Education and Active Citizenship: Prospects and Issues

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the theoretical and research literature on the relationship between education and active citizenship. As is consistent with the writings of Kant, Durkheim and Marshall, the paper discusses the concept of active citizenship and how it is related to knowledge, attitudes and behavior. The focus then turns to the process by which individuals acquire the characteristics that lead to the practice of active citizenship. In this context the literature on schooling and political socialization is critically examined. Finally, the paper points to gaps in our knowledge and understanding about the political learning process among young adults, and suggests a theoretical and research agenda which lends itself to policy implications for schooling, in particular school subjects on civics and citizenship.

Current Interest in Citizenship, Civics and Political Education

Citizenship and questions related to political competence have become matters of concern in many countries of the world. This is particularly the case in the republics of the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and countries where political independence or developments in democratic structures are evolving, such as in many third world countries. But the concern has also resurfaced in the 1990s in many advanced Western societies where government commissions, publications, special issues of journals, and studies of civics and citizenship education have become common occurrences (Torney-Purta, 2000). Examples of this interest are found in the recent discussions of citizenship and education (Ichilov, 1998: Kennedy, 1997), and in a number of empirical studies of civics education, and how young people learn about politics and become active citizens (Hahn, 1998; Niemi and June, 1998; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995). The current international study of civics education in 24 countries by the

International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) bears testimony to the global nature of this interest. (See Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo, 1999.)

It is widely recognized that education is a key factor in the production of political competence and the kind of behavior deemed necessary for effective citizenship. For this reason many recent debates and studies have focussed on the relationship between education and the kind of political knowledge and participation which are seen as necessary for citizenship. However, in spite of the rhetoric that abounds regarding the link between education and citizenship, much ignorance about the ability of education to produce active and effective citizens remains.

The purpose of this article is to identify some of the issues that surround this field of study. The ultimate outcome of this paper is to point the way forward for future research and policy in the area of civics and citizenship education.

The Notion of Active Citizenship

Discussions of citizenship can be found in the classical literature of Western civilization. Already in the writings of the early Greek philosophers we find in the notion of citizenship a freedom from absolute rule and the enjoyment of a certain level of self-government and self-determination. Plato, of course, was concerned about the free democracy in which no citizen wanted to be subject to any ruler, and how this democracy could become a tyranny.

Plato explored the '…one quality of which all the citizens must be partakers…', and concluded that these virtues were those of '…justice and temperance and holiness, and , in a word, manly virtues' (Plato, *Protagoras,* pp 45-46). Furthermore, Plato, after discussions with Socrates about the acquisition of virtue, comments '…why, Socrates, do you still wonder and doubt whether virtue can be taught? Cease to wonder, for the opposite would be far more surprising' (p. 46).

Aristotle, on the other hand, recognized that a true citizen is one '…who shares in the administration of justice, and in offices' (Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 472). By this, Aristotle was not referring to formal political or administrative office, but rather an 'indefinite office' and he goes on to say, 'This is the most comprehensive definition of a citizen, and best suits all those who are generally so-called' (p. 472).

From the classics, therefore, we find that citizenship requires a

sharing of political decisions, and that the qualities required for this task can be taught. It is from Kant, however, that brings us to a closer distinction between types of citizens.

In his work *The Science of Right*, Kant makes the distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizenship. He was of the view that three juridical attributes are necessary for a person to be a citizen: 1) constitutional freedom, 2) civil equality, and 3) political independence. He saw the third as problematic with respect to members of society who were constitutionally free and equal, but who were in some way subject to the will of others, such as an 'apprentice', an employed 'woodcutter' or a 'resident tutor as distinguished from a schoolmaster' (Kant , 1952 [1785]: 436-437). Indeed Kant surmised that '...the latter conception [passive citizenship] appears to stand in contradiction to the definition of citizen as such' (Kant 1952 [1785]: 437). In other words, 'passive' citizens are citizens in name only, and in practice are no different from persons living under political despotism or tyranny.

A final perspective is provided by T.H. Marshall, who pointed out that citizenship consists of three parts or elements, the civil element (individual rights and freedoms), the political element (the right to participate in decision-making), and the social element (the right to economic welfare and security) (Marshall, 1965, p. 78). Marshall argued that education is essentially linked with citizenship: '...when the State guarantees that all children shall be educated, it has the requirements and the nature of citizenship in mind... it should be regarded, not as the right of the child to go to school, but as the right of the adult citizen to have been educated' (p. 89).

However, some would argue that it is not enough to be educated. More importantly, it is necessary that education include the competencies and skills required for the effective obligations and duties of citizenship. As Janowitz comments: 'In addition to achieving effective literacy, the citizen's obligation for education includes some rudimentary civic education...a measure of understanding of national political traditions, and of the organization of contemporary political and governmental institutions, as well as the person's linkage to these institutions' (Janowitz, 1980, p. 11). Furthermore, civic education should be more than formal instruction. Janowitz, citing the findings of Hanks and Eckland concerning the beneficial effects of extracurricular activities at school on later civil life, contends that civic education should include '...meaningful and realistic participation in community and public affairs' (p.11).

The importance of a civics education which is more than formal instruction is commonly advocated by curriculum experts. Conrad and Hedin, writing about citizenship education in the United States, argue strongly for a participative citizenship education (Conrad and Hedin, 1977). They contend that adolescents must practice their citizenship in order to learn it. For them, these activities consist of '…ameliorating or solving issues and problems', in other words forms of community activities.

Similarly in other countries, such as Australia, the emphasis on education for active citizenship suggests that more is involved than simply formal education. Since the beginning of the concerns about education for citizenship in recent decades, the emphasis has always been on 'active' citizenship. In this context the term 'active' has been taken as more than simply voting in elections, but rather '… to participate fully in decision-making processes…' (Civics Education Group, 1994, p. 2).

For the most part, active citizenship is taken to mean formal knowledge about the political system, voting in elections, and participation in community voluntary associations. Nonetheless, the proscription that a citizen 'participate fully in decision-making processes' (a proscription reminiscent of Aristotle), suggests that voting may not be the only effective means of practicing 'active' citizenship. In this context it is important to examine other forms of citizenship activism, and some of the problems which may emerge from them.

Manifestations of Active Citizenship

Clearly, political or civic knowledge is a necessary condition for the effective practice of citizenship. However it is not sufficient. As the Report of the Australian Civics Expert Group pointed out, 'Not all will choose to do so…' (p. 6). Yet, neither is the simple act of voting the ideal end point of active citizenship. It may be the minimal requirement, and indeed in some countries such as Australia, voting is obligatory. Furthermore, many local community organizations act on behalf of interest groups. Thus it is true that participation in these organizations represents a form of participation in political decision-making, but the motivation is often personal. Where, then, does the virtue of citizenship lie?

A neglected area of active citizenship lies in those activities which are clearly of a protest nature and lie outside the formal channels of the political decision-making process. In this group of activities we include signing petitions, writing letters, and participating in demon-

strations. Although there are rules which guide these activities in every society, most would agree that they are a legitimate form of active citizenship.

There are related forms of political activism which may be more difficult to include because of the extent to which they may sit outside the normative and legal limits of acceptable behavior. Here we would include more extreme forms of protest such as the occupying of buildings and demonstrations that lead to damage or violence in some form. Associated with these forms of protest is the throwing of objects, even if harmless, and fighting with police or blocking traffic. Without getting into a debate about the spontaneous nature of these more extreme forms of protest, as studied by researchers in collective behavior, they nevertheless represent an attempt by citizens to make their voice heard and to influence the decision-making of government bodies. In some cases, these actions are illegal and against the law. Yet, do they represent a form of active citizenship?

Herein lies a paradox for those concerned with education for active citizenship, namely, to what extent are forms of protest or even civil disobedience included in civic or citizenship education? History provides many examples of individuals who engaged in forms of passive civil disobedience to register their dissent from what they considered unjust laws. The actions of Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, for example, suggest that under certain conditions, '…civil disobedience is a civil act, the disobedience of a person in his capacity as a *citizen* under government' (Bedau, 1969:19).

In order to pursue this question further we would need to include an examination of the type of political system (for example, totalitarian, democratic, and colonial), and the nature of social control mechanisms (for example, tolerance or the style of police behavior). What might be considered legitimate active citizenship in one context, may be considered civil disobedience or even criminal disobedience in another.

Although these conceptual issues are readily discussed in rhetorical or advocacy contexts, they are rarely researched sociologically. The issues of what constitutes 'legitimate' forms of active citizenship, for whom, and for what purpose, are issues that must form a part of educational programs for civic education and active citizenship education.

The Relationship between Education and Active Citizenship

The outcomes of civics education programs have been the object of

research, although less than one might expect. Furnham (1991) points out that more research on young people has been conducted on political attitudes rather than on political knowledge and political understanding (p. 19). However, it must be said that there has been even less research done on forms of political action among young people. And yet we know that already in secondary school, if not earlier, many young people are introduced, formally or informally, to types of activity which may be labeled political activism or active citizenship (See Astin, Korn and Berz, 1990; Saha, 2000). Indeed Furnham makes clear the necessity for a more robust approach to the study of the link between political attitudes, knowledge and behavior:

> It therefore becomes of some considerable applied interest what political attitudes and knowledge young people have; how they are acquired and changed; and most importantly how political beliefs translate into political action whether it is through the ballot box, demonstration or even violence (Furnham, 1991, p. 34).

Perhaps one of the most comprehensive and comparative early studies of the impact of civics education on political knowledge and attitudes is that reported by Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen (1975). Using a standard self-administered questionnaire on three random samples of school students at age 10, 14, and final year of secondary school, ten countries participated in one way or another in the project. The ten countries were the Federal Republic of Germany, Finland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Sweden and the United States.

Some of the important findings of this early comparative study can be summarized as follows (Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen, 1975: 18):

> The widely held objective of producing loyal, informed, critical and actively participating democratic citizens was *not* successfully attained in any of the countries in this study.

> …there were few differences between the responses, on average, by boys and by girls, or by children from different social backgrounds; adolescent rebelliousness was not an important factor, and participation in civics-related activities did not seem to be very important.

> On the whole, the results showed that specific classroom practices were less important than what is often called the 'classroom climate': more knowledgeable, less authoritarian. And more interested students came from schools where they were encouraged to have free discussion and to express their opinion in class.

The continued importance of research in civics education is reflected in the fact that the IEA is currently engaged in a second civics study, this time with 24 countries taking part (Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo, 1999).

One of the few studies which focussed on political activity and the predisposition to political activity was conducted on samples of Australian secondary students. Saha (2000) found that there was a relationship between having studied about government, the possession of knowledge about politics, and the experience of, or disposition to engage in less intense forms of political activism, such as signing petitions or writing letters. On the other hand, the study found no relation between these civic education variables and the disposition to engage in more intense and non-normative political behaviors, such as occupying buildings in protest or taking part in violent demonstrations.

It was also clear from these data that the link between civics and political activism was not related to academic performance, but rather was related to the type of engagement the student had with the school. Students who talked more with their teachers and who liked school were more likely to participate in legitimate forms of activism. The reverse was true for those who indicated a tendency toward violent and illegal forms of activism. Clearly, then, having studied civics in one form or another is related to interest in politics and to forms of legitimate political activism. Nevertheless we need more research in order to fully explain those factors which are related to the various types of political activism that do occur.

Problems and Issues Related to Education and Active Citizenship

The preparation of young people for adult life is never a straightforward matter. This is particularly the case in democratic societies where the degree of independence allows dissent as well as consent. Thus civics education and the preparation for citizenship in a democratic context means that young people are prepared to make independent decisions regarding the social and political future of the society in which they will live. To this extent the preparation for active citizenship is a preparation for independence.

Accordingly, education for active citizenship poses both problems and challenges. With respect to the first, the problems involve the creation of an environment within which the practice of active citizenship is tolerated in all its variations. The challenge is how to design a

curriculum that will educate young people for the responsibilities that active citizenship requires. Each of these, the problems and the challenges, deserves some attention.

Active Citizenship as a Two-Edged Sword

It is clear that an education program intended to produce a politically active citizenry is a very complex matter. Not all civics instruction will produce results, and if results are produced, they may be of an undesirable kind. Teaching young people to be active citizens may be a two-edged sword, for as adults, the present-day students may just as likely oppose as support the government of tomorrow. Furthermore, the spectrum of political activity can range from the very legal and safe actions to the violent, illegal and unsafe actions.

Inglehart (1996) found, in his study of more than forty societies, that respect for authority had declined in the advanced industrial societies (but not in the 'poor' societies) between the early 1980s and the early 1990s. The social groups with the lowest respect for authority were those who were younger, with higher levels of education, and with post-materialist values. Inglehart regarded this finding as having implications for those responsible for governing countries. 'This shift may make the task of governing increasingly difficult for the ruling elite – but it may also tend to increase mass demands for responsive and democratic institutions' (p. 661). According to Inglehart, this trend could result in either increasing levels of political action by citizens, or to political apathy and civic indifference. Thus he concluded that citizenship education had an important role to play in the production of individuals who were politically independent and politically active rather than disengaged and uninvolved.

Citizenship education, if it follows the guidelines which are being developed as a result of current research, will not only provide the knowledge to understand the rights and obligations of citizenship, but also to think clearly and critically about the political developments in society. Thus citizenship education is a form of political empowerment which enables the individual to participate independently and intelligently in public debate and civic activity. At the same time, the individual may perceive himself or herself to be patriotic, loyal, and committed to the political values and processes of society.

Until it is clear what types of active citizenship are deemed desirable, and under what conditions, the production of educational programs and curricula materials will be of uncertain value, and the achievement of desirable citizenship objectives will be problematic.

The Manipulation of Citizenship Education

Much of the discourse about civics and citizenship education assumes that there is an objective body of knowledge about the political assumptions, beliefs and life of a democratic society. Thus the curricula of citizenship education courses, how and by whom they are developed, are assumed to provide an adequate basis on which individuals can make political decisions, ranging from voting to other forms of political participation.

However, these assumptions cannot always be substantiated. Historical facts about events, and the political processes of a society concerning their interpretation, are rarely disseminated in a purely objective manner. The reason for this has been the subject of considerable debate and revolves around the view that one takes about the class structure of society and the power relations that flow from it. In similar fashion, the extent to which the educational system mirrors the power structure of society, to that extent will it present a particular point of view about the social structure of society and the way it operates. This applies equally to the characteristics of citizenship education. Thus it follows that the content of the civics or citizenship education curricula will reflect the construction of the political structure of society held by the social group which is dominant in that society.

Those who see education as reflecting the power structure of society take this view. Furthermore they see civics and citizenship education as a tool for the political manipulation of young people. Marciano (1997), for example, contends that there is a crisis in civic literacy, at least in the United States.

> It exists because the dominant elite that runs this country requires youth and citizens who can be manipulated… Civic illiteracy, which helps to keep youth and other citizens stupified, is perfectly reasonable once we understand the purpose and nature of 'citizenship training' in the schools: to undermine the critical and liberating potential of education (Marciano, 1997:2).

Marciano documents his own perspective by analysing the portrayal of the Vietnam and Gulf Wars in American history textbooks, which he argues, reflected the dominant elite perspective and gave no alternative view from which to judge independently these events. The question is whether it is possible to provide a form of civic and citizenship education which is not influenced by the dominant ideology.

It is for this reason that many writers argue that civics and citizenship training must focus on the development of the skills of criti-

cal thinking and decision-making, especially with respect to the political culture. Thus Land and Gilbert (1997) argue that education for active citizenship requires the development of these skills to ensure that independent judgements about political matters are made.

If dominant forms of democratic governance are not unambiguously acting in the interests of all, and if their organizational structures restrict access and prevent people from pursuing legitimate interests, then education for empowerment requires an orientation which not only prepares young people to participate in present institutional processes, but also provides them with the critical insights and abilities to evaluate, and where desirable, to work to change them (Land and Gilbert, 1997:509).

It is only when education for active citizenship provides these skills, can it enable individuals to avoid being manipulated by a dominant political ideology. As Engle and Ochoa (1988) comment, '…young citizens should grow in the ability to determine when they are getting the full facts and when they are being shortchanged' (p. 21).

Given the above considerations, civics and citizenship education is always a two-edged sword: it is critical, radical, progressive and empowering. However, in the theoretical arguments discussed earlier, particularly those of Kant, this is the only form of citizenship which is distinct from the state of a person under tyranny or despotism.

Conclusion

The focus on active citizenship in a way detracts from the normal discussions of the dimensions of citizenship, which tend to focus on rights and duties. Clearly these are not contradictory or exclusive dimensions, for to be an active citizen is also to exercise one's rights and duties as citizen. However, the link between education and active citizenship is more complex. It has been noted often that civics education and citizenship education are not exactly the same, as the latter includes not only knowledge but also a wide range of practices associated with citizenship (Kennedy, 1997). But the complexity does not stop with this distinction. In order to be an active citizen, knowledge is required, but not any kind of knowledge.

Active citizenship includes the normal practices of voting, paying taxes, and if needed, military service. These are compliant forms of citizenship, but they do not become forms of *active* citizenship unless they are the result of critical judgement and decision-making. The practice of citizenship becomes *active* when it is the result of the pos-

session of the knowledge and the skills to be able to decide whether and how one will practice citizenship. The practice of active citizenship is not simple compliant action nor is it routine action. The practice of active citizenship may be manifested in non-compliant and non-routine action as well.

This distinction poses a particularly troublesome role for education and educators. Education for active citizenship is not subversive education. But it is an education based on the production of citizens who have the knowledge, the skills, and the commitment to act either in a compliant or non-compliant manner, or in a routine or non-routine manner. Education for active citizenship develops in students the ability to evaluate morally and responsibly the political demands at a particular time. It also is a type of education which requires teachers who themselves are knowledgeable and open enough to regard citizenship education itself as a contested field. Finally, it requires a society with a political structure which is open to contestation. Governments, and the politicians within them, may be particularly uncomfortable in an environment where their actions are open to constant scrutiny and evaluation. But these are the requirements for the production of active citizens in a genuinely democratic society.

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