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Democratic Citizenship – A Conditioned Apprenticeship. A Call for Destabilisation of Democracy in Education

Abstract

We live in times when the search for a citizenship education that can transcend national, ethnical and cultural borders is an important part of educational policy. In times of increased pressure by the European Union on its nation states to provide for nation-transcending democracy, this question becomes crucial for national policy-making in Europe. In this text, Swedish education policy will be taken as a case in point in order to shed light on how this question is being handled in this particular national policy setting. It is argued that the policy's citizen fostering agenda tends to be counterproductive in the sense that it is still situated in national notions of the relationship between democracy and education, which tend to exclude certain individuals and groups of people on an age-related and (ethno) cultural basis. It is further argued that these excluding features can be related to educational ideas about socialisation. The aim of this text is underlined by suggesting a different way of framing democracy and democratic citizenship education: to increase the potential of education as regards the renewal of democracy and democratic citizenship.

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Keywords

Citizenship education, democracy, society-centred, consumer-centred, voicing, newcomers

A central task for education in many western liberal democracies in Europe is to foster democratic citizens. One core question in the present societal and educational situation is how this task, regulated by law, is handled in times of pluralism and globalisation. Recent discussions about the future of education and global democratic citizenship have been fuelled by a worry about the 'seemingly pervasive' erosion of the social, political, economic and moral fabric of society in the face of rapid economic and social change (Biesta, 2006). As regards the Swedish context, which is taken as a case in point in this text, Swedish education policy on citizenship seems to handle this worry in ways that can be considered as counterproductive these days. Such counterproductivity is framed as unsatisfactory when it comes to the task of fostering democratic citizens.

First, I briefly present some characteristic features of two modes of citizenship education in current Swedish education policy. Secondly, one shortcoming as regards the democratic viability of these ideals is highlighted and, thirdly, this lack is discussed in terms of what might be seen as an unsatisfactory notion of democratic life and of the relationship between democracy and education in relation to national educational arenas in Europe.

Two modes of citizenship education in Swedish education policy

In current Swedish education policy, two different modes of citizenship education dominate when it comes to the Swedish schools' commissioned role of fostering democratic citizens: a *society-centred* citizenship education and a *consumer-centred* citizenship education (Olson, 2008b).¹ Here, I will give a brief account of these modes of citizenship education as regards the educational task that is offered by them when it comes to providing for a democratic citizenry.

Beginning with the *society-centred* citizenship education, its 'democratic task' may be described as a question of empowering children and young people as well as other adults in education with skills and qualities that are assumed to be democratic. Hence, the educational assignment related to this empowerment tends to centre on democratic citizen fostering as something that can be provided for through a 'proper' democratic education in Swedish schools. This education appears, interestingly enough, to entail substantial qualities that are alleged to be inherent in an exclusive culture, i.e. the Swedish culture, so that adequate democratic citizen fostering is provided by means of a correct acculturation of values and skills that are assumed to belong to this culture. Within the *society-centred* mode of citizenship education, democracy thus seems to be intimately connected to a presumed Swedish national culture: "democracy forms the basis of the national school system" (Swed-

1 These two modes of citizenship education in current Swedish education policy are scrutinized and elaborated in previous policy research (Olson, 2008b). In this text, I sketch some feasible features of these nationally embedded educational policy modes of citizenship education without any intention of doing justice to either empirical stances of illustrations and exemplifications or to the contextual complexities involved in the analysis.



ish National Curriculum for the Compulsory School System, the Pre-school class and the Leisure-time centre Lpo94, 2009, p. 3).

Society-centred citizenship education thus encompasses a moral cultivation that involves concepts such as solidarity, respect for others, sympathy and mutual understanding, where democracy is incorporated by working on the individuals' bodies and minds (Olson, 2008b; Sigurdson, 2002). This task serves the higher aim of strengthening a collectively undertaken "national moral character" presumed to be democratic. In sum, society-centred citizenship education in current Swedish education policy can be described as a political way of providing for an educated individual who believes that "what is good for me is good for the nation, which is good for the world", which entails a fixed set of nationally encompassing moral skills and values whose application is considered to serve as the appropriate way for the individual to fulfil her democratic life (Englund 1996, Olson, 2008b, 2009a).

As regards the second mode of citizenship education that is emphasised in Swedish education policy, *consumer-centred* citizenship education, its educational task can be described differently. Less stress is here placed on the acquisition of substantial cultural qualities by children and young people, as well as adults in education than is the case in society-centred citizenship education. Instead, certain 'attitudes' towards life and politics are assigned a more central role in the educational task of fostering democratic citizens. More precisely, the role of democracy that is embedded in this political-democratic educational task is related to the principle of freedom of choice. Put briefly, where the society-centred mode of citizenship education incorporates a specific set of moral values and predispositions for the individual to embody by means of a proper democratic education, the democratic endeavour of consumer-centred citizenship education instead requires a certain attitude towards life: the readiness to choose – politically, culturally and economically.²

Fostering democratic citizens in this mode of citizenship education tends to become a question of preparing children and young people for a life with satisfactory alternatives for them to choose between in order to achieve their objectives, which, in turn, serves the higher purpose of expressing a democratic lifestyle (Boman, 2002; Englund, 1999a, 1999b; Olson, 2008a). The role of education may thus be pictured as a question of refining their sensibility to their own needs, desires and objectives so as to prepare them for a life in and a societal spirit of 'freedom of choice',

which is considered to be democratic in itself.³ What stands out as a nation-transcending extension of the citizen fostering involved in this mode of citizenship education is the hope that personal freedom, framed as a matter of navigating among possible choices, may serve as a trajectory for democratic life beyond the nation state.

The two modes of citizenship education and the endorsement of democratic life

Although in different ways, the two modes of citizenship education in Swedish education policy both entail a political vision where education is assigned special and exclusive importance for democracy and for democratic citizenship. The relationship between education and democracy seems to be depicted as external, which means that Swedish education is considered to be part of a democratic culture per se (Biesta, 2009). Such a relationship frames a democratic citizenship that is located in the existence of a properly educated citizenry so that once all citizens have received their education, democracy will simply follow. In the face of such a 'democratic' objective, a democratic citizenry should be provided for by means of appropriate learning processes in formal education. The relationship between education and democracy thus involves an educational vision where the desired result of educational efforts is a person who possesses democratic knowledge, values, dispositions and life forms that are to be applied to life in particular ways and under certain circumstances.

Such policy references to education and democracy support the assertion that education is capable of serving as a societal warranty for democracy and for democratic citizenship beyond national and cultural entities. Hence, Swedish schools not only constitute one proper and adequate training arena for the outcome of a desired democratic life, but *the* proper and adequate training arena for this life. This somewhat awkward policy response to the issue of educating people for democratic life, which to some extent tends to transcend national and cultural borders, is far from new or spectacular. Yet I think this awkwardness calls for further exploration.

Two civic 'knowabilities'

If we focus on the democratic core that is stressed in the society-centred and consumer-centred citizenship education in Swedish education policy, this core is marked out by an emphasis on two different civic democratic 'knowabilities' for the individual to em-

2 The consumer-centred mode of citizenship education in contemporary Swedish education policy corresponds to a certain degree with Zygmunt Bauman's (2000, 2007) concept of consumerism.

3 This educational task is thought to be supplied by means of schooling that stresses 'factual' knowledge, i.e. through the empowerment of the individual with knowledge of formal democratic structures and systems, and of human and customers' rights (Hwang, 2002; Olson, 2008a).



brace through education: a command of certain cultural moral codes that are being universalised (a common values education that is embedded in cultural registers) or, as in consumer-centred citizenship education, a certain attitude towards life that is directed towards prevailing principles of the market where delicate choosing within logics of demand and enquiry is a desirable feature for the individual to cling to.

As mentioned earlier, these two civic knowabilities both frame the role of education so as to ensure democracy by means of appropriate training of people for a life in a supposedly democratic educational culture, the Swedish culture. Nevertheless, the desired outcome of this educational policy not only frames children and young people, as well as adults in education, as persons who possess democratic knowledge, values and attitudes towards life that are to be applied in life. It also frames them as rooted, acculturated and performed as members or at least disciples of a specific national setting. That is, the democratic promise that emerges in the two modes of citizenship education in Swedish education policy seems to be embedded in nation-bound references; regardless of whether these references centre on the achievement of substantial cultural qualities of children and young, or on their enculturation into a specific 'democratic' choosing attitude towards life and themselves. This promise could be problematic, since it seems to fail to be democratic in itself.

Is democratic citizenship education democratic?

One problem concerning what becomes visible in the two civic knowabilities in the two different modes of citizenship education in Sweden is that some individuals and groups have a propensity to be excluded from the notion of having been 'properly educated' and, further, from valid democratic citizenship. What is at stake, it seems, is that the educational agendas emerging in these modes block the possibility of educational practices functioning as democratic arenas fostering citizens, as these agendas tend to break down vital and necessary all-encompassing ways for people to live a democratic life. Seemingly, they point to the contrary: for a narrow understanding of democracy that nurtures exclusion between people that is related to inquiries about whether one is sufficiently (well) educated or not.

One question that touches on these worrying limits of the Swedish citizen fostering agenda on policy level, as well as the educational policies in many other western (neo) liberal democracies both within and outside Europe (Biesta, 2006; Telhaug, 1990), is what implications their citizen fostering agendas may have for certain individuals and groups. Who may be situated as an insider – as an ascribed 'democrat' according to these agendas – and who runs the risk of being

situated as an outsider, as a 'not-yet-(ascribed) democrat'? And on what grounds may these ascriptions be based? What appears as a crucial notion in respect to these questions is the idea of democracy and democratic citizenship as something that is 'resided'. One can either be inside or outside this supposedly democratic life form depending on one's relationship to it and this seems to determine whether one is acknowledged as a (properly educated) democratic citizen or not.

Individuals and groups whose experiences, values and (choosing) attitudes are not found to be compatible with this 'resided' democracy thus tend to be excluded from a decent, recognisable democratic citizenship, or for some reason are considered to be not-yets in respect to such democratic existence.⁴ We can ask ourselves the question: who may these individuals and groups be, in a concrete sense? Children and young people are people who distinctly score as not-yets as regards democratic citizenship, as they have not undergone any citizenship education in school. Other people who run the risk of being categorised as democratic not-yets are immigrants and national or international minority groups. These people would need to be (re-)educated in terms of a constant refinement of knowabilities familiar in a supposedly Swedish democratic life form so as to fulfil the criteria for democratic citizenship, even though they might have undergone a citizen education other than the Swedish elsewhere in the world.⁵

The delimiting divides between the imagined 'outsiders' in the two policy modes of citizenship education in Sweden shed light on an imbalance that is unbearable for democracy: it seems to be based on a geographically and, supposedly culturally delimited foundation. Certain people tend to be excluded from a valid democratic citizenship. This, I believe, situates democracy and the educational assignment of fostering democratic citizens in a *discriminatory* frame. Establishing democratic citizenship becomes a question of whether the person next to me is, or can be, properly educated in the sense that she or he has a sufficient command of moral skills and dispositions that are acknowledged in a supposedly Swedish democratic life form makes it hard to nurture a hope for democracy. Instead, such a democratic conviction that is founded

4 The dilemma of the delimiting foundation of democracy in Swedish education policy and teaching practice is recognized and discussed as an educational problem in a central Swedish official report on democracy (Prime Minister's office, 2000).

5 Of special interest in this context would be to consider the situation of adult students who can be seen as 'ethnic Swedes'. These individuals have often undergone a citizenship education in the Swedish educational system earlier in their lives, but have not been subjected to the current, contemporary Swedish citizen fostering agenda. For further reading on related issues concerning adult students, see Merrill, 2009.



on ethnocultural divides presents an intolerable fate for democracy, as well as for education as a promoter of democracy within and beyond the nation state.

Hence, the proposal for democratic citizenship, which has emerged in earlier research on current Swedish educational policymaking, seems to be counterproductive. Rather, it illuminates a somewhat awkward situation: it creates closure for the 'fact' that the person in front of me is *beyond* my comprehension of democracy and democratic existence. Such democratic conviction is a hazard that we cannot afford these days. What we need is a democratic belief and citizen fostering agenda that can resist current forces of national or any other universalised embrace of certain life forms that nourish distance between people on ethnocultural or any other categorical basis. What we need, I suggest, are altered ways of thinking about the relationship between democracy, democratic life and education.

Democratic citizenship education as something other than socialisation?

How, then, can we approach the urgent question of educating democratic citizens in a pluralistic world? Far from presenting any solution to this question I will reconsider some aspects of the relationship between democracy and education. What is required, I suggest, is an educational policy on citizenship education that *rejects* socialisation as an educational paradigm and guarantee of democracy. In line with Biesta (2009) and Säfström (2005), it is the very idea of socialisation that has to be reconsidered in order to come to terms with the question of educating democratic citizens.

This suggestion stems from a need to liberate the relationship between democracy and education from the standardised view of a question of integration of not-yets, i.e. children and young people and ethnocultural 'others', in the present societal situation.⁶ This liberation may serve a specific and important aim: to support *change* in this situation and in societal conditions present in current conceptualisations of democracy and of democratic life, which can be seen as a central democratic and educational task. Accordingly, this liberation may serve as a way to transcend social, geographical and psychological boundaries that seem so hard to overcome in citizenship education on the policy level in Sweden. What is at stake is not to take away the responsibility of schools and teachers to

function as 'guides' of children and young and ethnocultural others in an existing world. The main motive for rejecting socialisation as dominating educational idea for democratic citizenship education is, rather, to make a case for a democracy that is directed towards what is new, what is *not yet* seen as democratic for a democracy still-to-come (Peters and Biesta, 2009).⁷

Seen from this viewpoint, to support the outsider's ways of speaking and acting democratic established democratic educational designs like the Swedish is to shore up the opportunity for societies to *renew* themselves and their ways of living and acting democracy through education. In this respect, the outsider's position might be seen as that of the newcomer, as she or he is apt to bring something new into the existing ways of speaking and acting democracy. What, then, does educating for democratic citizenship mean, i.e. taking newcomers' ways of speaking, thinking and experiencing democracy into account? And what would the policy approach to such an endeavour be like? This question does not lend itself easily to levels of practical implementation, but may serve as a critical questioning of democratic 'certainty' within the realm of education. It may invite us to consider educating for democracy differently compared with the two modes of citizen education in Swedish education policy. It may frame such education as a matter of encouragement, as the teacher's encouraging of the newcomers' 'voicing' of different meanings and understandings of democracy and of democratic life (Olson, 2009a).

Such voicing requires that these children, young people and other subjects for education not be treated as democratic not-yets, whose task is to refine their ways of speaking and acting democracy into a reified 'inside' of democracy that consists of specific skills and values and attitudes compatible with an established life form. Instead, it requires an openness and sensitivity to the ways in which these people possess the potential for creating something new and different from the known in terms of democracy. This voicing should not be confused with closure of the common educational assumption that children, young people and adults in education, i.e. the newcomers, should train for a democratic life and culture by engaging in democratic processes and educational practices that are intended to generate a democratic person. Rather, it should be considered as an educational task as important as these educational training practices. It

6 As mentioned earlier, there are indeed several differences between children and young people and ethnocultural others and in relation to the issues of democratic citizenship education. Nevertheless, they share one thing that makes them compatible with each other in relation to this context: they embody the outsider's position in relation to the two modes of citizenship education in Swedish education policy, which is dealt with in this part of the text.

7 A rejection of the idea of socialization in education requires a rethinking of psychological perspectives of education for democracy, such as socially and psychologically established categories and polarizations such as immigrant – emigrant, child – adult and so forth. Such 'developmentalistic' concepts must be rethought in relation to education as they, according to Biesta (2009), tend to make it hard for schools and teachers to think differently about education, school and the people who are subjects of education.



is also worth stressing the notion that the rejection of socialisation as a hegemonic idea in democratic citizenship education is not to consider children and young and ethnocultural 'others' as superior beings in relation to the openness to a renewal of democracy. Instead, they should be considered as a valuable offer in the efforts to break with the tyranny of preconditioned orientatedness concerning democracy and democratic life in education.

To put it differently, what I suggest is that the newcomers' voicing of democracy and democratic life in education may be regarded as a way of learning *from* and *through* democracy, which should be perceived as important as learning for and about democracy. Any citizenship education that takes the former two modes of learning democracy into account should be seen as part of an ongoing, friction-filled route without guarantees of outcomes measurable in any educational quality test. This voicing is by no means free of cultural, political or economical aspects but is, rather, part of these aspects, as they are part of the public space in which education is involved (Mouffe, 2005).

Instead of presenting a proposal for how to implement this offer in educational practices, I would claim that the offer of the voicing of children, young people and other subjects for education gives us the opportu-

nity to *destabilise* current political educational conceptualisations of democracy and democratic citizenship. Destabilising democracy in this sense can be seen as a way of nurturing the hope of a redirecting of the relationship between democracy and education in a way that can 'open up' the political and societal framing of citizen education through education. This hope stresses the notion of the rejection of socialisation as an educational paradigm for democracy. In addition, it carries with it the promise of democratic existence *beyond* national and ethnocultural divides, which may contribute to a redirection of Swedish as well as other nation-bound educational systems in Western democracies in Europe towards a breakdown of pre-established notions of democracy and democratic life.

In summary, rethinking education for democracy as a rejection of socialisation can be seen as a generous offer to policymaking for, and educational practices of, citizenship education. This offer suggests a deepening of the prospect of the *potential of education* as a public space where the search for a renewal of democracy is at the core of the educational practices. This offer, I suggest, is intimately connected with a visionary aspect of democracy and democratic citizenship as something that should involve, and be defined by, children, young people and cultural others.

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