

THEME CONTEXT: Citizenship education under liberal democracy

A contextualization of the comments on the IEA/
ICCS 2009 study

Education and democracy

Today, the devotion of democracy to education is hardly controversial. Rather, following John Dewey's democratic conception of education (Dewey 1916/1944, pp. 81–99) we can say that the dispute is about the consequences of the centrifugal tendencies of liberal freedom (cf. Callan 1997, p. 10). However, even if democracy is accepted as the basic concept in citizenship education, it leaves much room for disagreement about what should be its constitutive elements, and how to relate to the historical nation-state versus a pluralistic, multi-cultural society. The liberal view that the state should adopt a neutral stance towards the various philosophies of life, established in the post-war era, now seems to be on the retreat in many countries. Despite many nations' attempts to give prominence to universal themes in their definitions of citizenship, there are particular national dimensions that distinguish each country's conception of citizenship and frameworks for citizenship education from others, and the implications for citizenship education are related to the history of the nation (Osler and Starkey 2001, Brubaker 2004, Clemitshaw 2008, Buck & Geissel 2009). Seen from an even more critical perspective, not only the disputes about the privileging of the nation-state as the appropriate scale of political community, but the acceptance of liberal institutions themselves and their underlying values is to some conservative and fundamentalist groups a threat (Kymlicka 2003, p. 48). Pluralism and diversity raise such challenges also to citizenship education. And, since education historically has been about establishing a national identity among citizens, today citizenship education is challenged also from supranational forums, like the European Union, and from universalistic claims in general, but

also from communitarian interests, and from the individual's expectation of respect for personality and idiosyncrasy. These challenges seem to be unavoidable, complex consequences of liberal democracy's characteristics.

If we follow this line of thought, it is through education that every citizen in a liberal democracy is expected to develop into a political actor, capable to participate in discussions and decisions of common interests, despite differences – being both knowledgeable and articulate, (Gutmann 1999, p. 285). Thus, with the reference to liberal democracy we can problematise not only the fundamental questions concerning the proper aims of education, but also the proper balance between different interests in moral and political education (Macedo 2002, p. 2). Such a balancing act is put under the condition of “the contingent but inescapable imperfections of our capacity to reason together towards agreement” (Callan 1997, p. 25). In its concrete form, contingency, caused by pluralism, is framed by various forms of nationalism, manifestations of racism, xenophobia and intolerance. Seen from this brief characterization of society, the question of political education in the meaning of becoming and being a political citizen obviously has to be understood as a political, philosophical, theoretical, and even a methodologically complex issue. How then can an investigation like the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2009 be interpreted if we want to understand it in relation to liberal democracy?

Politics and passion

Of course, there are many answers to such a question. Understanding how young people become political citizens, or, better still, how they in a meaningful way can be defined and understood in terms of already being political citizens, requires a differentiation of the use of perspectives and central concepts. If we consider the character of liberal democracy, leaving aside the aspects of a dominant hegemony for the moment, one thing could be said: namely that, besides dominating epistemological concepts such as knowledge and learning, concepts like political, cultural and social belonging; affinity, community, recognition and identity, should reasonably be part of the inquiry agenda. Further, when framed and contextualised by concepts as contingency, ambivalence and hesitations, the understanding of being a political citizen in a liberal democracy form a complex relation between public and private, and between politics and passion. In line with Callan's (1997) sophistication of John Rawls's (1993) idea of the reasonable, being and becoming a political citizen or person “devolves into a cluster of mutually supportive habits, desires, emotional propensities, and intellectual capacities” (Cal-

lan 1997, p. 8), rather than the application of a “tidy moral calculus” (ibid.). In other words, this draws attention to how citizenship can be defined from its location in passions and emotions in a way that blur the lines between liberal democracy and the critique from the radical democracy position (e.g. Chantal Mouffe), where exactly “the relation between passion and politics and the limits of the rationalist framework are brought to the fore” (Mouffe 2002, p. 616). This critique, saying that because modern (liberal) theory has remained blind to the place of passion, it also has been unable to understand that the main challenge confronting democratic politics is “not how to eliminate passions in order to create a rational consensus, but how to mobilize them toward democratic designs” (ibid.), is contradicted not just by Callan’s political philosophy. To take just one more example, Michael Walzer declares that “passionate intensity has a legitimate place in the social world” (Walzer 2002, p. 617) and, he continues, “the extension of rational legitimacy to the political passions seems to me a useful revision of liberal theory which has been too pre-occupied in recent years with the construction of dispassionate deliberative procedures” (ibid.). The relation between politics and passion put some specific *qualitative questions* to the field of research on how young people perceive themselves as democratic citizens and political individuals; how they deal with clashes between political and moral values and also what kind of autonomy and independence is given to the institution. What is at stake here is the character of theory and methodology in research on citizenship education, and the task is how to make conceptual clarifications, not least concepts capable of discriminating between knowledge about society and affective ties towards politics. What is at stake is thereby also the shift from aggregated data about learning civic knowledge, virtues and skills, into studies of everyday life in general: in school and in other institutions where socialisation takes place – not least in the media. Shifting to such a perspective on what happens in the realm of citizenship education trains the light on individuals as subjects and their self-determination, their political thinking and judging in a way that goes beyond formal learning.

Studying the IEA/ICCS 2009 study

In this volume of the journal we are offered a deeper insight into the ways in which citizenship education is theorized, structured and measured in the internationally encompassed IEA/ICCS study¹ – a study aiming at investigating citizenship education in almost forty countries in Asia, Europe and Latin America. The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study, the ICCS study, covers not only

knowledge items but also a variety of attitudinal and concept items – nevertheless measured in terms of statistics provided by quantitative data. By providing qualitative empirical cases, in their respective articles the authors hint at feasible openings for ways of approaching the study. The exploration of different, ethical, existential and communicative situations and enactments of citizenship are a qualifying complement to the surveying of individual-based outputs and characters, focusing on first-hand epistemology. Taking concrete situations as a starting point, the studies in the following articles focus on mainly *relational* aspects involved in young people's notions of democracy and citizenship, where citizenship and education are understood in their broad senses of everyday life inside and outside of schools. The articles offer feasible openings for research strategies and theoretical and methodological approaches to how to understand citizenship and citizenship education under liberal democracy. The authors thereby provide a critical discussion not only of methodological principles, but also of democratic principles involved in liberalism, that is, the relation between public and private, the differences in power between subjects, the meaning of conflict and consensus, etc. Examining the ICCS study also from normative points of view, the authors shed light on the need to theorize education and to re-describe and reformulate central analytical concepts for understanding citizenship and education. The articles, based on qualitative studies of young people's descriptions of democracy, the political, citizenship education and experiences from communication, deepen the ICCS data while critically reviewing the survey limitations. Thereby, this issue could be considered in relation to an ongoing project, the *ICE Project*, funded by the Swedish Research Council (Amnå, Arensmeier, Ekman, Englund & Ljunggren 2010) and the re-analysis of the ICCS study, asking what effects different institutional school settings have on citizenship capacities, that is, students' civic engagement and political efficacy, their knowledge about democracy and political issues, and their attitudes towards democratic values. In the project we interview students, teachers and school principals, and we take part in classroom activities in lessons on citizenship, analysing the communication strategies between teachers and students, and between students in order to find out how political and moral controversial issues are dealt with. We will not deliver any results from that study here, while, in terms of a key concept used in the project, that is, *schools as political arenas* (Amnå, Englund & Ljunggren 2010), something can be said on a general descriptive level about the Swedish schools against which the discussion in this volume takes place.

For instance, we can see that from the end of the last century, increased cultural diversity has changed the school's historical basis as a political institution, and confronted it with new conditions for ensuring democracy and welfare. In a situation that is highly culturally diverse and mobile, there hardly exist any shared conception of what characterizes a good citizen in a heterogeneous nation like Sweden. Conditions that previously, in a situation of hegemony and cultural homogeneity, have been quite unproblematic for citizenship education, now may be interpreted in terms of risk and uncertainty, ambivalence and hesitation from agents involved in education. To our mind, it is quite easy to imagine the schools' and the teachers' dilemma in being able to establish a citizenship education that is sufficiently normative while also promoting differences in political and moral values and attitudes. For anyone who wants to understand what role schools plays in a liberal democracy it seems important to emphasize not just students' competencies for a future adult life, but the shifting political and moral questions that arise in the everyday classroom as well. Students are not only, and from such a perspective not even primarily, citizens of a future political adulthood. They are already involved in politics as individuals and as actors in a public, policy-driven institution, and so is the teacher. In Sweden the overall policy in education is about democracy. Liberal democracy can be of different kinds, but it demands a certain amount of consensus – radical democrats would rather say hegemony – where the values that constitute its ethical and political principles are accepted. In Swedish curricula, questions about citizenship have hardly been a crucial political issue but rather an integral, economic part of the labour market and the competing state (cf. Englund 1986, Boman 2002, Olson 2008), primarily based on a nation-state hegemony in which curricula express democratic values that have been largely uncontroversial (Ljunggren 2008, Ljunggren & Unemar Öst 2012).

Criticism and expansion of liberal democracy

Here I would like to resume the critique of liberal democracy from radical democrats, stressing the hegemonic tendency in liberal institutions, criticised for turning political questions into solely moral ones. Following Chantal Mouffe's (2000)² definition of 'politics', meaning "the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions which seek to establish a certain order and organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual..." we can define the very situation in which citizenship education is embedded. Citizenship education, understood from the concepts of 'politics', is about establishing a certain

order and organizing human coexistence in a way that makes possible agreements that satisfy rationality, understood as allegiance to liberal values. According to Mouffe, such allegiance, for instance in citizenship education organized under liberal democracy, can only be understood in relation to how ‘politics’ becomes ‘political’, that is, when we take into account the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in all human relations, which in turn means that trying to reach consensus without exclusion “would imply the eradication of the political” (ibid., p. 15). If one accepts such a distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’, this means in the case of citizenship education that the teachers’ dilemma is to decide not only what should be taught directly or nondirectly when no answer is entailed by the public values of the liberal democratic state (cf. Hand 2008), but whether even the public values of the liberal democratic state itself should be put under review. In brief, when the teacher is expected to expound different views as impartially as possible, the consequences can be of two kinds. In the first case (of hegemonic ‘politics’) the teacher presents different perspectives and discourses in a neutral way, naming them without judging. Here the student is expected to learn; to understand and to being able to compare different traditions and discourse without taking a stand for or against any of them. In the second case, however, the teacher and the student relocate the focus from this kind of epistemic, plural truth to the contingent political meaning (Ljunggren & Unemar Öst, in press) including the (antagonistic) political. In this case the student, while being aware of the contingency in perspectives and truth, is expected to consider what will be her own view and how to defend it in deliberation, debate and discussions. In this case, students and teachers are seen as actors from a kind of perspective that avoids understanding education taking place in front of pre-constituted identities or to operate with the conception of the subject as utility-maximizing agents or as rational subjects. These thin concepts of the subject and rationality interfere with and hinder subjectivity and individuality the way that Mouffe (2000, p. 10) elucidates what she maintains really is at stake in the allegiance to democratic institutions, that is, “the constitutions of an ensemble of practices that make the constitution of democratic citizens possible”, which include passions and emotions in securing allegiance to democratic values. And, as already indicated, such an inclusion can be recognized also in the context of a liberal democracy (Callan, Walzer) all the way back to Dewey where a general characterization of the criticism of certain kinds of liberal democracy is about *the conditions of existence of the democratic subject*.

Politics and the political in the classroom

Citizenship under liberal democracy could thus obviously be criticized both internally and externally in a highly similar manner, even though there is a sharp difference when it comes to the use of antagonism, hegemony and consensus. In order to further contextualize the comments in the following articles, something should be said about the character of the typical Swedish classroom based on the ICCS study, elaborated upon in the analysis in the *ICE project*. First, about the hegemonic tendency, there is a brief picture of the acceptance of democratic values among students where the ICCS study shows that Swedish students strongly agree with the basic principles of a liberal democracy. A large majority of the students support principles concerning equality between men and women and principles concerning equal rights for immigrants to participate in society (Ekman & Zetterberg, 2010a, 2010b). According to these findings the European students, on average, tended to agree with the statements used to measure attitudes in line with the basic principles of liberal democracy (Kerr et al, 2010, p. 89). Countries with the highest level of support for equal rights for all ethnic or racial groups were Sweden and Luxembourg. Further, initial findings from the ICCS study show that almost one third of the principals in Sweden viewed supporting the development of effective strategies for the fight against racism and xenophobia as one of the three most important aims of civic and citizenship education (*ibid.*, p. 127). In most of the other countries in the European regional module, fewer than 10 per cent of principals viewed this as an important aim (*ibid.*). This is an indication of a dimension that, on a principal level, opens up for an awareness of political questions in the classroom, including dimensions of ‘politics’, and perhaps also ‘the political’. Liberal democracy, and the way that the ICCS design concretizes it when taking up principles of rationality and epistemology, should not immediately be perceived as serving just ‘politics’. Several of the IEA’s studies point to the irrelevance of education that uses narrow definitions and a focus on learning abstract concepts or a focus on facts. According to the majority of studies, it is rather preferred, in education, to draw attention to those local contextual conditions that the school and the students are embedded in: “to assist the students in the handling of the issues they face in the classroom by taking account of the circumstances prevailing in their everyday lives and social environment can avoid getting into an abstract education” (Torney-Purta 2007, p. 4). Citizenship education in terms of the reconstitution of individuals as political subjects assumes a reconstruction also of the institution. Recalling Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism, since any political order is

the expression of hegemony “political practices cannot be envisaged in simply representing the interests of pre-constituted identities, but in constituting those identities themselves in a precarious and always vulnerable terrain”, (Mouffe 2000, p. 14). This is a criticism from the outside. However, if we accept the statement that once we acknowledge the power of countervailing cultural and economic pressures in any given society, then “we are also compelled to see its public institutions as sites of acute ethico-political conflict in which the triumph of liberal democratic values is by no means assured” (Callan 1997, p. 50) as being a highly relevant view of the dilemma for citizenship education. And as he points out (*ibid.*), it would be absurd to infer that schools might somehow be insulated from friction between liberal ideas and opposing values in the larger social environment, which is a criticism from inside. Here, frictions and disagreements are not sterile difference of opinion – they involve passions and emotions; these are not mere intellectual operations but constitutional elements of persons and group of persons that blur the boundaries between the public and private and between the political and the comprehensive (*ibid.*, p. 31). So, despite the critique from a radical democrat like Mouffe (2000, 2005), in liberal democracy (the way Dewey, Callan, Gutmann, Kymlicka or Macedo defines it), political conflict is not a problem to be overcome in any absolute sense. The distinction between radical and liberal democracy might be a distinction where “the political is played out in a *moral register*” (Mouffe 2005, p. 5) in a discrimination between us and them that instead of being defined by political categories is established in moral terms.

The distinction between facts and the meaning of facts

Citizenship education under liberal democracy is a contingent concept, and nothing here has been said about the discrimination between social-democratic, liberal-conservative or neo-liberal democracy. However, rightly, as guest editor Maria Olson notes in the next article, educating citizens in our times is an uneasy liberal-political concern. Following John Dewey’s philosophy of education we know that normative issues are inherent in education by definition while “we cannot set up, out of our heads, something we regard as an ideal society” (Dewey 1916/1966, p. 83). His advice that “we must base our conceptions upon societies which actually exist” (*ibid.*) is a requirement that in turn leads to the need to distinguish between facts and the meaning of facts, between the possibilities of measuring activities and understanding them in relation to real subjects. Such needs are

in no way unproblematic today in a situation that is highly culturally diverse and mobile, and where there hardly exists any shared conception of what characterizes a good citizen in a heterogeneous nation like Sweden. Therefore a challenge to the field of research and studies on citizenship education is to free oneself from pre-understood context of the institution(s) and from predetermined concepts. Education is often understood today in terms of measurable outcomes and visibly clear standards, sufficient to show efficacy and impact, where the language of education has come to be characterized by ‘epistemology’. However, in the words of Dewey we know that in education “concrete habits do all the perceiving, recognizing, imagining, recalling, judging, conceiving and reasoning that is done”, and that “habit does not, of itself, know, for it does not of itself stop to think, observe or remember” (Dewey 1922/1983, p. 124). If we consider this carefully, it means that there is a need to hesitate before the dominating rhetoric of epistemic criteria for understanding citizenship education. The quantitatively oriented International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2009) promotes increased attention to standardization and testing. The following articles (3–6) deal with questions on political education and citizenship by commenting on the study. The articles are all individual and cannot be put into any common discourse of criticism or normativity. Nonetheless, they could be assigned a common feature in terms of how they exemplify how citizenship education under liberal democracy can be handled in terms of both appreciation and criticism, also when it comes to the methodological consequences, and how a survey study like ICCS 2009 can be brought into consideration. However, what has been said in this article shall not otherwise be taken as a common ground, but simply a way to offer a discussion of the framework within which the thematic issue is presented.

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Notes

1. The 2009 IEA/ICCS study (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement/ International Civic and Citizenship Education Study) is an international study based on several instruments for collecting data (<http://www.iea.nl/icces.html>): (I) An international knowledge test for 14-year-old students, together with international and national questionnaires containing questions concerning their background, attitudes and behaviours. (II) An international questionnaire and a national questionnaire for teachers. (III) An international questionnaire for schools – in most cases answered by the school principal. The original sample for the Swedish data, to which we will refer in this article, included in total 169 schools, both public and private, 2,711 teachers and 3,464 students. The sampling process, and the analysis of data, was carried out in a way that enables generalizations over the total population of students in the 8th grade during the period investigated. The data was collected in the spring of 2009, and the school questionnaire, the knowledge test and the questionnaires for students were completed by over 90 per cent of the sampled Swedish schools and students, whereas the response rate for teachers ended up a bit lower, but still within an acceptable margin of error – of the sampled teachers 74 per cent answered.
2. Mouffe, Chantal (2000): *Deliberative democracy or agonistic pluralism*, 72 *Reihe Politikwissenschaft/Political Science Series* 72, pp. 1–17; p. 15. I regard this article as a concentrated overview of Mouffe's criticism of liberal democracy – a criticism that has been further developed in Mouffe (2005).

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