

DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP IN SCHOOLS: TEACHING CONTROVERSIAL ISSUES, TRADITIONS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Review by Róisín Boyle

This publication is a compilation of articles on the timely topic of education for citizenship which are organised in three sections based on the themes of democratic schooling, teaching controversial issues and accountability. This book is an outcome of the international seminar series at the University of Edinburgh, organised by the Citizenship and Democracy Network of the Scottish Educational Research Association, and the rationale for the selection of themes is based on the insights of the sociologist C. Wright Mills. The aim of the series was to represent a wide range of international perspectives on citizenship. But since the seminar was held in Edinburgh, all but three of the contributing authors were based in Scotland and England, with two from the USA and one from Denmark. The book's range of perspectives can therefore be considered to be narrow regardless of the initial objectives. Indeed, many of the contributors refer to the same British policy reports and institutions, for example, the 'Crick Report', Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education, and the Curriculum for Excellence. Most of the authors are academic researchers with only four out of thirteen representing the teaching community. The book's concept was to integrate three perspectives – research, policy and practice – on each theme, which has been accomplished although not necessarily with equal weight.

The editors envisioned the target groups for the book to be policy makers, researchers, students and practitioners who are interested in developing forms of citizenships in schools: 'The book is envisaged as a stimulus for discussion in staffrooms, seminars and policy forums'. A more suitable audience would be academic researchers and students of advanced programmes (MA or PhD level) interested in this particular topic and I would recommend this book to such an audience. They will benefit from the large number of references and in-depth representation of the Scottish and English scholars in this field. Policy-makers, however, are unlikely to be attracted to this resource as the contents are too specific, retrospective and the conclusions too diversified to

be utilised in policies affecting the general public. Practitioners may find it difficult to utilise any of the presented concepts in their work. Specific models with sufficient amount of details are not explicitly presented in a way that would be more beneficial for teachers.

The title and the division of the book into three parts give the impression that the articles are multi-faceted. The layout and presentation do little to enhance the book. It is fragmented into too many independent, rather short articles including shorter sections with introductions and conclusions. Consequently, introductions and conclusions often overlap giving the impression of repetition. The layout is limited to plain text without any illustrations or graphic representations. The text is saturated with references but there is little contribution of original research work from the authors.

The first part of the book entitled 'Democratic Schooling' failed to present diversity of perspectives. All three authors seem to share the same perspective which is essentially neutral and unlikely to stimulate debate. They present, with very adequate quality, the dominating historical and current views on democratic schooling in the context of citizenship. There are two distinct issues covered in this part: education for democratic citizenship and democratic execution of education in general. The approach of placing them together may be found confusing by less experienced readers. Gary McCulloch separates these issues while Danny Murphy has decided not to. Leif Moos attempts to link his article to accountability postulating requirements towards equality in schools. The distinctions between equality and democracy appear sometimes neglected in this book and there is no notion that democratically accepted policies represent interests of the majority of the public but not necessarily to ensure equality and satisfaction for everybody.

It should be perhaps clarified more explicitly in the title of the second part of the book - 'Teaching Controversial Issues' - that this section is still correlating or referring to citizenship education. The first article by Carole Hahn is the most outstanding work in the book covering all aspects of education - practice, policy and research - as intended by the editors. She also presents her own research and practical examples of how to approach teaching controversial issues in the context of citizenship. Alan Britton has had personal

experience of teaching, researching and policy-making, but his article fails to convince or to separate the three objectives in the way that would be understandable for readers who may be familiar only with one of the fields. On the other hand, he highlights indoctrination as a key risk factor in teaching controversial issues and achieving the objective of democratic schooling. The decision to use the context of the 11 September 2001 attacks on New York and Washington by the author Rita Verma as a background for teaching controversial issues is in itself controversial, as it might be considered more of a unifying than divisive factor. Cultural factors and stereotyping are brought to attention but regardless of their significance they do not directly correlate with democratic citizenship. Globalisation or global citizenship can be considered a better example presented by the same author as a controversial issue.

The third section on 'Accountability and Education for Citizenship' focused on assessment and accountability. Public expectation is that schools would be accountable for creating effective democratic citizens. There are official policies in place aiming to address accountability of education for citizenship. It is straightforward to assess accountability for learning through standardised tests which are already in place, but it is more complex to assess accountability for the objective of producing responsible democratic citizens. Richard Pring suggests that successful education for citizenship would require separate assessment for general learning and assessment for citizenship accountability. I would agree with this observation but neither the author nor any other contributors to the book have been able to propose any particular model for the former's assessment.

Ken Greer gives an account of the conflicting requirements of the education system and concludes that education for effective citizenship is difficult to inspect. It is difficult for schools to strike an appropriate balance between fulfilling direct learning requirements and delivering society's wider expectations. Ken represents the official body established for the assessment of education (HM Inspectors of Education). In her article, Alison Peacock represents the view that school leaders should be accountable first and foremost for the quality of children as citizens developing the skills of leadership for social justice. This can be found controversial as an approach likely to compromise the quality of education in such fields as linguistics and natural sciences,

carrying similarities with the socialistic policies that historically failed in the Soviet Union and countries of the Eastern bloc. This approach may be favourable for practitioners as a straightforward policy to satisfy parents and the public in the short term and to avoid controversial issues.

The last article by Henry Maitles, ‘Conclusion: Half Full or Half Empty?’, suggests a dilemma with regard to either positive or negative interpretations of the current status of education for democratic citizenship in UK schools. He concludes that there are ‘examples of excellent work going on to develop young people’s interest, knowledge, skills and dispositions in areas of citizenship and democracy’. On the other side, there are unresolved issues such as inadequate knowledge/skills/values etc, curriculum overload and lack of teacher confidence in dealing with controversial issues related to citizenship. These perfectly just observations are likely meant to serve as a general conclusion of the whole book, but unfortunately are not very constructive.

The issues discussed within this book are relevant to the concept of development education (DE), dealing with the question of citizenship at both the local (mostly) and global (sporadically) levels and empowers learners to contribute to the process of change within society. The term ‘citizenship education’ is a more specific way of addressing the social structures and processes that shape citizenship but is clearly intertwined with issues of human rights, global justice, environment and survival. In the life of the school, DE empowers children and young people as global citizens and equips them with skills, values and attributes for learning, life and work towards progress. The current rioting linked to the Union flag protests in Belfast not only highlights the importance of citizenship education but also suggests that the current citizenship curriculum or its execution fail in some Northern Ireland schools.

There is a general introverted approach within this resource, as to be expected for a group of specialists of a narrow field such as citizenship education. They do not address the popular issue of increasing immigration and the impact of the new immigrants on the democratic ‘majority based’ view of the UK citizenship. In Scotland there is a strong campaign towards independence that is not addressed either. The book presents a comprehensive overview of the problems and challenges associated with education for

democratic citizenship, but offers few solutions and it is unlikely to stimulate any actions. Nevertheless, I believe that a large fraction of readers of this journal will find this book as a useful reference resource when researching citizenship topics in education.

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