THE FOUNDATIONS OF CRITICAL QUESTIONING IN CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

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Abstract
An important question in citizenship education concerns the extent to which learners are encouraged to conform to authority and existing political structures, or alternatively to question and challenge them. This article puts forward an argument for a critical questioning approach, in which the ability and disposition to subject political issues and institutions to critical scrutiny is fostered. This framework is seen to be justified in terms of its intrinsic educational benefits and its extrinsic benefits to democratic society. A distinction between weak and strong forms of criticality is made, with the latter seen to be preferable on account of its questioning of underlying societal structures. However, implementation of this framework in a public education system presents significant problems. Three of these problematic issues are raised, namely: the difficulty of establishing allegiance and cohesion around abstract principles; the extent to which it is possible for an authority to promote critical scrutiny of itself; and the risks of indoctrination. These tensions are not insurmountable but place considerable demands on teachers and state education systems.

Keywords: citizenship education, critical education, democracy and education.

Resumo
Uma questão importante na educação para a cidadania está relacionada com até que ponto os alunos são estimulados a sujeitar-se à autoridade e às estruturas políticas existentes, ou, alternativamente, a questioná-las e desafiá-las. Este artigo apresenta uma argumentação em favor da abordagem do questionamento crítico, que estimula a capacidade e a disposição a submeter questões e instituições políticas à análise crítica. Essa abordagem se justifica em função de seus benefícios educacionais intrínsecos e dos benefícios extrínsecos que ela traz a uma sociedade democrática. É feita uma distinção entre formas fracas e fortes de crítica, dando preferência às fortes pelo fato de que elas questionam as estruturas sociais subjacentes. Entretanto, a implementação desse método apresenta problemas significativos. Três dessas questões problemáticas são levantadas: a dificuldade de estabelecer comprometimento e coesão em torno de princípios abstratos; até que ponto uma autoridade é capaz de promover o exame crítico de si própria; e os riscos do doutrinamento. Essas tensões não são insuperáveis, mas elas exigem muito dos professores e dos sistemas públicos de educação.

Palavras chaves: educação e cidadania, educação crítica, democracia e educação.
The Foundations of Critical Questioning

Introduction

The renewed interest in citizenship education around the world, and its recent introduction as a compulsory subject in the National Curriculum of England, raises a number of important political and educational questions. One of these is the extent to which learners are encouraged to conform to authority and existing political structures, or alternatively to question and challenge them. On the one hand, it can be argued that it is necessary to instil in young people certain unwavering allegiances: these may include a love of nation (or other form of State), so that they might further its interests for the benefit of all its members; respect for its laws, for the sake of order and security; and support for its institutions and the government of the day, to ensure the effective functioning of the political system. This conformist approach to citizenship education, supported by contemporary theorists such as Galston (1989; 2002), has an early justification in Hobbes’s (1651/1996) Leviathan, in which a strong and unchallenged State is seen to be necessary to control people's naturally destructive instincts.

However, there is also a tradition of critical scrutiny of the elements outlined above, with its roots in Locke’s (1690/1924) rejection of Hobbes’s all-powerful State and assertion of the right and duty of the people to alter or remove a government that is not upholding their interests. According to this second approach, society will only maintain effective institutions if they are subjected to critical assessment, enabling them to be reformed if necessary. In addition, the quality of governments is seen to be dependent on the political awareness of the voters and their ability to evaluate the different candidates. These requirements call for an education designed not to galvanize loyalty, but to promote a questioning attitude towards the State and its institutions.

Civic education in the past has not, as a general rule, had the development of critical attitudes as a central aim. National governments have used school curricula to strengthen the idea of nation and galvanize loyalty, thereby suppressing rather than encouraging a questioning of their legitimacy. According to Green (1990), this was the motivation for the initial development of national education systems in the 19th century: they were “a powerful instrument for promoting political loyalty amongst the people and for creating a cohesive national culture after the image of the ruling class” (p.79). A recent example is found in the Moral and Civic Education in Brazilian schools imposed by the military dictatorship until 1985. While nation-states with established democracies are nowadays less blatant in their promotion of nationalism in schools, education systems still have national cohesion as a central aim. Even countries which do not aim to suppress internal minorities or assert their power internationally will still wish to promote national identity as a means of ensuring the effective functioning of the polity.

This paper, instead, puts forward an argument for a critical questioning approach to citizenship education. This approach would aim to develop in students the ability and disposition to subject political issues and institutions to critical scrutiny as a means of upholding a just State and effective citizen participation in decision-making. The framework of critical questioning challenges two common approaches to citizenship
education that suppress critical thought in different ways. Firstly, nationalistic education, which glorifies the nation through myth and pathologizes critique for the purposes of consolidation of internal power or external expansion. Secondly, forms of apolitical education, which, by focusing on the contribution of the individual to the community and removing the possibility of political change, serve to maintain the status quo (e.g. the ‘Education for Active Citizenship’ of the UK Conservative government in the early 1990s, as discussed by Wringe, 1992).

I argue that critical questioning is preferable to the development of unqualified patriotism for educational as well as political reasons. However, there are significant problems posed by this framework, in terms of its adoption as government policy, the viability of its implementation in classrooms and implications for the functioning of the polity. Three of these issues will be addressed: the question of allegiance; the difficulties of an authority promoting critique of itself; and, lastly, indoctrination.

This article will not propose specific teaching methods for the classroom, and will focus primarily on the general orientations of the approach. The subject in question is relevant even for countries that do not have citizenship education or civics as a separate curricular element. The same agendas are often promoted in other parts of the curriculum, such as history and social studies, and to a large extent the whole of the school experience functions as a means of citizen formation.

The notion of critical questioning

A questioning approach in education is one that involves students in a process of enquiry, rather than absorption of pre-defined content. That is not to say that it avoids completely the transmission of facts or knowledge. Nor does it entail relativism: there may in fact be certain and correct answers to the questions posed, but these are discovered by the students through investigation rather than being given at the start of the process.

In the physical sciences, students are often encouraged to speculate about the result of an experiment and then perform it for the purpose of establishing the answer for themselves. This approach is adopted in schools not because the result of the experiment is in doubt, but to encourage learners to be independent and inquisitive, in short, good researchers. However, in the moral and political realms, where certain answers are elusive, a questioning approach is more than just a pedagogical method to improve learning skills: it recognizes that individuals have the need to construct their own conceptions and the right to put forward their own understandings. Again, this is not an acceptance of relativism, and does not imply equality of worth of all moral and political views.

Methods of questioning in education, many inspired by the philosophical enquiry of Socrates, have been developed by number of modern theorists and practitioners (e.g. Heckmann 2004; Nelson 2004; Saran and Neisser 2004; Teloh 1986). These Socratic approaches aim for a systematic challenging of people's beliefs and assumptions through dialogue, leading to greater insight into fundamental truths. While it is perhaps unrealistic
to expect that Socratic enquiry can be fully achieved in large secondary school classes, elements of it can be employed. A questioning approach, therefore, is one that can be used in schools either as a pedagogically effective means of grasping pre-defined truths or as a means of exploring contested issues, and thereby developing deeper understanding.

What, then, constitutes a critical questioning approach? In the educational literature, there appear to be two distinct uses of the term, relating to two influential movements, critical thinking and critical pedagogy. The former emphasises the development of rationality and skills of evaluation of arguments, identification of assumptions, formulation of lines of reasoning and so forth. A considerable literature on this topic has emerged in recent years (e.g. McPeck 1990; Paul 1990; Ennis 1996; Bowell & Kemp 2005), including both do-it-yourself guides and theoretical discussions. Critical pedagogy, on the other hand, drawing on the critiques of capitalist society of the Frankfurt School and the pedagogical thought of Paulo Freire, is an explicitly political movement of educators (e.g. Giroux & McLaren 1986; Shor 1992; hooks 1996). It starts from the premise that there are certain fundamental injustices in society and that education is a key factor in their perpetration and continuance. These injustices do not stem from a lack of rationality in individuals, but from structures and practices of oppression by some segments of society over others. Education, therefore, must be transformed, both so as to empower individuals and groups, and as a means of changing the core social, economic and political structures of society that support oppression. Understandings of hegemony distinguish this framework clearly from that of critical thinking. Since conventional education transmits a particular understanding of society and supports particular structures and relations, then it is necessary to provide a counterbalance. This requires the presentation of particular forms of knowledge to the students which can allow them to critique dominant positions.

While critical thinking sees its contribution to citizenship as the development of clear thought to expose false arguments and enable rational choices between candidates and policies, it is criticised by the critical pedagogy movement for its apolitical nature. In focusing on the development of rational thought, it seems to ignore power relations in society, and unjust structures and institutions that prevent certain individuals and groups achieving their goals even when they do think critically and rationally.

Critical pedagogy, however, also has its critics. A number of problematic questions (stemming from Freire) are raised by maintaining notions of ‘correct thinking’ and ‘false consciousness’, while at the same time respecting the autonomy of the learner and the construction rather than transmission of knowledge. The movement has also been criticised for its lack of a clear proposal and the highly inaccessible nature of its academic language.

While the differences between these frameworks are real and cannot be explained away, the tensions between them can be fruitful. This paper is based on a conception of criticality that, like critical pedagogy, understands knowledge and pedagogy as located in social relations, many of which are oppressive. Rationality alone, therefore, is not sufficient to construct citizenship. At the same time, the baby of rational thought should not be thrown out along with the bathwater of naïve apolitical conceptions of critical thinking, and clear, sustained analysis of arguments and the construction of counter-arguments are
important citizen skills.

Another element, a sense of justice, is also required if questioning is to provide a satisfactory framework for citizenship education. Questioning and critique of the State, the current government and its policies must be carried out in relation to some set of criteria, however piecemeal or loosely defined. This paper will not attempt to provide a unifying conception of justice, a task which, if possible at all, is beyond the scope of this study. Nevertheless, a conception of justice involving some form of equal consideration for all citizens must underlie critical questioning. While the citizenship education discussed in this paper assumes a national framework, this sense of justice will necessarily go beyond national boundaries and address issues on a global scale.

There are clear links between the educational aim of promoting critical questioning and that of promoting personal autonomy. It might be argued that this conception is nothing more than autonomy in relation to the political sphere. However, while autonomy is necessary here, it is not sufficient. While critical citizenship requires individuals to have a certain independence of will and freedom of thought, it also requires them to have strong allegiance to principles of justice and to unite in reciprocal concern expressed through rights and duties. Autonomy does not guarantee the necessary interest in public affairs, nor important civic virtues such as courage. Questioning citizenship implies not only understanding of but also active opposition to abuses of justice, in terms of the repealing of unjust laws and removal of ineffectual governments.

Critical questioning as an approach to citizenship education

**Educational justifications**

Education for questioning citizenship aims to develop the disposition and ability to subject elements of the political system to critical scrutiny and not to accept the current government and wider political structures as necessarily the best, or the only, possible system. This involves knowledge, skills and attitudes: knowledge of the political context and its underlying structures, including elements that may not be flattering to the current government or to the nation in general; skills, such as the weighing up of evidence and identification of ideologies; and values, attitudes and dispositions that are conducive to this type of autonomous questioning and that reject an uncritical acceptance of authority and support for the status quo.

McLaughlin (1992: 238) states in relation to the ‘minimalist’ conception of civic education that, “it may involve merely an unreflective socialization into the political and social status quo, and is therefore inadequate on educational, as well as other, grounds”. It is this educational consideration that provides a first justification of a questioning approach. It is doubtful whether citizenship education which does not involve critical reflection can be called ‘education’ at all. Schooling which aims to produce citizens in a mould that has been previously and externally determined will require ‘training’ or ‘conditioning’,
elements which can, in certain circumstances, be a valid part of the educational experience, but which alone are insufficient. An externally imposed mould may in some cases be beneficial both to the individual learner and to society in general, but its instrumental benefits cannot justify it as an educational practice.

A non-critical citizenship education might, for instance, consist of the teacher explaining the origins of Parliament, its current function, the creation of laws, the importance of respecting the law, electoral processes, the importance of voting and so forth. Students would be required to absorb the information, the explanations and values associated with them, and to reproduce them at a later time. This approach is not entirely worthless, and a substantial amount of essential information must be transmitted in this way (as in all forms of education). However, it is not sufficient: firstly, enquiry into a problem (such as “Why do we have a parliament?”, “Is a parliamentary system better than a presidential system?” or “Does the existence of a parliament guarantee genuine democracy?”) is likely to be more effective in engaging learners’ interest and active engagement in the issue in question. It can also stimulate curiosity and encourage an enquiring disposition that will lead to continued learning in the future. Most importantly, it can lead to a deeper understanding of the issue through the process of grappling with a specific problem and appreciating the complexity and contested nature of political issues in general.

An objection commonly raised is that learners must be educated in a particular knowledge tradition before being taught to question it (Winch 2004). It is clear that a certain amount of knowledge is necessary before a person can critically question in a meaningful sense. Yet does this entail immersion in a particular tradition? Galston (2002: 105) states:

One might also argue that instructing children within a particular tradition, far from undermining intellectual or religious freedom, may in fact promote it. Knowing what it means to live within a coherent framework of value and belief may well contribute to an informed adult choice between one's tradition of origin and those encountered later in life.

However, accepting the need to be grounded within a tradition does not mean rejecting a critical approach, since the majority of school experiences and the general exposure to culture outside school will in fact provide the student with that particular knowledge tradition. Citizenship education, which will normally occupy a small proportion of a student's time, should concentrate on developing critical faculties rather than reinforcing the dominant tradition.

**Political justifications**

In addition to these educational considerations, there are good reasons to believe that
the development of questioning attitudes in citizenship education has an instrumental value in contributing to a healthy democracy. There may be arguments for the desirability of a conformist and submissive population in times of extreme external threat or internal unrest, but in most cases this will serve the interests not of the wider population but of the ruling elite, who can thereby hold on to power with little accountability. Commentators (e.g. Kymlicka 2002; Heater 1999) often distinguish between two main frameworks of citizenship: liberal – based on individual rights guaranteed by the State – and civic republican – emphasizing universal active participation. Critical awareness is necessary for both of these, since in the liberal conception, citizens must defend their rights and choose their representatives wisely, and in the civic republican conception, meaningful participation depends on political understanding and judgement (McCowan 2004). Although, as Curren (1997) points out, critical citizenship is not intrinsic to the concept of democracy, it is certainly desirable even in the most minimally democratic system. Kymlicka (1999: 82) states that:

The ability and willingness to engage in public discourse about matters of public policy, and to question authority...are perhaps the most distinctive aspects of citizenship in a liberal democracy, since they are precisely what distinguish ‘citizens’ within a democracy from the ‘subjects’ of an authoritarian regime.

Galston (1989), however, presents a counter-argument, proposing that citizenship education should not require children to question their situation. He makes a distinction between philosophic and civic education, where the purpose of the latter is “not the pursuit and acquisition of truth, but rather the formation of individuals who can effectively conduct their lives within, and support, their political community” (p.90). He concedes that liberal democracies are more open to the social consequences of philosophic education than most forms of government, but that even in these, the aims of civic education should not be the quest for truth. He states:

[R]igorous historical research will almost certainly vindicate complex "revisionist" accounts of key figures in American history. Civic education, however, requires a more noble, moralizing history: a pantheon of heroes who confer legitimacy on central institutions and constitute worthy objects of emulation. (p. 91)

Callan (1997) calls this sentimental civic education, tracing it back to Plato’s appeal to myth as a means of increasing loyalty to the State. Galston is not in favour of State coercion through education, since “genuine civic unity rests on unforced consent” (Galston 2002: 108), yet opposes the promotion of critical autonomy in relation to cultural and political values, the State being seen to have neither a right nor a duty to promote scepticism among children.

Yet, while it is right that a “noble, moralizing history” can be an effective pedagogical
tool, and that it is necessary to engage the emotions as well as an intellectual acceptance of the principles of a just society, this does not justify the presentation of distorted factual evidence of the past and the repression of critical thought. Furthermore, as Callan states:

[S]entimental political education depends in part on an offhand pessimism about the ability or desire of ordinary citizens to understand the rational grounds for the political institutions under which they live. (p.102)

If democracy is to be more than a thin veil for a continuing rule of the few, then citizens must be trusted to judge their own State, and have access to information on its more unseemly aspects, even if that undermines the naive patriotism on which political cohesion sometimes depends. Surely the risk of destabilization is one worth taking. Those who have most to fear from a critical populace are elites whose mandate is based on inherited power rather than good governance.

It is necessary here to distinguish between the surface level components of the political system and the underlying structures supporting them. In many liberal democracies, there is freedom to choose candidates for government offices and to influence the policies chosen by the government. Yet all this exists within a deeper framework which defines what is and is not possible. A weak form of critical citizenship would only subject current political actors and policies to scrutiny; a strong form would also assess the form of government, the constitution, the economic system and other core structures of society.

Garratt and Piper (2004) provide an instance of the importance of the strong form of critical questioning. While the Crick Report in the UK does provide support for active citizenship and political literacy, some key elements of the underlying order are not questioned. Garratt and Piper draw attention to the failure to address the issue of the British monarchy, and the conflation of notions of subject and citizen, with significant implications for the political identity and power of individuals. It seems clear that the question, ‘Should we or should we not have a monarchy’ is an ideal one to raise in class and around which to develop discussion and debate. Moreover, it is fundamental to understanding the current context of citizenship in the UK and deciding its future trajectory. Avoiding issues like the monarchy and the merits and drawbacks of the capitalist economic system both removes essential keys for understanding society and provides undesirable restrictions on visions of social change and development.

There are, therefore, intrinsic and instrumental justifications of education for questioning citizenship. However, it is far from easy for a school system to implement this type of education. These problems will be addressed in the following sections.

The problem of loyalty and allegiance

All forms of democratic State require some allegiance from their citizens, even if this only consists of a minimal recognition of legitimacy and authority, and respect for laws.
Miller (1993: 9) in his justification of the nation, states that in the absence of such a context:

> It is potentially difficult to mobilize people to provide collective goods, it is difficult to get them to agree to practices of redistribution from which they are not likely personally to benefit, and so forth. These problems can be avoided only where there exists large-scale solidarity, such that people feel themselves to be members of an overarching community, and to have social duties to act for the common good of that community, to help out other members when they are in need, etc.

A potential shortcoming of the critical questioning approach, therefore, is that it does not have the power to mobilize allegiance, and may serve to undermine what allegiance there already is.

As discussed above, Galston (1989) sees a ‘noble, moralizing history’ and a ‘pantheon of heroes’ as necessary features of citizenship education, even when this means presenting a society's past and present in an undeservedly favourable light. Yet should we have to teach allegiance in this way? Surely, in the crucial matter of giving consent to government, allegiance should emerge from the conscious decision of the individual, and not be based on misleading or deliberately distorted accounts of the nation.

Given that some form of shared identity or loyalty is necessary for a polity to function, in a democracy it would be ideal for society to unite around democratic values such as those proposed by Crick (1999): freedom, toleration, fairness, respect for truth and respect for reasoning. Centring allegiance on these democratic values is particularly desirable in multi-ethnic States, where there may be significant minorities who do not share the history and identity of the majority. Yet it is not certain whether this can be achieved in practice without other forms of shared tradition. Kymlicka (1999) cites the case of Canada, where despite a large degree of unity on political principles, there is still strong secessionist sentiment in Quebec. It is certainly more difficult to build cohesion around abstract principles than around the familiar and emotive symbolism of land, race and nation.

A civic education that is rational rather than rhetorical and morally critical rather than moralizing is not obviously a powerful instrument for the arousal of those political affections whose maintenance seems especially difficult in large, pluralistic democracies whose present and future are overshadowed by a morally ambiguous past. (Callan 1997: 102)

The “morally ambiguous past” referred to by Callan is something that will inevitably emerge in any critical analysis of a country's history, as instances are uncovered of injustice against groups and individuals within the nation and against other nations. Yet there is a need to engage the emotions in any form of education, and in this case it is necessary to inspire learners to meaningful political participation, or at least to support for a just polity – something that is hard to achieve on the basis of a view of past and present as a “moral
wasteland”. Another point raised by Callan is the danger of developing a scepticism that is politically sterile (p. 113). There is not so much a lack of intellectual questioning in contemporary times as a preference for an epistemological scepticism that leads more easily to political disengagement than to engagement.

Is it overly ambitious to expect citizens to develop the degree of allegiance necessary for the survival of a polity around abstract democratic values? Should citizenship education aim firstly to promote loyalty to the nation-state and hope that democratic values will be transmitted indirectly? The difficulties involved in trying to build these necessary political affections has led Callan to advocate what he calls ‘emotional generosity’, which allows learners to avoid cynicism by appreciating and being inspired by positive elements of their political institutions and history, but without slipping into the manufactured fictions of sentimental civic education (Callan 1997: 18). A similar position is adopted by Kymlicka (1999). This approach seems promising since it avoids the politically sterile scepticism outlined above, without destroying the ability to evaluate critically. The question of allegiance, however, is not easily resolved and remains a considerable stumbling block for critical citizenship education.

Can an authority promote critical scrutiny of itself?

Another objection closely linked to the previous one is that of the difficulties involved in a State genuinely encouraging critique of itself. Authorities will be discouraged by the possible risks, as emphasized by Winch (2004: 475):

There is an inherent danger of instability in the critical outlook once it has been developed. The habit of analysis and criticism cannot be turned off by society at will, and so it is almost inevitable that it will be exercised in ways that are unforeseen and unwelcome to some.

Some empirical examples can illustrate this point. The Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST) of Brazil is a social movement working for agrarian reform that runs a large network of schools in accordance with its own philosophy of education and political aims. Like many educational initiatives inspired by the ideas of Paulo Freire, MST schools foster critical attitudes towards the government and the underlying political and economic structures of society. Yet, despite their best intentions, there are powerful constraints on the movement’s ability to foster critical attitudes towards itself, on account of the need for unity and loyalty in order to achieve political aims and to protect itself from external threats (McCowan 2003). Another example is provided by the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua. The new administration initiated an ambitious adult literacy campaign in 1980 aimed at conscientizing the population along Freirean lines. However, these aims were progressively undermined by the more pressing task of galvanizing internal loyalties in the face of the threat from the Contras (Arnove 1986; Miller 1984).
These examples raise the question of whether a body providing schooling can ever effectively promote critical scrutiny of itself. It is highly unlikely that nations threatened by internal instability and external invasion will promote those types of attitudes and make available information that might be corrosive of support for the government. Clearly, there are limitations on the ability of States in any situation to subject themselves to criticism. Educational programmes run by community groups, NGOs and social movements are in a better position to promote questioning citizenship (in relation to the nation-state) than state schools. Yet there are limits to the extent to which they will promote questioning of themselves. In general terms, political bodies – whether State, political party or civil society organization – can only allow critical questioning up to a certain point, and will suppress scrutiny once their own survival is at risk.

On the other hand, empirical research shows that in some circumstances it is possible for critical attitudes to be encouraged towards government policy and still maintain viable governance (see, for example, studies of local government education policy in Brazil: McCowan, forthcoming; Azevedo 2002; Gandin & Apple 2002). Moreover, public education systems are only partially controlled by the State, and the teachers within them have some degree of autonomy and can interpret the curriculum in different ways. A critical questioning approach will depend as much on individual teachers as on the authority providing the education.

In summary, there are considerable forces acting against the promotion of critical attitudes in schools, due not only to the requirements of sustaining a cohesive polity as discussed above, but also to ensuring internal and external security. While these forces can be overcome by committed governments, it may well be that this form of citizenship education is only practically possible in a State that has achieved a fair degree of stability.

**Indoctrination and neutrality**

A major concern in citizenship education, and in all forms of education with a moral or political relevance, is the possibility of indoctrination. This is a possible reason for the absence of political education as a curricular subject in UK schools until 2002. Commentators such as Flew (2000) and Tooley (2000) consider that political issues should still be excluded from education on account of the dangers of indoctrination. What, therefore, are the risks entailed in this approach?

Flew (2000) provides a critique of the Crick Report and the scope the new citizenship education provision allows for indoctrination. He, and earlier studies such as Scruton et al. (1985), refer to the Peace Studies initiative of the 1980s which, according to the author, “certainly constituted the then most widespread kind of politically indoctrinatory teaching” (page 19-20). The author rightly calls for clarity on key issues such as human rights and equality, and for an emphasis on critical thinking. However, this pamphlet provides a good example of the partial use of the word ‘critical’: Flew calls for a critical analysis of anti-fascism and pro-EU materials in schools; elsewhere, Tooley (2000)
criticizes indoctrinatory references to ‘sustainable development’ and ‘concern for the environment’. They do not, however, call for critical attitudes towards the free market or patriarchy, for example. In the case of these authors, the call to remove the political elements from the curriculum stems not from an opposition to the political per se, but from a fear of the influence of left-wing educators. Nevertheless, they do raise an important point that notions such as rights that have wide acceptance in society should not be taken for granted. Educators should raise the questions of the origins of rights, if they are necessary and, if so, why; if human beings have an obligation to protect the environment, how to balance the at times conflicting interests of human welfare and environmental protection, and so forth.

Freire considers neutral education to be impossible (and he goes further than Crick by stating that attempts to be neutral are a veiled means of perpetuating injustice). He proposes that teachers should state their opinions, but not impose them in an authoritarian way: “Respecting them [the learners] means, on the one hand, testifying to them of my choice, and defending it; and on the other, it means showing them other options…” (Freire 1994: 65). Roberts (1999: 20), explaining this feature of Freire’s thought, draws a distinction between, “(a) transmitting a political or moral view and (b) doing this in a dogmatic way”.

However, there remains the difficult question raised by the confrontation of the critical thinking and critical pedagogy paradigms. Should citizenship education actively promote particular views, rather than presenting a balanced perspective, when these views are systematically submerged by the prevailing hegemony? It would certainly be right for a teacher to actively promote, say, the equal rights of women and men, in a context in which this was far from being an accepted position. Yet, there is little to be gained in forcing this view on students, however just it may be: there must be critical understanding before a view is internalized, and this involves being aware of opposing views.

**Conclusion**

Few countries still impose the cruder nationalist forms of citizenship education often evident in the 19th and 20th centuries. Yet current provision is a long way from promoting genuinely critical citizenship. The curriculum in England for example does provide some space for critical questioning, at least in principle. The Crick Report states:

> Respect for the rule of law is a necessary condition for any kind of social order and a necessary component of education. In a parliamentary democracy, however, education must also help future citizens distinguish between law and justice…. Citizens must be equipped with the political skills needed to change laws in a peaceful and responsible manner. (QCA 1998: 10)

However, this remains at the level of weak questioning. What is needed is a strong form, through which, in addition to current governments and laws, the basic structures of
the system can be challenged. The political system should be presented to students as an edifice to be taken apart and reconstructed, not as a façade which, at most, can be painted in different colours. Otherwise, not only will the growth of political apathy among the young continue unabated, but the democratic system itself will be undermined.

Clearly, schools should not necessarily promote criticism of the government or State institutions, since in some cases these may be perfectly adequate. It is as wrong for an education programme to start from a premise of the necessary corruption of society as from one of its necessary acceptability. Nevertheless, no part of society should be so sacred that it is protected from the critical eye of young people in schools. This conception may appear a destructive one, aiming first to undermine unjust institutions, rather than construct alternatives. Certainly, citizenship education should also promote the constructive skills of deliberation and participation, and combat feelings of powerlessness by showing the potential for real change through political action.

This paper has argued for critical questioning as a basis for citizenship education on both educational and political grounds. Yet while this framework is highly desirable, there remain difficult questions relating to the cohesion of the polity, pedagogical practice and the viability of implementation in a public education system. Balancing the conflicting aims of allegiance and critical attitudes does not necessarily entail finding the median point between two extremes. A strongly questioning population can also be very cohesive, as long as it is bound by some other form of allegiance, in the absence of uncritical patriotism. Encouraging forms of allegiance that are not based on conformism and blind patriotism is the daunting task facing educators.

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Notes

1 These critiques are not valid for all theorists of the critical thinking movement. More political conceptions can be seen in Brookfield 1987, Weil 1998 and Winch 2004.

2 The report produced by the Advisory Group on Education for Citizenship and the Teaching of Democracy in Schools (QCA 1998), chaired by Bernard Crick, which formed the basis of the National Curriculum provision for Citizenship.

3 i.e subject of the crown, not subject as ‘agent’.

References


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