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Beyond Policy – Empowerment as choice or empowerment as voice?

Educating for active citizenship is a pressing issue for educational policymaking in the Nordic countries, not least in the current neoliberal climate defined by economic and social change and by calls from different quarters for increased pluralism. Growing demands from the European Union on its member states to provide for active citizens through education fuels this task. In this text, Swedish education policy will be taken as a case in point in order to highlight how this issue is being handled in this Nordic policy setting. It is argued that its citizen fostering agenda is marked out by a deepened neoliberal orientation as regards the depiction of citizenship. This deepening takes place in the face of a historical rupture in Swedish education policy on citizenship, and consists of a replacement of the historically established society-centred citizenship with a consumer-oriented one that centres on the individual and on 'freedom of choice' as vital hubs. It is further argued that this shift highlights two problematic notions involved in the prevalent, neo liberally oriented framing of active citizenship through education: it tends to gloss over collective and antagonistic dimensions of citizenship necessary for encountering today's societal demands. By drawing on Chantal Mouffe's (2005, 2009) conceptualisation of 'political agonism' the overall aim of this text is highlighted: to seek for feasible openings for an altered way of framing the concept of active citizenship, where education is not depicted in terms of empowerment as choice, but in terms of empowerment as voice.

Introduction

Since the 1990s increased attention is paid in the European Union to education's role in the forming of active citizenship (Birzea, 2005; Johansson, 2007). Not only has the concept come to be stressed in relation to international law, but also to issues of more subjective character like identity creating political, cultural, economical and working life oriented registers:

Citizenship education has a high priority because of social, economic, cultural and political changes that affect the lives [sic.] of citizens. Active citizenship with a European dimension or European citizenship is defined as the membership of the European community of states, which has the following dimensions: political/legal, economic, social, cultural (Haahr, 1997, p. 2)

In this unpublished report written on assignment of the European commission the role of education as regards active citizenship is linked to many different societal dimensions. To reformulate the role of education within Europe hence is envisioned as a question of reframing the relationship between citizenship and education so as to open up for current social changes in contemporary European society.

In a EU European perspective this aim can be traced back to the 1980s when nation transcending educational policies circulated in Europe, with varying impact in the nation states. These educational policies were developed in a time of international organisations like OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development), IMF (International Monetary Fund), WTO (World Trade Organisation), the World Bank and the EU, in the aim of remodelling national school system and -cultures from mainly neo liberal, economical, market related needs (Biesta, 2009; Lundahl, 2005). With this the question of citizenship in the EU becomes a vital part of a supranational knowledge based economy (Alexiadou, 2005). Although the EU policy clearly declares that national citizenship is not to be replaced by a European citizenship, the relationship between the two is far from clear and coherent. With Lawn (2003) this can be seen as a result of the vulnerability of the EU as regards education: the union does not have any educational entity of its own, and has to rely upon national educational systems of its member states. The pressing issue for 'local' national education policy makers in Europe thus is to provide for a policy response to these supranational "travelling educational policies" (Alexiadou, 2005, p. 5) on active citizenship. According to Alexiadou and Zambeta (2005) these acts are important to illuminate. Not only because national education policy arenas are receivers of such travelling polices, but also as they have an impact on them, by the *way* in which these policies are embedded in national educational contexts.

Taking this as a starting point, the text highlights one Nordic educational policy setting, the Swedish, in order to shed light on how supranational policy demands are handled in this 'local' policy context as regards the role of education in the formation of active citizens. In the Swedish education policy context at least two major strands of educational policies can be identified, which are both contrary and intertwined in complex ways. *One the one hand*, contemporary Swedish education policy and reforms are well in line with international and European trends of decentralisation, deregulation and expansion of choice opportunities (Arnman, Järnek & Lindskog 2004; Lundahl, 2005). In certain respects it represents something of an extreme in these respects. It is maybe the state that has had the most rapid and far-going development of school markets and new public management, after the so-called freedom of choice reforms in the early 1990s. One feasible implication of these reforms is that markets and NPM, including competition over students, ranking lists, individual teacher salaries and other

policy technologies are promoting a “new culture of competitive performativity” (Ball, 2003, p. 219). European and international organisations like the OECD and the European Union, and international achievement comparisons like PISA and TIMSS have become increasingly influential in respect to this performativity (c.f. Lundahl, 2007).

On the other hand, the heritage from a traditional Social democratic welfare state is still visible in Sweden and in the Nordic countries. The comprehensive education system has survived by large, and there is little of tracking and division of pupils at lower secondary level (but increasingly so in post 16-education). The variations between schools are relatively small, and social segregation is low in an international comparison. From the mid-90s, inclusion has been a central concept in education and welfare policies, reflecting a broader vision and a higher level of ambition than the older integration strategy. Legislation and national curricula emphasise the duty to educate democratic citizens and give pupils substantial influence (Olson, 2008b). This ideology tends to be in concert with current reforms related to the liberal-conservative government in office since 2006 assumed to involve an increased stress on the fostering of entrepreneurs and customers-oriented citizens in Sweden in neo liberal notions, and together with the Swedish ideological heritage from the era of Social Democratic welfare state it introduces new directions for curricula and education policy on citizenship.

While the intensive period of governance reforms in Sweden from the early nineties has been analysed in numerous studies, comparatively few of these have enquired curriculum in terms of *citizenship* (see c.f. Englund 1985/2005; 1996; Ljunggren, 1996; Niklasson, 2007). In this text I give a brief account for my thesis (Olson, 2008b), which constitutes one of these studies, in order to discuss the *ways* in which Swedish education policy seem to handle supranational, neo liberally oriented EU demands on education for active citizenship. To this aim, I delimit the notion of neo liberalism to a stress on individualisation and market orientation as central references for the envisioned education for active citizenship. First, I make a brief account for current Swedish education policy on citizenship, which ends with the heading ‘Empowerment as choice’.ⁱ Secondly, two unsatisfactory notions of this policy are highlighted and thirdly an altered way of depicting active citizenship is suggested, based on an inspired reading of Chantal Mouffe’s (2005, 2009) conception of political agonism.

Swedish education policy on citizenship – working life, political and cultural aspects

According to previous research (Olson, 2008b), on which the account for Swedish education policy on citizenship is based,ⁱⁱ three major aspects stand out as central as regards the commissioned role of education to foster citizens in this policy setting: one *working life-related*, on *cultural* and one *political* aspect. Taken together these three aspects indicate two vital orientations for a ‘properly educated citizenry’: a strengthened emphasis on the individual and an increased stress on the principle of ‘freedom of choice’. This indication, underpinned by neo liberal notions, is far from surprising, and has been captured in earlier policy research on Swedish educational

policy (Lindblad & Lundahl, 2001). What is noteworthy are the *ways* in which these orientations are set into practice in the Swedish education policy context: by altered ways of 'embodying' young and other subjects with presumably necessary traits, qualities, dispositions, activities and action-taking in *working life-related, cultural* and *political* aspects of citizenship.

Working life-related citizenship

The working life-related understanding of citizenship in Swedish education policy is marked out by an emphasis on the individual and on the educational task of cultivating the 'knowability' to make good working-related choices. This stands in contrast the historically established imaginary of working life citizenship, which was to bestow young people and other subjects to education with knowledge of their collective rights, so as to make people prepared for a life of economical wellbeing through collectively oriented targets.

If social and economical security was targeted as a vital part of a 'proper' working life citizenship fostering, which was to provide for a general conviction of the value of having a job after school, current policy on this citizenship fostering tends to frame these objectives as parts of an old paradigm:

When one was in school one picked up things that were thought to be of direct use for what one was about to become later on in life. The school motivation was linked to a life that waited after school, sometimes fixed jobs, some well paid, other at least safe (SOU 1997:121, p. 41, my transl)

This paradigm is replaced by another, different one, marked out by a societal change:

Life long affiliation to a profession has been replaced by life long learning. It is a question of learning once more, learning anew, stand insecurity, change direction/.../the demands are about an improvement of the general competence, a competence that can be used in a long succession of professions (SOU 1997:121, p. 42, my transl)

Work is framed as a societal sphere that is marked out by "life long learning" and "succession". The presumably 'active' civic attitude towards this sphere is to see work as a challenge that helps to overcome rigidity. The weakened link between education, work and safety can be depicted as a weakened trust in a collective dimension of a working life-oriented citizenship. It marks distance to the historically established policy on citizenship, and not least by depicting education in a disillusioned way:

The educational system can, at best, achieve that each individual is given an opportunity to continuous development of [working life-related] qualifications and of personality adapted to his or hers individual conditions (SOU 1990:14, app. 22, p. 53, my transl)

Education is pictured as an arena that should provide for the individual's "development" of her personal skills that are seen as related to her "personality". This development seems to be intimately entwined with her ability to make decent choices:

A general target for school should be to provide for student's support as regards knowledge, working life-related contacts, guidance etc that they may need in order to make well grounded choices concerning education and work (SOU 1992:94, p. 109, my transl).

In sum, the stress on variation and change in Swedish education policy on active working life-related citizenship goes with a different framing of the future, school and individual interests. Formerly prevailing references of economic safety and control, provided for by an education that sees to individual and collective participation in economical and working life-related politics on a national level are weakened as policy targets. Instead, personal fulfilment and flexibility are strengthened as guiding devices for a working life citizenship in Swedish education policy. The role of education stands out as a place where the individual is to cultivate these guiding devices by improved 'knowability' of how to choose adequately. That means, in accordance with personality and individual propensity.

Cultural citizenship

Swedish education policy in citizenship does not only stand out in working life-related registers, but also in cultural ones. Cultural citizenship can be featured as a matter of breaking up with a dominating Swedish hegemonic 'we' for a life of individual choices as regards cultural identity. The changed focal point in the envisaged fostering for cultural citizenship also seems to imply a different approach to the role of education in relation to the formerly settled in this policy context.

In a historical scope cultural citizenship fostering was a question of enculturation of young and other subjects in education to a pre-assumed "Swedishness" (Olson, 2009). The Swedishness consisted of a fixed set of qualities, traits and dispositions, such as solidarity, compassion and respect for others etcetera. These virtues was concretised into fixed 'rites de passage' that were related to an alleged Swedish majority culture, which often merged with democracy. In the late 1990s this depiction of cultural citizenship is to a growing extent depicted as a hazard:

There is a risk that 'we', the majority culture, represents the norm while the 'strange' cultures are treated as a threat, and that the cultural work emanates in restoration of our own culture, building defences around it and discriminate what is outside (SOU 1996:143, p. 10, my transl)

The Swedish "we" is described as being too a narrow, discriminatory cultural entity. Instead, proper cultural identity making stands out as a question of 'freeing' oneself from such a collective notion of culture. This is supposed to be done in the course of cultural choice:

One can no longer take over a role, a tradition. One must create one self; even one's own identity must be produced and created/.../Life projects can be chosen; they must not be inherited (SOU 1997:121, p. 37, my transl).

Cultural identity is no longer described in terms of pre-established substantive goods for the individual to conquer. Instead it is portrayed as an open space for each and every one to create and to hold in accordance with one's individual will and wishes.ⁱⁱⁱ Consequently, cultural citizenship is envisioned as an art of self-performed "cultural exemption" (SOU 1997:121, p. 37, my transl). The shift towards cultural citizenship as a matter of choice contributes to an altered role of education. It no longer should supply young and other subjects in education with a specific 'cultural offer' of nation-oriented, supposedly collective character. Instead it is assumed to function as an arena for individual making of 'good deliberations' over "cultural meaning":

In a school-for-all, different cultures meet. There are also conditions for an equal encounter. An encounter on the basis of mutuality, a mutuality that implies respect and a will to transcend borders and to be influenced in order to develop new cultural meaning (SOU 1997:121, p. 287, my transl)

Hence, the changed role of education as regards cultural citizenship fostering that stands out in Swedish education policy can be depicted as to offer space and opportunity for the individual to discover and try out different notions of cultural meaning-making, in order to make 'good' choices as regards her 'own' life project.

Political citizenship

If cultural citizenship is portrayed as a question of breaking-up from fixed notions of culture and identity, and the educational task is to serve as a setting where this can be done, by individual choice, the picture of political citizenship is another. Fostering for political citizenship centres on the strengthening of the individual's awareness of rights, with special attention to the aspect of autonomy. The increased stress on the individual as a juridical subject in Swedish education policy, and as such a holder of political agency, marks a notable change: if the formerly settled picture of political citizenship covered both an individual and a public, collective dimension, the current picture tends to be more restricted to an individual level, where formal aspects of democracy are emphasised as vital parts of political agency.

The altered framing of political citizenship also implies a different notion of the role of education. Education for political citizenship stands out as a question of enforcing young people and other subjects in education to be politically active by making them aware of the opportunity to speak up for their individual rights against public authorities. The critical basis for this conception of education in relation to politics reveals a notion of politics where protection of the individual is at the core of the educational task. Hence, the educational task as regards the formation of political citizens becomes a matter of providing for support of the individual's ability and rights to protect herself from intrusion from public authorities' in her daily life. This, perhaps

most evident liberal orientation of citizenship education in Swedish education policy is highlighted as an existential issue: “the human being is free to decide over her self and her matters as long as it does not harm anyone else” (SOU 1997:121. p. 108, my transl).

This negative definition of freedom is far from new. What seems new is the extent to which the individual is highlighted as a holder of political agency, and the role that is given to the concept of autonomy in respect to his high-lightening: Political agency is not only seen as to act autonomously on an individual basis. Political agency is also inscribed as a matter of the individual’s consciousness of the right to act autonomously. This conception of political agency is underscored by international reference and by what is conceived of as an educational difficulty:

...school – as many other organisations of similar kinds – have difficulties to relate to individuals. The principle of autonomy is about the single human being, and the child convention speaks of ‘the child’s rights’, that is children in singulars” (SOU 1997:121, p. 109, my transl)

The complaint about the Swedish school is formulated in terms of individual rights to autonomy. These concepts are related to participation and democracy. Hence the role of education as regards fostering of political citizens is twofold: to supply for a deepened knowledge *about* formal juridical aspects of democracy, and to provide for “activity that gives training *in* [this notion of] democracy” (SOU 1997:121, p. 29f, my transl). Furthermore, such a framing of education tends to serve the higher aim of enforcing ‘good political choice’ through local participation. A participation where choice denotes to the fulfilment of private interests in and through education, and where political agency can be seen as a choice-making where the individual’s power over her own learning is at the heart of the matter, most often with parental influence:^{iv}

Parents should take a more active role in the participation in the every day life of school and have opportunities to have influence on what is central to them, things that the children talk about at home – the teaching, the safety, the peers, if it is amusing, whether one learns anything (SOU 1997:121, p. 121, my transl)

Individual commitment to different kinds of local educational settings hence stands out as an important aspect of (training for) political participation in Swedish education policy. To this end education seems to be envisioned as a place where this commitment should be cultivated, a cultivation that is oriented towards increased awareness of formal and juridical aspects of democracy. In order to encourage such cultivation it is proposed that school offers individually tied rewards, such as “a notification in the final certificate” (SOU 1997:121, p. 7, 118, my transl) if, for example, students involve in local student’s councils. This suggestion may serve as an illustrative example of the stress on the individual and her awareness of her rights to self-determination in the envisioned political citizenship in Swedish education policy.

Neo liberally tangled citizenship – Empowerment as *choice*

Recalling the aforementioned conception of 'active citizenship' as it stands out in EU-supranational educational policy, the outset of citizenship that is featured in Swedish education policy seems to respond to this neo-liberally oriented "travelling educational policy" quite successfully. If we by such travelling policy mean a strict focus on citizenship as being encompassed by individualisation and market orientation, denoted by the individual's freedom to choose among different alternatives in imagined logics of demands and supply (Barry, 2000). Even though active citizenship is not addressed as a concept in this 'local' Nordic policy context its neo-liberal course can be depicted through a stress on the individual, formal rights and the principle of 'freedom of choice' as central parts of citizenship and citizen fostering through education (Olson 2008a). This mixture itself can be considered as a complex mixture of market orientation and political heritage from the era of Social Democratic governance (Lundahl, 2002, 2005)ʸ.

The depiction of citizenship and citizen fostering in this 'local' Nordic education policy setting both nurtures and contributes to current neo-liberal demands on education for 'active citizenship'. Although this, as Lundahl (2007) points out, is done almost without any addressing of such demands explicitly in the Swedish education policy texts:

The main goal of education is to make possible for the student to successively find her own comparative advantages and her real direction of interest and to offer her or him the chance to develop her or his individual creative potential as much as possible. The target for public education should be to contribute the individual's personal development. This is being done through individual building-up of competence/.../It also takes place by offering incitement and found a self-trust for acting autonomously and for further development as a worker, as a member of a social and political network and as a private person (SOU 1990:14, app. 22, p. 53)

Put in a different way, the "active citizen" that stands out in Swedish education policy seems to centre on the capability of the individual to help herself. Apparently, the critical task for education in respect to this citizen figure is to provide for a 'proper' training in self-help that can provide the young and other subjects in education with deepened self-knowledge in working life-related, cultural and political registers. This self-knowledge tends to draw heavily on individual choice making. More specifically, it stands out as a question of educating for citizenship by an *empowerment* of the individual through *choice*.

Active citizenship as 'empowerment as choice' – two problematic notions

If we accept that every notion of citizenship is relational and that the condition of existence of any conception of citizenship is contextual, the concept of 'active citizenship' as 'empowerment as choice' in Swedish education policy seems problematic. The problem is twofold: it lacks openness to *collective identification*, and it lacks a necessary centeredness on *conflict*. One feasible worry related to these lacks is that such educational empowerment fails to spot that the relational and contextual character of citizenship are based on an affirmation of difference (Mouffe, 2005, 2009).

Need for a collective, conflict-oriented dimension of citizenship

What seems to get lost in the concept of active citizenship as ‘empowerment as choice’ is the ‘fact’ that citizenship, laid down by political language or ‘lived’ and experiences by people, is not performed in void. Citizenship and citizenship education is always acted upon, performed and articulated in a specific context, within particular webs of political and social relations, which hold special implications for certain individuals and groups in society. To this aim it is important not to aim at a neutral, universal conception of citizenship applicable to *all* members of the political community, which may be considered to be the case in a neo liberally tangled conception of ‘active citizenship’. This is important as such an

abstract notion of ‘citizenship’ has come to represent (albeit falsely) a democratic social order - a society in which the collective ‘we’ is an inclusive form of citizenship where the multiplicity of citizen identities are thought to be represented. The power of such abstractedness for ‘the people’ has meant that citizenship is traditionally thought to be emblematic with equal freedom as well as a bond between people within and across often hierarchically structured and ethnically diverse societies (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000, p. 4)

According to Arnot & Dillabough this “abstract notion of ‘citizenship’” may challenge the determination of an ‘other’ that does not equivalence with established ‘common senses’ within any pre-assumed “collective we”. This ‘other’ may always play the role of a ‘constitutive outside’, which opens up for a doubleness of border as regards citizenship framed in *moral registers* (Mouffe, 2009), i.e. for and ‘inside’ represented by a presumably ‘proper’ educational citizenship fostering and accordingly a properly educated individual, and an ‘outside’ represented by an ‘improper’ educational citizen fostering and an improperly educated individual (Olson, 2009). An all-encompassing framing of citizenship hence makes the rise of antagonisms understandable.

On the basis of Chantal Mouffe’s notion of ‘agonism’ (2005, 2009) I argue that a neo liberally tangled conception of ‘active citizenship’ opens up for such moralising divides, through its abstractedness as regards the concept of citizenship. This means that it fails to offer an opening to different views of citizenship in working life in cultural and political registers of citizenship required in the creation of “new subject positions what would allow the common articulation of, for example, antiracism, anti-sexism and anti-capitalism” (2005, p. 18). With Mouffe it is the *hegemonic position* held by the neo liberal orientation of the concept of citizenship in our times, with its focus on the individual, formal rights and principle of ‘freedom of choice’ as critical elements for civic agency, that is problematic: it cannot perceive the constitutive role of antagonism in social life. Instead it tends to blur possible positions *outside* established ‘voteable’ (i.e. ‘choosable’) political parties and impedes the constitution of distinctive citizen identities constituted in and through conflict, i.e. through antagonism.

What is at stake is that the centredness on individual choice and on formal universal rights as the constitutive basis for citizenship and citizen fostering tends to discourage to discourage growth of space and openness for *other* collective identities around for example ethnic, religious or class-based identification. This is not to say that

conventional political parties can play an important role in giving expression to social division and the conflict of wills among individuals and groups. But if they fail in their job, conflicts will assume other guises and it may be more difficult to manage them democratically. To this aim, the prevailing neo liberal course of citizenship that stands out in the Swedish and in EU-s supranational education policy on citizenship fails to embrace the plural condition for human existence: it appears to be 'blind' for difference as regards each and every one's equal access, opportunity and possibility to choose 'freely' (Englund & Quennerstedt, 2008). This difference is related to "often hierarchically structured and ethnically diverse societies" (Arnot & Dillabough, 2000, p. 4), which calls for an altered notion of education for 'active citizenship'.

Empowerment as voice - A feasible opening?

Citizenship is vital for democratic politics, but a modern democratic theory must make room for competing conceptions of our identities as citizens (Mouffe, 2005, p. 7)

Without offering any solution, I will draw upon Mouffe's notion of 'agonism' in order to sketch a brief, feasible opening for an altered way of defining 'active citizenship' and educational fostering of 'active citizens'. One that may have the potential to take into account openness for collective identification and conflict.

A vital point of reference for such sketching is Todd's (2009) conception that the role of education is to 'face' humanity, not to cultivate it. To open up education as an arena for political agonism might be to offer young and adults subjected to education *opportunity* to collective identification, to mobilise politically in and through conflicting world views and ideas, modes of living, dispositions for action and action-taking that are conceived of as related to ways of acting upon, perform and articulate citizenship. What is at stake is to open up for altered ways of framing and living citizenship that are not restricted to the rule of law or to any moral notion of 'right' and 'wrong', through education, in order to make room for *competing* conceptions of our identities as citizens.

To consider education as an important arena for such individual and collective identification, through conflicting experiences and modes of thinking and living held and 'embodied' by of the young and other subjects in education, might be one way of redefining 'active citizenship'. This redefinition is done in a way that does not reject any idea of rationality, individuality or universality, but affirms that 'active citizenship' and the educational fostering of 'active citizens' is a business that is necessarily plural, discursively constructed and entangled with power relations. It means "acknowledging the existence of the political in its complexity" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 7) by calling in a dimension of a 'we', the construction of the friend's side, as well as the dimension of the 'them' beyond moralisation in terms of 'right' or 'wrong' and also beyond 'left' and 'right', as the constitutive aspect of an agonistic approach towards education for 'active citizenship'.

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ı This account is based on my thesis (Olson, 2008b), which involves a mapping and analysis of objectives, descriptions and notions of children and young in Swedish education policy in the 1990s, as regards the Swedish compulsory school. It also entails a historical analysis from the aftermath of World War II to the end of the 1980s. The analytic target of the analysis was to scrutinize different depictions of citizenship in this policy setting, in order to investigate and discuss how Swedish education policy responds to the urging question of how to create an education for a democratic citizenship in our times. The method used in the analysis was text- and discourse analysis, and the material analysed are national policy documents such as national curricula, government commissions, government bills and directives. The theoretical framework was mainly sociological where the work of Bauman's (1996, 2000, 2007) has served as a main source of inspiration.

ii The description of this policy research is sketched without any intention of doing justice to either empirical stances of illustrations and exemplifications, or to the specific contextual complexities involved in the analysis of Swedish national policy making on citizenship on which this article is based.

iii However, this policy chart is far from coherent, as the Swedish school still should “actively and consciously /.../ influence and stimulate the students to embrace the common values of our society” (Lpo94, 98, p. 12).

iv For further reading on the impact of the policy conception of parental influence in school in Swedish education policy, see Englund, 1996; Erikson, 2004).

v These two components in the envisioned citizenship education can be put into a wider frame where they denote a historical shift in Swedish education policy during the 1990s: From a *society-centred* orientation of citizenship to a *consumer-oriented* orientation of citizenship, marked out by increased mobility, increased autonomy and self-fulfilment (Olson, 2008b).