

THEME: Citizenship education under liberal democracy

To be or not to be a (properly educated) citizen
– comments on the ICCS 2009 study

In this theme issue we wish light is shed on a worldwide study – the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study*, ICCS 2009 – that aims at investigating the readiness among young people in different countries to take on their roles as citizens, and its educational implications (Schultz et al 2010). This study ranks among other international comparative studies, such as the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, PIRLS, the Programme for International student assessment, PISA, and the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study, TIMSS. These studies have come to gain increased influence in the field of education in the past 20 years and can be seen as one manifestation of the culture of accountability in education (cf. Apple 2004, Hopmann 2008, Pettersson 2008, Taubman 2009).

Compared to other international studies the ICCS 2009 study stands out in that it concentrates on the notion of democratic citizenship in an educational context. As regards the Swedish context, a national equivalent to the ICCS 2009 study has been carried out and reported recently (Amnå et al 2010, The National Swedish Agency for Education 2010a, 2010b). Here the ICCS 2009 is highlighted from various theoretical and methodological perspectives for three purposes. First, to offer a deeper insight into the ways in which citizen competence is measured in the ICCS 2009 study. Secondly, to discuss the ways in which young people's possibilities to act are indicated in the ICCS 2009 study by providing qualitative empirical cases; and thirdly, to hint at some feasible openings for ways of approaching young people's enacted and expected citizen competence in education.

In order to carry out this threefold aim, attention is drawn to the aims and ambitions of the ICCS 2009 study, as well as to the selection of content and criteria in the study's quantitative design as regards its

measurement of citizen competence and education. The content and criteria chosen can be seen to point out what, according to the study, characterises educationally desirable citizenship. As such, these criteria serve as a source for a deeper investigation of how young people are depicted and what is required of them and of educational policy and practice according to the ICCS 2009 study. As in any study, especially quantitatively informed surveys studies aimed at drawing comparison, there is an assemblage of built-in methodological demands, circumstances and conditions – opportunities and delimitations – involved. As the ICCS 2009 study is international and serves comparative ends, the measurement of young people's citizen competence in school and in the wider society must use concepts that are clear and distinct, and perhaps also to some extent lean on more or less conformist depictions of citizenship and citizen competence. Nonetheless, the particularities and concretisations that are necessary to meet these ends mean the exclusion, or invisibility, of other feasible ends. Hence, while the ICCS 2009 study and other international comparative studies make it possible to draw comparisons between different countries over time, they also convey messages about the content, meanings and enactments that are encompassed and not encompassed, valued and less valued in the phenomenon of democratic citizenship (Cherryholmes 1988).

By focusing on the current accountability movement in education, intensified through the increased attention given to high-stakes testing on different levels in the field of education (Au 2007), and on joint highlighting of qualitative exemplifications of young people's meaning-making processes and practical enactments of citizen competence, three interrelated arguments are raised. First, that the ICCS 2009 study's measurement of young people's current and future inclination for democratic citizenship in and through education needs to be seen and acted upon in relation to what young people say and do here-and-now, inside and outside school.¹ Secondly, that the selection of items and design in the ICCS 2009 study stands out as nurturing notions of democracy and citizenship that might be hazardous if they are allowed a too heavy impact in the field of education; thirdly, on the basis of these two arguments, the importance of asking ourselves, as educators and educational researchers, what education is and what it could be, and for what reasons these arguments need to be raised is being stressed, with respect to the assignment of education in promoting a proper(ly educated) citizenry.

Theoretical and contextual outlining

Here I provide a brief account of the theoretical and contextual delineations that guide our joint approach to the ICCS 2009 study in this theme issue. Initially, a general framing of citizenship and education in present times is presented. This is followed by an account of some central remarks in the ICCS 2009 study.

Educating citizens in our times – an uneasy liberal-political concern

The concept of citizenship belongs to the category of concepts that stand to lose their meaning as a result of popularity. Like other key terms in social, political and educational sciences (civic society, government, social capital), the term citizenship seems accessible and clear precisely because it is used so frequently (Birzea 2005). In Western liberal societies the concept of citizenship refers to a considerable extent to the individual in formal, juridical and universalised registers, encompassing specific scientific notions of belonging, identification and participation in society (Kymlicka & Norman 2000, Tilly 1995).

Although the concept of citizenship is depicted in liberal traditions in general, universal terms, the notion of what is universal is nevertheless interpreted and articulated in specific national, social and political contexts, reflecting historical traditions and institutional and cultural complexes. To provide an example, British literature on citizenship, central to its liberal traditions, has tended to focus on the relationship between individual citizens and the State. In contrast, the Scandinavian literature, which also rests on liberal traditions, has been more likely than the British to emphasise the relations between citizens as a collective, reflecting the feelings of solidarity and participation emanating from a long history of social democracy. The focus in the Scandinavian literature on participation is also evident in the field of education (cf. Bronäs 2000, Lister 2003, Lister et al 2007, Lundahl 2005, Telhaug et al 2006) and comes to the fore in the current Swedish education curricula (Englund 1986/2005, Olson 2008) and in education practice (Öhrn et al 2011). Thus, concerning the field of education in Western liberal societies, in Sweden and elsewhere, its alignment with liberal traditions testifies to the variety of ways and degrees in which educating competent citizens involves liberal concerns, such as; attentiveness and sensitivity to individual autonomy, following laws and regulations, plurality and participation in universalised registers (Feinberg & McDonough 2003, Irsdotter Aldenmyr 2011, Roth & Burbules 2007).

The emphasis in liberal democracies on promoting a democratic citizenry through education can be seen in the light of general political worries about the future of democracy. These worries are partly underpinned by political science and sociological research that suggests a decline, particularly among adolescents, in political participation, in knowledge and in interest at local, national and global levels in different parts of the world (Inglehart 1997, Yates & Youniss 1998). Although the support from such research is inconsistent, contemporary political targeting of these issues in the field of education, together with the undergoing revival of the research field of political socialisation (Amnå et al 2009), indicates a political unease about the current state of democracy and democratic citizenship. This situation, in which the liberal command is strong but at the same time seems to fail to nurture civic spirit, can be referred to as the failure of liberal democracy (Mouffe 2009). In Simon Critchley's words, this failure has to do with lack of commitment:

there is a motivational deficit at the heart of liberal democratic life, where citizens experience the governmental norms that rule contemporary society as externally binding but not internally compelling (Critchley 2007, p. 7, in Bergdahl 2010, p. 72).

Focusing on the general liberal political concern to provide a democratic citizenry through education, by seeing to young people's citizen commitment as "internally compelling", the ICCS 2009 study places itself in the midst of this concern.

The ICCS 2009 study – an event in present times of accountability

The geographically and historically comparative aims of the ICCS 2009 study have the following background motives: recent terror attacks in the world, increased social and economic gaps between people in the world, the increased importance of nongovernmental organisations [NGOs] in societies, increasing access to the Internet and global general tendencies towards individualisation (Schulz et al 2008, 2010). Whether or not the ICCS 2009 study takes up on liberal principles in its measurement of young people's citizen competence must be left for investigation, but the motives underpinning the study mirror a similar worry about young people's civic spirit with regard to their ability and readiness to deal with social and political matters in our times, as well as the expectations of education to deal with this concern.

As enacted, deliberated and negotiated, neither liberal nor any other category of citizenship can be divorced from its time and context – temporal, geographical and institutional (Osler & Starkey 2003). Indeed, any depiction of what it means to be a citizen inside and outside of school, together with the vocabularies and endorsements that capture it, is likely to differ between countries and cultural contexts (Torney Purta 2009). The depictions are also likely to differ between different institutional and educational settings within these geographical and cultural contexts. Moreover, in different cultural educational contexts people receive, experience and act upon the notion of citizenship differently, depending on their age, class, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality and (dis) ability. These factors, together with different ‘regimes’ of dominant institutional patterns, policy-making processes and curricula, interact to weave the texture of citizenship for individual citizens. In this light, the ICCS 2009 study aims to adjust the educational arrangements to the measured levels of young people’s inclination to respond to what counts as citizen ‘competentability’ in different geographical and contextual settings, so that this competentability can be promoted in and through education in an appropriate way.

Reiterating the considerable impact that internationally encompassed, quantitatively oriented assessments like the ICCS 2009 study have had in the realm of education, the study seems to both illustrate and promote increased educational centeredness on measurement and standardisation of levels through the testing of knowledge, skills and qualities within and between nation states (cf. Graham & Neu 2004). That is, centeredness on outcomes rather than on processes, on curricula and methods of teaching rather than on questioning the purpose of certain methods of teaching and on education as such (Biesta 2010).²

Against the background of the cultural stream of accountability in educational policy, practice and research – together with contemporary Western liberal political worries about the future of democracy – the ICCS 2009 study can be seen as something that takes place in the midst of this stream. The present theme issue aims to highlight some crucial concerns regarding this event. More precisely, the aim is to stress some worrisome implications of over-emphasised confidence in the information provided by this study regarding the relationship between education, democracy and citizenship. In doing so, the intent is not to point out at this study or any other international, quantitatively oriented study as irrelevant or misdirected. Neither is the aim to propose that studies carried out in order to allow comparisons between different cultural settings, historical situations and societal states fail to offer significant information about young people’s civic engagement by the very way in

which they are carried out. The aim is rather to stress the importance of asking ourselves as educators, educational policy makers or researchers about the role of these studies in the educational task to provide a (properly educated) citizenry.

The Contributions

To further this aim, the contributions in this theme issue take as their common starting point to highlight different notions of the relationship between young people, democracy, citizenship and education that are raised and actualised in and through the ICCS 2009 study. In *Maria Olson's* article *WHAT COUNTS AS YOUNG PEOPLE'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN TIMES OF ACCOUNTABILITY? ON THE IMPORTANCE OF MAINTAINING OPENNESS ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE'S CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN EDUCATION*, light is shed on young people's civic engagement. Through an analysis and discussion of the ways in which civic engagement comes to be depicted in the ICCS 2009 study, and in the stories of young people, it is argued that placing too heavy educational emphasis on the ICCS 2009 study is problematic for the educational task of promoting an engaged citizenry. It is further argued that we need to continue to allow space for the multiplicity of ways in which young people's civic engagement comes into being in and through education. In *THE (EMBODIED) CITIZEN – EXPLORING YOUNG PEOPLE'S POSSIBILITIES TO ENGAGE IN THE WELLBEING OF OTHERS* *Silvia Edling* contributes to discussions regarding the role of education to combat different forms of violence towards others, such as discrimination, bullying, oppression and so forth. In the article she explores the relationship between how young people describe their everyday responses to other people's life circumstances and the image of a citizen who engages in other people's wellbeing presented in the ICCS report. In interpreting the relationship between the report and the young people's narratives she uses Kristeva's understandings of politics and the political as a means to make sense out of the young persons' narratives. The concepts illuminate the ways ideals within politics become embodied and the struggles accompanying these embodied responses. Moreover they help direct attention to moments that are not captured in politics while at the same time they convey a message about young people's possibilities of promoting the wellbeing of others in the field of the political. Hence, Kristeva's interpretation of the concepts provides a language that makes it possible to think and hence approach the educational desire to stimulate young people's engagement in the wellbeing of others otherwise (not instead).

In *CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN DISCUSSIONS CONCERNING POLITICAL ISSUES* Johan Liljestrand scrutinises and gives an account of what constitutes the object for discussion concerning social and political issues in the ICCS 2009 study. By highlighting interaction in discussions between teachers and students in the classroom, he makes a case for arguing that the meaning and relevance of what are considered to be political issues in classroom discussions are far from given, but form part of social construction. He further argues that the issues chosen for discussion form part of political negotiation. Taken together, the analyses of what count as political and social discussions in the ICCS 2009 study and in the classroom testify to the relational character of the subject for discussion concerning social and political issues. On the basis of this conclusion it is argued that, if democracy takes individuals' common deliberation as its point of departure, young people needs to be considered as citizens here-and-now. In the final contribution Erik Andersson stresses the importance of understanding what it means to be politically socialised. In *THE POLITICAL VOICE OF YOUNG CITIZENS: EDUCATIONAL CONDITIONS FOR POLITICAL CONVERSATION – SCHOOL AND SOCIAL MEDIA* two empirical spaces, the ICCS/school and the social media/Black Heart, are described, analysed and used to illustrate tensions between a conventional and a situational (new life politics) understanding of political conversation and socialisation. It is argued that young people's voices are framed differently depending on where, when and how the political conversation is enacted. It is further argued that social media (and other youth spaces), together with a revitalisation of education, have the potential to provide a 'third space' where the voice of young people is taken into account as a political voice. By focusing on the notion of situational political socialisation and insights from young people's political conversations, Andersson suggests that education can allow young people to take up their political life situation in school by considering them as political citizens here-and-now.

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Notes

1. This argument is also raised in the Swedish analytical report that came into being as a response to and initiated commentary on the ICCS 2009 study (The National Swedish Agency for Education 2010b, chapter 1).
2. Wayne Au's (2007) meta-analysis of 49 empirical qualitative studies, which was carried out in order to investigate how high-stakes testing affects different aspects of school curricula – the knowledge content, the knowledge form and the pedagogy – serves as one empirical example of the heavy reliance on such assessment rationales in the field of education today.

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