From teaching citizenship to learning democracy: overcoming individualism in research, policy and practice

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In this article we argue for a shift in educational research, policy and practice away from teaching citizenship to an understanding of the ways young people learn democracy. In the first part of the article we identify the ways in which the discussion about citizenship in Britain has developed since the Second World War and show how a comprehensive understanding of citizenship, which has underpinned much recent thinking about citizenship education, has been replaced by a more overtly individualistic approach. In the second part of the article we delineate the key problems of this individualistic approach and make a case for an approach to citizenship education that takes as its point of departure the actual learning that occurs in the real lives of young people. In the concluding section, we outline the implications of our view for research, policy and practice.

Introduction: democracy, citizenship and education

Over the past two decades there has been a worldwide resurgence of interest in questions about education and democratic citizenship both from educators and from politicians. In new and emerging democracies the focus has, understandably, been on how education can contribute to the formation of democratic dispositions and the development of a democratic culture. But questions about education and democratic citizenship have not only been raised in the context of how to build a democracy. In many established democracies similar questions have been asked about how to maintain and nurture democracy and democratic culture.

Recent discussions about the future of democracy have been motivated by two related concerns (McLaughlin, 2000, p. 543). On the one hand there are worries about the level of political participation and political understanding; on the other hand there are worries about the ‘seemingly pervasive erosion of the social, political, economic and moral fabric of society in England, in the face of rapid economic and social change’ (Kerr, 2000, pp. 74–75). The final report by the Advisory Group on
Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools (Crick Report) not only claimed that there are ‘worrying levels of apathy, ignorance and cynicism about public life’ (Crick, 1998, p. 8), and that the current situation is ‘inexcusably and damagingly bad’ (p.16). It is also argued that this situation ‘could and should be remedied’ (p.16), and as a corollary, that the Government has a responsibility to put structures and processes in place to do just this.

There are particular anxieties about the role and position of young people. The notion that young people have lower levels of political interest, knowledge and behaviour than adults has been well documented (see Furnham & Gunther, 1987; Mardle & Taylor, 1987; Park, 1995). While some argue that this is a normal phenomenon of the lifecycle and that political interest increases with age, there is recent evidence which suggests a decline in political interest and engagement among young people compared to previous generations—at least, that is, with respect to ‘official’ politics (see Wilkinson & Mulgan, 1995; Park, 1999). Some have argued that young people have a different and very distinct political agenda so that a decline in engagement with ‘official’ politics does not necessarily mean a disengagement with social and political issues more generally (see Inglehart, 1990; Mort, 1990; Klingemann & Fuchs, 1998; White et al., 2000; Kimberlee, 2002). Others maintain, however, that young people do not have a ‘distinctive new political agenda of their own’ (Jowell & Park, 1998, p. 8).

Although the evidence about levels of political interest and participation is inconclusive, young people, as ‘citizens in the making’ (Marshall, 1950, p. 25), have become a principal target of Government initiatives aimed at countering the perceived trend of political and social alienation. Citizenship education has become the cornerstone of these initiatives. It was incorporated into the National Curriculum in England in 1988 as one of the five cross-curricular themes, but it is only relatively recently (September 2002) that citizenship has become a compulsory National Curriculum foundation subject at secondary level for students at Key Stages 3 and 4 (11–16). This has been complemented by non-statutory guidelines for citizenship education alongside Personal, social and health education (PSHE) at Key Stages 1 and 2 (5- to 11-years-old) (see QCA, 2000a, b, c).

While we do not wish to downplay the significance of citizenship education—not in the least because young people themselves have indicated a lack of knowledge and understanding in this area (White et al., 2000, p.44)—we would argue that the inclusion of citizenship in the formal curriculum has served to mask a deeper and more profound problem concerning young people’s citizenship. In our view, citizenship education, as it has been conceived, represents no more than a partial response to the alleged ‘crisis’ in democracy. We argue that there needs to be a shift in focus for research, policy and practice from the teaching of citizenship towards the different ways in which young people actually learn democratic citizenship—which must also include attention to the ways in which young people learn not to be involved with questions about democracy and citizenship. ‘Learning democracy’ comprises how young people learn about the idea of democracy and the ways it is practised in different settings and at different levels (local, national, global); how
they come to acquire the skills of deliberation and democratic decision-making; and how they come to form positive or negative dispositions towards democracy. For us, democracy is not confined to the sphere of political decision-making but extends to participation in the ‘construction, maintenance and transformation’ of all forms of social and political life (Bernstein, 2000, p. xxi; see also Dewey, 1954; Barber, 1984). We do not conceive, in other words, of democracy as merely a form of Government but primarily as a ‘mode of associated living’ (Dewey, 1966, p. 101). In this respect we approach democracy as a social and a political ideal that has to do with inclusive ways of social and political action (Säfström & Biesta, 2001; Lawy & Biesta, 2006).

The reason for focusing on the ways in which young people learn democracy is not simply that the nature of learning in this area is ‘still not understood’ (Davies, 2000, p. 10). Rather, the shift from teaching citizenship to learning democracy makes it possible to overcome the individualistic conception of citizenship that underpins much recent thinking in the area of citizenship education. The focus on learning democracy allows us to show the ways in which this learning is situated in the unfolding lives of young people. It also allows us to make clear how these lives are implicated in a wider cultural, social, political and economic order. It is ultimately this wider context which provides opportunities for young people to be democratic citizens and to learn democratic citizenship. The shift from teaching citizenship to learning democracy emphasizes the point, in other words, that democratic citizenship should not be understood as an attribute of the individual, but invariably has to do with individuals-in-context. From a research point of view, this means that it is only by following young people as they participate in different formal and non-formal practices and settings, and by listening carefully to their voices, that their learning of democratic citizenship can be adequately understood. This, in turn, makes it possible to acknowledge that the educational responsibility for citizenship learning is not and cannot be confined to schools and teachers but extends to society at large (see Biesta, 2003, in press).

In the first section of this article we reconstruct the discussion about citizenship and its development in Britain since the Second World War. As we indicate, this reconstruction of the discussion reveals a shift away from a more comprehensive conception of citizenship that was prominent after the Second World War towards a much more individualistic approach from the 1980s onwards. As a result of this shift, it has become increasingly difficult to acknowledge the situatedness of citizenship. In the second section we argue that this trend is also evident in recent developments in citizenship education, most notably in the premise that the alleged crisis in democracy can be adequately addressed by (re)educating individuals. We outline the problems associated with such an individualistic approach, i.e., with an approach where the emphasis is on the individual per se rather than on the individual-in-context, and argue for an approach to citizenship education that takes its point of departure in the learning within the real lives of young people. In the concluding section, we outline the implications of our view for research, policy and for the practice of citizenship education.
Citizenship after the Second World War

The rise of the active citizen

Writing in the aftermath of the Second World War, T. H. Marshall in his essay ‘Citizenship and social class’ (Marshall, 1950) delineated a view of citizenship which was to inform the social liberal consensus of the post-war period up to the 1970s. According to Roche (1992, pp.16–17), Marshall’s theoretical framework represents the ‘dominant paradigm’ in citizenship theory in Britain and has continued to represent the touchstone for discussions about citizenship. Mann has suggested that in relation to Britain, Marshall’s view of citizenship is ‘essentially true’ (Mann, 1987, p. 340).

Marshall defined citizenship as ‘a status bestowed on all those who are full members of a community’, and argued that ‘all those who possess the status are equal with respect to the rights and duties with which the status is endowed’ (Marshall, 1950, pp.28–29). Marshall took an historical approach which focused upon the development of citizenship rights in modern societies. His main thesis was that modern citizenship includes three different kinds of rights: civil, political and social rights. Civil rights, that is the rights necessary for individual freedom, such as ‘liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice’ (Marshall, 1950, p.74), developed largely in the eighteenth century. Political rights, including the right to vote and to stand for political office, followed in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Social rights, which mainly developed in the twentieth century, include:

... the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society. (Marshall, 1950, p.74)

According to Marshall each of these three kinds of rights corresponds to a particular set of institutions. Civil rights are protected by the court system, political rights correspond to institutions of local government and parliament, while social rights are associated with the welfare state.

Although Marshall’s analysis can be read as a description of the development of citizenship rights in Britain, his main concern was with solving the problem of how citizenship and capitalism could be reconciled. The growth in wealth created by capitalism had created the conditions for increasing social rights. Yet, at the very same time these rights posed a threat to the capitalist system since they were collectivist by nature and required increased public expenditure and taxation. For this reason Marshall argued that the conditions had changed: ‘in the twentieth century citizenship and the capitalist class system [were] at war’ (Marshall, 1950, p. 87).

Marshall believed, however, that social rights, institutionalized within the framework of the welfare state, could ultimately mitigate the worst excesses of the market. In line with the functional analysis he was advocating, he introduced the notion of the ‘hyphenated society’, the constellation of democratic-welfare-capitalism where ‘the parts are meaningless except in their relationship with one
another’ (Marshall, 1981, p. 128). Social rights thus rendered citizenship compatible with capitalism by ‘civilizing’ the impact of the market. Fundamentally, he believed that the expansion of social rights would irrevocably ameliorate and cut across class differences and inequalities. Although there was conflict and controversy in the post-war period over the type of policies that were needed to achieve the expansion of citizenship, Marshall’s ideas secured ‘a continued commitment to social justice and social integration through the growth of social rights’ (France, 1998, p. 98). Marshall held that with the post-war construction of the welfare state, the progress of citizenship as a rounded and meaningful status was complete.

Notwithstanding the importance of Marshall’s work for the understanding and advancement of citizenship in post-war Britain, his ideas have over the past decades been criticized for a number of reasons (for an overview see Faulks, 1998, pp. 42–52). One of the issues Marshall did not explore was the possibility that the state may work in the interest of one class or group of elites, rather than function as a neutral referee—an assumption which was ‘naïve even in the context of 1950s Britain’ (Faulks, 1998, p. 44). Faulks concludes, therefore, that although Marshall argued that citizenship requires a social dimension to make it meaningful for most individuals, ultimately the social rights he advocated are ‘paternalistic and dependent upon the condition of the market economy’ (Faulks, 1998, p. 51). Marshall did not see ‘that meaningful citizenship demands active participation by citizens who possess the necessary resources to facilitate participation’ (Faulks, 1998, p. 51). By failing to transcend the agency-based approach to citizenship, Marshall did not consider ‘the structural constraints which the market and coercive state place upon the distribution of the resources necessary for citizenship’ (p. 51).

From the welfare state to neo-liberalism

It was not the theoretical weakness of Marshall’s arguments that led to a decline in the impact of his thinking. Much more importantly, his optimistic belief in the welfare state as the impartial guarantor of social justice was overtaken by actual transformations in the industrialized world, such as the decline in autonomy of the nation state and the globalization of production and consumption, and by related social and cultural changes. These developments have radically altered the way in which citizenship is comprehended by individuals and groups in both privileged and marginalized positions (for a recent assessment see Turner, 2001).

In Britain, the challenge to the post-war consensus primarily came from the New Right from the mid-1970s onwards. It followed a sustained period of economic and political unrest and was championed by Margaret Thatcher who insisted that a culture of ‘welfare dependency’ had become endemic in society. Here Thatcher was intuitively following neo-liberal thinkers such as Frederick Hayek, in arguing that social rights and welfare state provision more generally undermine rather than support individual freedom because they weaken personal responsibility and civic virtue. For neo-liberalism ‘the only way to engender good citizenship is to see as its basis the individual freely choosing to act in a responsible way’ (Faulks, 1998, p. 68).
This helps to explain why Thatcher sought to counter and reverse the development of social citizenship by returning to the traditional liberal idea of free markets and limited government. She did so, however, within a neo-liberal rather than a classical liberal framework. The difference between the two ideologies is very well captured by Olssen.

Whereas classical liberalism represents a negative conception of state power in that the individual was to be taken as an object to be freed from the interventions of the state, neo-liberalism has come to represent a positive conception of the state’s role in creating the appropriate market by providing the conditions, laws and institutions necessary for its operation. In classical liberalism, the individual is characterized as having an autonomous human nature and can practice freedom. In neo-liberalism the state seeks to create an individual who is an enterprising and competitive entrepreneur. (Olssen, 1996, p. 340)

The idea of ‘limited government’ does not mean weak government. The state has to be strong to police and safeguard the market order. Gilmour summarizes the apparently contradictory logic of Thatcherite ‘authoritarian liberalism’ as follows.

There was no paradox in rhetoric about ‘liberty’ and the rolling back of the state being combined in practice with centralization and the expansion of the state’s frontiers. The establishment of individualism and a free-market state is an unbending if not dictatorial venture which demands the prevention of collective action and the submission of dissenting institutions and individuals. (Gilmour, 1992, p. 223)

Although the explicit individualistic rhetoric with its ‘valorization of the individual entrepreneur’ (Hall et al., 2000, p. 464) was softened under John Major in the early 1990s, the emphasis on personal responsibility and individual choice was retained. In important areas such as civil service and Government reform, the Thatcherite agenda was in fact speeded up under Major.

From social rights to market rights: the active citizen

The foregoing makes clear that one of the most central aspects of the New Right Conservative Governments of Thatcher and Major was the redefinition of the relationship between individuals and the state and hence the redefinition of the very idea of citizenship. Faulks (1998, p.124) describes the redefinition of citizenship as a shift from social rights to ‘market rights’, which comprise ‘the freedom to choose, the freedom to own property and have property protected, the freedom to spend money as one sees fit, and the right to be unequal’. At the centre of this vision stands the active citizen, a ‘dynamic individual’ who is self-reliant and takes responsibility for his or her own actions, rather than depending upon Government intervention and support, and yet possesses ‘a sense of civic virtue and pride in both country and local community’ (Faulks, 1998, p.128). This particular form of active citizenship comprised ‘a mixture of self-help and voluntarism whereby competition and rigour of market relations would supposedly be “civilized” by concern for one’s community and country’ (p.128). Although it was underpinned by a perceived need for shared values and reciprocal obligations and loyalties, active citizenship was in effect more
concerned with the individual as an autonomous chooser and individual economic consumer in the market place, than with the promotion of community values. Thatcherism, with its individualistic emphasis, only succeeded in increasing social division, rather than creating the basis for community spirit to emerge.

By focusing on the need for individuals to take responsibility for their own actions, the call for active citizenship was based on a particular diagnosis of society’s ills, in that it was assumed that what was lacking in society were active and committed *individuals*. The explanation for society’s problems was thus couched in individualistic, psychological and moralistic terms—the result of a lack of individual responsibility, rather than an outcome of more structural causes such as underfunding of welfare state provisions or the loss of political control resulting from privatization of public services. In this way active citizenship followed the strategy of blaming individuals rather than paying attention to and focusing on the structures that provide the context in which individuals act. Ironically, therefore, active citizenship exemplified a depoliticization and privatization of the very idea of citizenship.

**Citizenship and capitalism**

Many analysts see the emergence of the New Right as a radical break with the past, particularly with the social liberal consensus that existed in the first decades after the Second World War. They mainly hold Thatcher responsible for the breakdown of the welfare state and the erosion of social rights. While it is clear that Thatcher had a huge impact on British society—even though she claimed that ‘such a thing’ did not exist—and while it is equally clear that successive Conservative Governments had been highly effective in reshaping the political agenda, the demise of the welfare state cannot be exclusively accounted for by a change in political ideology and rhetoric forged by Conservative Governments. Faulks suggests that the development of the post-war consensus that gave rise to increased and improved welfare provision and expanded social rights, should not simply be understood as a victory of the working class over the ruling class. The development of social rights was also the product of the needs of the ruling class to maintain modern production. The expansion of social citizenship was, in other words, due ‘to the mutual benefits it secured for capital and labour’ (Faulks, 1998, p. 108). From this point of view, it is hardly surprising that social rights came under pressure when the needs of capitalism changed in the 1970s as a result of the increasing globalization of production. The relatively brief period of managed capitalism in which production and consumption were mainly confined to the borders of the nation state gave way to a much more anarchic form of global capitalism in which Governments were under pressure to offer suitable conditions to global capital in order to remain a player in the global economy. Unlike Marshall’s expectations, this created a situation in which the ‘war’ between citizenship and capitalism returned. Social citizenship, as it had developed in the post-war era, was increasingly seen as an impediment to Britain’s competitiveness in the world economy. Viewed from this perspective the Thatcherite agenda of the 1980s can be...
understood as ‘an attempt to adjust to the new realities of capitalism by reducing impediments to capitalist investment, such as trade union and social rights, and opening up Britain’s economy to increasing globalization’ (Faulks, 1998, p. 121). The neo-liberal ideology of individualism, choice and market rights suited this situation much better than the old ideology of collectivism, solidarity and social rights.

When Labour came to power in May 1997, there were high hopes for a radical change, including the expectation that the welfare state would be rebuilt. These expectations, which were fuelled by the Labour Party itself, have, however, not fully materialized. With respect to citizenship, Labour mainly sought to ameliorate the New Right position by using communitarian ideas to emphasize the importance of social values and social responsibilities. But in key areas such as education and health care—the main pillars of the welfare state—Labour has simply continued with the rhetoric and practice of choice, delivery and accountability, thereby positioning citizens as consumers of ‘high quality’ social services, rather than as those who participate in democratic decision-making about the fair distribution of collective resources (see Biesta, 2004b). In this respect the Labour Government has continued the individualistic neo-liberal line of thinking that was a prominent feature of preceding Conservative Governments.

The idea of citizenship education: from an individual to a contextual approach

Our overview of the development of citizenship in post-war Britain not only provides the factual background for our discussion of the idea of citizenship education. It also serves as a framework for understanding and evaluating recent developments in this field. What it allows us to show, is that recent developments in citizenship education have stayed quite close to the individualistic conception of citizenship that emerged in Britain in the 1980s. Since this is only one of the ways in which the ‘problem of citizenship’ can be understood, it becomes possible to argue—as we will do below—that the idea of citizenship education, as a way to make young people ‘ready’ for democracy, is only of the ways in which democratic learning can be promoted and organized. As we will suggest, it is not necessarily the best way.

Although citizenship education is not a recent invention (see Batho, 1990), there can be no doubt that in the English context a major impetus for recent initiatives has come from the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools. The brief of this group, set up by the then Secretary of State for Education and Employment, David Blunkett, was:

... to provide advice on effective education for citizenship in schools—to include the nature and practices of participation in democracy; the duties, responsibilities and rights on individuals as citizens, and the value to individuals and society of community activity. (Crick, 1998, p. 4)
The group was also expected to produce ‘a statement of the aims and purposes of citizenship education in schools’ and ‘a broad framework for what good citizenship in schools might look like, and how it can be successfully delivered’ (p. 4).

The Advisory Group, which consisted of representatives from a very broad political spectrum, agreed that effective education for citizenship should consist of three strands. Firstly, social and moral responsibility: ‘children learning from the very beginning self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour both in and beyond the classroom, both towards those in authority and towards each other’ (Crick, 1998, p. 11; emphasis in original). Secondly, community involvement: ‘learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community’ (Crick, 1998, p. 12; emphasis in original). Thirdly, political literacy: ‘pupils learning about and how to make themselves effective in public life through knowledge, skills and values’ (Crick, 1998, p. 13; emphasis in original). Along all three lines the Advisory Group emphasized that citizenship education ‘is not just knowledge of citizenship and civic society; it also implies developing values, skills and understanding’ (Crick, 1998, p.13).

According to Kerr (1999, p. 79), the Advisory Group placed ‘considerable stress on the outcomes of effective citizenship education … namely active and responsible participation’. What eventually ended up in the Citizenship Order (the official guidelines for the teaching of citizenship), was considerably different to the recommendations of the Advisory Group. This particularly weakened ‘the holistic impact of the Citizenship Advisory Group’s final report’ (Kerr, 1999, p. 79). In the Citizenship Order the following three attainment targets for Key Stages 3 and 4 were specified:

- Knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens.
- Developing skills of inquiry and approach
- Developing skills of participation and responsible action (see Kerr, 1999, p. 83).

Three problems with the idea of citizenship education

The current framework for citizenship education has been criticized from a wide range of different angles (see Beck, 1998; Garratt, 2000; The School Field 10, 3–4 and The School Field 11, 1–2; for a ‘temperate’ reply see Crick, 2000). Our concern here is not with the specific content and shape of the proposals and practices but with the more general idea of citizenship education, that is, with the idea that the alleged crisis in democracy can be adequately addressed by (re)educating individuals, by making them ‘ready’ for democratic citizenship through education.

The first problem with the idea of citizenship education is that it is largely aimed at individual young people. The assumption is that they, as individuals, lack the proper knowledge and skills, the right values, and the correct dispositions to be the citizens that they should be. This not only individualizes the problem of young people’s citizenship—and in doing so follows the neo-liberal line of thinking in which individuals are blamed for their social malfunctioning. It also individualizes
citizenship itself, most notably through the suggestion that good citizenship will follow from individuals’ acquisition of a proper set of knowledge, skills, values and dispositions. One could, of course, argue that citizenship education can only ever be a necessary, but never a sufficient condition for the realization of good citizenship. This is, for example, acknowledged in the Crick Report, where it is emphasized that ‘schools can only do so much’ and that we ‘must not ask too little of teachers, but equally we must not ask too much’ (Crick, 1998, p. 9). Yet the underlying idea is that schools ‘could do more’ and, more importantly, that they ‘must be helped’ (p. 9). The latter point suggests that even when the wider context is taken into consideration, it is only in order to support the ‘effective production’ of the good citizen.

The second problem we wish to highlight, concerns the assumption that citizenship can be understood as the outcome of an educational trajectory. The idea of citizenship-as-outcome reveals a strong instrumental orientation in the idea of citizenship education. The focus is mainly on the effective means to bring about ‘good citizenship’ rather on the question what ‘good citizenship’ actually is or might be. The instrumental orientation clearly comes to the fore in Crick’s contention that ‘the aim of the new subject is to create active and responsible citizens’ (Crick, 2000, p. 67; emphasis added). Indeed, the overriding concern has been about how to best engender a particular species of citizenship amongst young people. It has been to find the ‘best’ and most ‘appropriate’ methods and approaches of teaching citizenship to young people—of achieving what is regarded to be a common goal that they can aspire to. We therefore agree with Hall et al. (2000, p. 464), that the ‘contemporary political and policy discussion is for the most part much less concerned to critically interrogate the concept of active citizenship, than it is to debate how such a thing might be achieved’. We wish to argue that a continuous interrogation of the possible meanings of citizenship, a continuous ‘public dialogue about rival value positions’ (Martin & Vincent, 1999, p. 236) should not only be at the very centre of democratic life (see also Säfström & Biesta, 2001), but also at the very centre of citizenship education.

The idea of citizenship as outcome is also problematic because it is fabricated on the assumption that citizenship is a status that is only achieved after one has successfully traversed a specified trajectory. We suggest that citizenship is not so much a status, something which can be achieved and maintained, but that it should primarily be understood as something that people continuously do: citizenship as practice. Citizenship is, in other words, not an identity, something that someone can ‘have’, but a practice of identification, more specifically a practice of identification with public issues, that is, with issues that are of a common concern. This implies that a culture of participation should be a central and essential element of democratic citizenship.

As long as citizenship is conceived as outcome, it places young people in the problematic position of not-yet-being-a-citizen. Indeed, as France has argued, citizenship ‘is generally understood as an adult experience’ and, as a result, being young is only seen as ‘a transitional stage between “childhood” and “adulthood”’
(France, 1998, p. 99). Such an approach, set alongside our concerns about citizenship as outcome, fails to recognize that young people always already participate in social life; that their lives are implicated in the wider social, economic, cultural and political world; and they are not isolated from these processes. In effect, being a citizen involves much more than the simple acquisition of certain fixed core values and dispositions. It is participative and as such it is itself an inherently educative process. It is about the transformation—through critical enquiry and judgement—of the ways in which young people relate to, understand and express their place and role in society.

This is precisely the point where the question of learning arises—which brings us to our third and final problem with the idea of citizenship education. One obvious problem with any educational strategy, including the teaching of citizenship, is that there is no guarantee that what young people learn is identical to what is being taught. Proponents of the idea of ‘effective’ education may have us believe that it is only a matter of time before research provides us with teaching strategies that will guarantee ‘success’. Yet apart from the question as to what counts as ‘success’ (and who has the right to define it), they seem to forget that learning assumes that learners have to make sense of the curriculum and the activities they are engaged in, and that they only do so on the basis of a wide and divergent range of experiences (see Biesta, 1994; Bloomer, 1997; Dewey, 1938). Education is a process of communication, which relies upon the active acts of meaning-making of learners and it is this unpredictable factor which makes education possible in the first place (Donald, 1992; Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2001; Biesta, 2004a). Moreover, young people learn at least as much about democracy and citizenship from their participation in the range of different practices that make up their lives, as they learn from that which is officially prescribed and formally taught. Even where a school includes exceptional internal democratic arrangements—such as a school council or other ways in which young people are enabled to participate meaningfully in the collective decision-making about their educational experience—this still only represents a small proportion of the environment in and from which young people learn. They learn as much, and most possibly even more, from their participation in the family or leisure activities, from interaction with their peers, from the media, from advertising and from their role as consumers—and they often learn different and even contradictory things.

All this suggests that the learning of democratic citizenship is situated within the lives of young people. The way in which young people make sense of their experiences—including their experience of citizenship education—depends crucially upon their own perspective which are, in turn, determined by the outcomes of previous learning and meaning-making (see Dewey, 1938). But young people’s perspective—and hence their learning and action in the area of democratic citizenship—is also determined by the wider cultural, social, political and economic order that impacts upon their lives. It is at this point that the individualistic approach of citizenship education—and of citizenship itself—reveals one of its main shortcomings. A reluctance or even a refusal to undertake certain social
responsibilities is not something that can be attributed to an isolated individual, but always has to do with the individual-in-context. It is as much about knowledge, skills, values and dispositions that young people ‘have’ as it is about the situation in which they live and act.

Citizenship in context

A telling example of the latter was found by France in a study that concerned the meanings and experiences of citizenship among a group of working class young people (France, 1998). France found that the willingness of these young people to be active, responsible and fully participating citizens had everything to do with the social, economic and cultural situation they found themselves in. He found, for example, that their willingness to become engaged in their community was frustrated by the fact that they felt that they had to conform to the adult status quo. The sense of exclusion resulting from this was a strong reason for young people not to care (France, 1998, p.105). Another important factor that influenced young people’s willingness to undertake social responsibilities in their community was related to poverty. There was a recognition that if young people wanted to be successful participants in the world of consumption, they had to escape from their local community. As France explains, ‘undertaking any form of social responsibility was rejected in that participation in the local area would only increase their own experiences of being poor rather than aid them in getting on in either economic or social life’ (pp. 105–106).

On the basis of this, France concludes that it is not enough to expect or to enforce young people to be active participants:

As a society we have to recognize that young people need a stake in the society or community in which they live. During the last 15 years this has been reduced by the erosion of social rights and the expression of social power by certain adults. This has led to fewer opportunities in both the community and employment for young people to move into the adult world. It is important therefore to recognize that without these opportunities many young people will not feel any desire to undertake social responsibility either to their local or national community. (France, 1998, pp. 109–110)

We agree with France and the work of other researchers in this area (such as Hall et al., 1999, 2000) that the problem of citizenship is misunderstood if it is conceived as an abstract unwillingness of ‘young people’ or ‘the next generation’ to become active in social and political life. The problem is one of young-people-in-context, which means that it is as much about the young people as it is about the context in which they live and learn. It is, in other words, the actual condition of young people’s citizenship which has a crucial—and perhaps even decisive—impact upon the ways in which young people can be citizens and upon the ways in which they learn democratic citizenship. It is for precisely this reason that citizenship education as it has been defined and understood is a partial and problematic response, one that masks the deeper and more profound problem with young people’s citizenship. From this point of view, the real educational responsibility lies not with teachers, schools or young people themselves, but with those who are responsible for the
conditions of young people’s citizenship: their economic, social and cultural position and their opportunities for meaningful participation. Part of the responsibility for young people’s citizenship therefore clearly lies with the Government and it is precisely in this sense that Bernstein’s dictum that school cannot compensate for society is also valid in the area of citizenship and citizenship education. We should not forget, however, that not everything that has a potential impact upon young people’s lives and their learning can be controlled, such as, for example, the impact of global consumption on young people’s perceptions of what constitutes a good and meaningful life.

In a sense, all of this highlights the importance of Marshall’s idea of social rights, since it can be argued that these rights are crucial for the actual condition of young people’s citizenship. After all, to be able to actively participate in society requires not only knowledge, skills, values and dispositions, but also requires resources that can make the real and meaningful participation of all citizens, including young citizens, possible.

**Conclusion: from teaching citizenship to learning democracy**

In this article we have provided an overview of the evolution of the theory and practice of citizenship in post-war Britain. Against this background we have proffered an analysis of recent initiatives in citizenship education, focusing on the general thrust of the ‘idea’ of citizenship education. Although we do not wish to argue against citizenship education—schools can make a difference—we do believe that the current approach to the teaching of citizenship is problematic for two related reasons. On the one hand because it understands the ‘problem’ of citizenship mainly as problem of individuals and their behaviour. On the other hand because, in its response to the ‘problem’ of citizenship, it focuses on individuals and their knowledge, values, skills and understanding. We have argued that the problem of citizenship is not about young people as individuals but about young people-in-context. Similarly, we have argued that citizenship education should focus on young people-in-context and on the social, economic, cultural and political context(s) in which they live their lives. This suggests a different direction not only for citizenship education itself, but also for research and policy. Our case for a shift from teaching citizenship to learning democracy is precisely meant as a marker of such a change in direction.

While teaching citizenship mainly raises research questions about the most effective way to ‘produce’ good citizens (for such a view see Hargreaves, 2001, p. 496), learning democracy first of all requires research which seeks to understand how young people actually learn democracy (that is, how they learn about democracy and how this affects their dispositions and values). It also requires research which aims to understand the various ways in which young people can actually be democratic citizens. It asks, in other words, for a contextualized understanding of the ways in which young people learn democracy, one which gives a central role to their actual ‘condition of citizenship’. It is only by following young
people as they move in and out of different contexts, practices and institutions and by trying to understand what they learn from their participation, or non-participation, in these contexts, that we can actually begin to understand what is going in the lives of young citizens in Britain today. Apart from some of the studies mentioned in this article and recent work by Eden and Roker (2002), there is remarkably little research that has so far achieved this.¹

The shift from teaching citizenship to learning democracy also has implications for policy-makers and politicians. If policy-makers and politicians are really concerned about young people’s democratic citizenship, they should pay attention to and, even more importantly, invest in the actual conditions under which young people can be citizens and learn what it means to be a citizen. What we have in mind, here, is not only investment in economic terms, although, as we have argued, the resources that make real and meaningful participation of all citizens, including young citizens, possible, are of crucial importance for the ways in which young people can learn democracy. Policy-makers and politicians also need to invest in another way, in that they need to think very carefully about the impact of their policies and strategies on young people’s perceptions of democracy and citizenship. What, for example, do young people learn from the fact that the Government’s interest in education only seems to be about test-scores and performance in a small number of academic subjects? What do young people learn from the fact that the Government supports an educational system where those with money have a much better chance of success in life? And how does the experience of unemployment, poverty and bad housing impact upon young people living under these conditions? Our claim here is that the educational responsibility does not stop at the point where an effective system of citizenship teaching is in place. The educational responsibility extends to the very conditions of young people’s citizenship, because these conditions define the context in which they will learn what it means to be a citizen of a democracy. It ultimately is on the basis of those experiences that young people will decide whether they want to play an active role in the future of their society.

Finally, the shift from teaching citizenship to learning democracy also has implications for citizenship education itself. One important implication, as we have suggested, is that the definition of citizenship should not be kept ‘outside’ of citizenship education, but should be part and parcel of what citizenship education is about. What constitutes ‘good citizenship’ is not something that can be defined by politicians and educationalists, or set as an aim for young people to achieve. Democracy itself requires a continuous interrogation of the possible meanings of democratic citizenship, and citizenship education should be one site where such an interrogation takes place. This does not mean that citizenship education should only be about the exploration of the possible meanings of citizenship. If learning democracy is situated in the lives of young people, then citizenship education should also facilitate a critical examination of the actual conditions of young people’s citizenship, even though it may lead them to the conclusion that their own citizenship is limited and restricted. Such an approach would provide the basis for a deep understanding of democratic citizenship. This contrasts with that which has
been achieved through formal classroom based lessons in school and college where ‘good’ citizenship practice has been depoliticized and disconnected from everyday lives and interests of the young people and from any understanding of their ability to shape and change the conditions of their lives and of those around them.

**Note**

1. In the pilot study Young People Learning Democracy we have developed a methodology for precisely this kind of research (see Biesta et al., 2005).

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