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Worries and Possibilities in Active Citizenship: Three Swedish Educational Contexts

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Abstract

This article examines how the concept of active citizenship has been given a neo-liberal character by examining practice in three different educational contexts in Sweden. The concept of active citizenship has become influential in educational policy and practice throughout the European Union. The aim of this paper is to highlight concerns at how this concept has come to be re-shaped by neo-liberal principles in Swedish education. The analysis highlights three themes, based on voice, ethical awareness and complexity and mutuality of lived experience, and argues that they provide the basis for a shift away from the present neo-liberal colouring of the concept.

Keywords: Active citizenship, neo-liberal, Swedish education, young people's voice, teachers' attitudes, identity

Introduction

In this article, we maintain that the conception of active citizenship in education in Europe has come to imply a specific formation of citizens as active, both in society and in creating one's own identity. Initially, the ambition of active citizenship was to promote young people's empowerment and autonomy, as well as democracy and human rights in and through education. As previous research has shown, a neo-liberal colouring of the concept has gradually taken place. In this colouring, the individual risks becoming fenced in by increased marketization, particular ways of understanding the individual in relation to the collective, and understanding rights and responsibilities (cf. Kymlicka & Norman, 2000; Olssen, 2009). The article is based on a re-analysis of three empirical contributions from three different Swedish educational contexts, which focused respectively on policy (Olson, 2008), teacher identity (Irisdotter, 2006) and identity creation among minority students (Wigg, 2008). What we term a neo-liberal colouring of active citizenship in Swedish education is only briefly sketched in the introduction, as it is further elaborated on in the first of these contexts.

In Europe, the impact of the concept active citizenship can be traced back to the late 1980s, when increased attention begins to be paid in the European Union to the role of education in the forming of active citizenship (Birzea, 2005; Johansson, 2007). Even though transnational organisations like the OECD (Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development), IMP (International Monetary fund, WTO (World Trade Organisation), the World Bank were involved in the development of the concept of active citizenship - which implied a stress on economical and market oriented needs - the early definitions of active citizenship took their point of departure in a liberal focus on the individual and her right to autonomy in political and legal registers. The very initiative of putting forth the concept of active citizenship at a European educational policy level was made out of the ambition to strengthen children and young people's autonomy and opportunities of voicing their will, needs and opinions. This aim, for several reasons, no longer seems to be viable or central. What is at stake, we argue, is that the initial purpose of introducing the concept of active citizenship in the field of

education in Europe, which was “to ensure that the learning of democratic values and democratic participation by all is effectively promoted in order to prepare people for active citizenship” (Weerd et al., 2005, p. 1) has been partly replaced by others. Hence, we can notice a shift from defining citizenship as a status towards a thicker understanding of citizenship as an active social and identity making practice underscored by the concept of active citizenship (cf. Kerr & Nelson, 2006).

However, ideas about the meaning of active citizenship in education do not only exist on a policy level. Rather, these ideas travel through various interpretations in different practices in the educational system, where the shaping of teachers’ meetings with students and students’ identity formation stand out as two vital examples. We wish to exemplify and illuminate the concept of active citizenship as a liberal idea that has undergone changes toward neo-liberal registers through three different educational contexts in Sweden; in education policy, in compulsory school teachers’ notions about their students, and in young refugee students’ experiences of meeting with the Swedish school.

The highlighting of the three educational contexts not only serves as an example of worries, but also as a basis upon which suggestions for an altered depiction of active citizenship are made.

Neo-liberal tendencies in Swedish education

Contemporary Swedish education policy and reforms are well in line with international and European trends. Previously, the Swedish school system was strongly centralised, but from the early 1990’s decentralisation, deregulation and expansion of choice opportunities have fundamentally changed the school system (Arnman et al., 2004; Lundahl, 2005; Wahlström, 2002). The development from a unitary state centred and state regulated educational system from the midst of the 1940s to the end of the 1980s to viewing school as partly a market for choice has been rapid and far-going, as a result of the so-called freedom of choice reforms in the early 1990s. At the same time an increased segregation due to e.g. ethnicity has emerged in recent years, challenging and changing the heritage from the traditional Social democratic welfare state (cf. Bunar & Kallstenius, 2007).

Swedish education, as well as many other European national educational settings (Kerr & Nelson, 2006; Telhaug, 2006) seem to respond quite effectively to current economical tendencies in society. In today’s western societies there is an increased focus on particular logics of market that have come to partly over-shadow the initial European educational liberal notion of a deregulated educational system in which the state has a limited role in young people’s fulfilment of their life project. A neo-liberal market orientation has come to constitute a new logic, which to some extent shows similar patterns as the state centred educational systems. Subsequently individualism has come to be depicted differently and the individual, educational and citizen rights aiming at providing for young students’ empowerment and for democracy to have to some extent lost their strength (eg Bauman, 2001, 2007; Beck, 1999; Habermas, 2008; Sennett, 1993, 2006). In a wider scope, this change can be described as a shift of responsibility away from the collective, public state controlled schooling towards the logics of consumerism and economics regarding what is seen as central for an active citizenry.

Disposition

As mentioned previously, the article consists of three empirical contributions from three different Swedish educational contexts, based on materials from the authors' respective doctoral theses (Irisdotter, 2006; Olson, 2008; Wigg, 2008). The material is re-analysed in accordance with the joint purpose of this article. All three empirical contributions begin by giving examples that illuminate central aspects, followed by an elucidation of what stands out as worrying as concerns neo-liberal influences in these examples. Finally, each of the three contexts point out which possibilities the analyses offer when it comes to a potential shift of the understanding of active citizenship. These possibilities are further elaborated in the concluding discussion.

The first context: Neo-liberalism in Swedish education policy - Active citizenship as agency on command

In light of previous research (Olson, 2008) Swedish education policy shows a particular neo-liberal orientation of active citizenship. Even though formation for 'active citizenship' is not addressed explicitly in the policy texts, the general stress on the role of education to provide the young with autonomy through almost exclusively choice making as a means for individual self-fulfilment points to this conclusion. In addition, it is argued that the focus on choice-making testifies to identity-making and goals in neo-liberal registers where competitiveness and consumerism are at the fore of interest for young people's fulfilment of their life projects. In this section, we first briefly highlight what can be seen as a neo-liberal colouring of the notion of active citizenship in Swedish education policy. Secondly, two conceivable worries about this colouring are pointed out and, thirdly, some features of an altered way of depicting the concept of active citizenship in education are sketched. The material used in the analysis of Swedish education policy texts is national policy documents such as national curricula, government commissions, government bills and directives (ibid).

Examples: The 'Neo' in Swedish education policy on active citizenship

One central point of departure in Swedish education policy is taken in individual choice. The concept of choice is juxtaposed with concepts like self-creating and identity;

“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” (Prime Minister's office, 1997, p. 37, our translation).

Identity and life style are portrayed as issues open for choice, i.e. as matters that can be chosen, created and held in accordance with one's own 'active' will and wishes.

The question of 'being someone' through active choice-making in education is further intimately entwined with rationales of competition:

The main goal of education is to make possible for the student to successively find her own comparative advantages and to find 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 to 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 (Prime Minister's office, 1990, p. 53, our translation)

Together with the underlining of the role of education for the individual's making of "well-grounded choices concerning education and work" (Prime Minister's office, 1992, p. 109, our translation) the political envisioning of active citizenship as an empowerment of young students involves skilled, strategic choice making. This envisioning could still be part of the liberal democratic envisioning of active citizenship if not for the main targets stressed; competition, efficiency and transactional assessment:

An increased and constantly changeable supply of goods, services, study combinations and possible professions, raises increased demands on the *citizens as consumers*. The rapid pace of change as well as the preferences of young people also stress the notion that many will not choose one course of life, but will change profession, professional knowledge and competence one or several times during their active time (Government bill 1992, p. 7, our translation and italics)

What stands out as central in the active citizen's choice-making is a logic of choice that is linked to principles of consumerism rather than to a logic of rights and democracy. It does so by stressing the need for the young student to 'become someone' by taking up a consumer's attitude through education; a becoming that is related to her "building-up of competences" and that are presumed as necessary for individual self-fulfilment. Put differently, the individual's choice making is envisaged as a goal in itself rather than as a means to attain increased opportunities to take control over her own life. The agency promoted in this kind of citizen 'activeness' stands out as a question of self-making through constantly on-going navigation in a bazaar marked out by competition and transactional assessment.

Worries

We will here pull forth two conceivable worries about a neo-liberal orientation in education policy on active citizenship. The first worry is that shuts down the opportunity for multiplicity of possible life projects for students to embrace in and through education and educational choice. The second worry is that this orientation fails to face plurality and to provide for societal change. Together these two worries point at a problem as concerns the neo-liberal colouring of active citizenship: it appears to be uniforming in a way that can be hazardous for democracy itself.

The first worry, that this shuts down the multiplicity of possible life projects for students to take on, comes into question by the alleged policy stress on young students' identity making as a matter of appropriating special, pre-defined life projects. There is a pre-assigned orientation involved in their pre-assumed freedom to choose school and school form as well as identity and life project: one that is nurtured by logics of economic growth and consumerism. What is at stake, we argue, is that this pre-assigned logic implies taking up on certain values, activities and motives for embracing them that are not compatible with liberal principles or with liberal education itself. They rather point away from them in that it tends to favour some values, strategic choices and activities as more valuable or correct before other,

which indeed is what makes liberal tradition liberal and what distinguishes it from other traditions, like for example the communitarian one (see cf. Barry, 2000; Feinberg & McDonough, 2003; Kymlicka 2000).

Giving priority in beforehand to some life projects before other ones undermines the very possibility of education to see to the nurturing of young people's autonomy sought for in EU-s educational policy. At an individual level contributes to a weakening of the students' possibilities to choose among different offers of life courses within education. It also weakens their freedom to ignore or deny their imposed 'freedom to choose' in favour of another course of their citizen activity. Further, it might also weaken their motivational basis to educate themselves in the first place (Biesta, 2006). To put it differently: What if children, young people don't agree on the assigned orientation of active citizenship required by the national education policy agenda? And why should they enter the field of education if they don't consider economic growth and skilling-up for what is presumed as a free market of identities and life projects to be of central value or interest for themselves? Whether they respond to this question positively or negatively is of course an empirical question, but it is nevertheless important to ask as education within a neo-liberally oriented discourse becomes one that does not nurture the promise of individual autonomy in *any* deliberate direction but in some deliberate direction.

The second worry about the current neo-liberal orientation of active citizenship in Swedish education policy touches upon the future of democracy itself. It has to do with whether this policy opens up for plurality and societal change. The unease involved is that there doesn't seem to be any regulating mechanisms within a neo liberally coloured policy orientation that can handle undesired processes of homogenisation and ideational mainstreaming. This, we suggest, jeopardises the capability of education to see to democratic core values like plurality and difference (cf. Milana, 2008). This policy could thus be hazardous to democracy itself in that it becomes difficult to contribute to societal change in other directions than those predicated by a commitment to market values and competition. This is indeed problematic if we consider education and citizen formation to be part of the envisioning of democracy plurality and a politics of unity between individuals and groups of people at a societal level.

These two interrelated worries pave the way for a common problem in a neo-liberal orientation towards active citizenship: it fails to embrace conditions and considerations necessary for a depiction of active citizenship beyond its own command, i.e. beyond logics of consumerism for the students' self-making. It rather seems to impose a certain direction for this self-making as regards what it means (for them) to be active citizens. In addition, a neo-liberal notion of citizen activity seems to offer few openings for democracy in that the promise of plurality and societal change is poor: there are few ways of calling homogenisation into question in education as regards what 'counts' as a 'proper', assumedly democratic active citizenship.

Possibilities

Where to head then, in order to come to terms with these worries in education? One way to go is to seek for an altered way of depicting active citizenship in education by amplifying the very basis for what can be included in the concept. With Mouffe (2005) part of departure for such amplification can be taken in considering active citizenship to be something contextual and relational: It links the meaning and content of active citizenship to the situations, places

and actors in which active citizenship is lived, claimed and enacted by the students instead of to any fixed and presumed logic to be appropriated in and through education.

This way of framing active citizenship in education calls us to see active citizenship as something where the presumed direction and goal activity of citizenship and the educational formation of citizens are not fixed and situated ahead of us, i.e. as something that we are about to achieve through education. Active citizenship is rather to be depicted as something constantly on-going and, at the same time, as already lived and acted upon by the young (citizens) themselves (Olson, 2009). This approach to active citizenship does not shut down the educational space of possible directions for individual identity making and choice of life project that seems to be the case in the neo-liberal colouring of the concept. Instead of consolidating particular set of activities, practices and life projects to be the right ones this approach opens up for a multiplicity of ways to prove as valid for an active citizenship in and through education.

A contextual and relational depiction of active citizenship offers, more precisely, an alternate point of departure for the conception of activity or 'activeness' involved in citizenship education than the neo-liberal approach. In relation to the neo-liberal orientation of active citizenship this point of departure offers a confident self-regulating mechanism as regards any static description of a proper active citizenship formation through education. It aims at offering space in education for the voices of young students on what an active citizenship involves. When it comes to the educational practice, a contextual and relational depiction of active citizenship requires an approach of investigation and affirmation, rather than one of reproductive socialisation as concerns the different ways of students' speaking and acting upon the concept of active citizenship in the classroom. It calls teachers and students to articulate their "identities as citizens" (Mouffe, 2005, p. 7) in both individual and collective registers, and to take these articulations seriously as concerns what could and should 'count' as active citizenship.

In sum, a contextual and relational depiction of active citizenship feeds the hope, we argue, for a multi-voiced depiction of active citizenship in education as it opens up for the students' different and conflicting ways of dealing with and acting upon the concept and phenomena of active citizenship. It might also raise hope as concerns the potential of education itself to meet up with today's calls for individual autonomy and openness for plurality and societal change in the formation of citizens, as the very starting point for depicting active citizenship is located beyond any fixed definition of active citizenship rather than in firm, market oriented logics of competition and ideational mainstreaming. With young students' voices on the meaning of active citizenship as a point of departure for the educational task to foster active citizens, focus can no longer be put on active citizenship as an assumingly free choice in a commitment to homogenising market logics. Instead it is put on facing the multiplicity of directions for identity making and life projects involved in an education for active citizenship.

The second context: Teachers' notions of their fostering tasks and their students

As shown in the section above, policy documents on different levels formulate an ideal active citizen with great opportunities for and capabilities of self-making by choice. One may expect to find a connection between the ideals expressed in policy documents and the ideals fostered

by teachers. There is indeed a connection that also confirms the neo-liberal tendencies of active citizenship in different educational contexts. Nevertheless, when analyzing teachers' talk about their students and the fostering task, there is also a slightly different kind of ideal expressed. The self-made, active citizen to be, i.e. the student, is somewhat overshadowed by the teachers' own opinions of what the student should become. We will show that there is a mismatch between the official policy documents and the teacher perspective as the concept of active citizenship travels. The teachers' interpretations of the documents are coloured by neo-liberal tendencies. Prior research also shows that a neo-liberal line of thought may sometimes colour teachers' ways of both thinking, valuing and responding to their students (cf. Gewirtz et al., 1995; Doddington, 2007; Day & Smethem, 2009; Sachs, 2003). A key question for this part of the article is: Who is the student and who should the student be, according to teachers and in relation to active citizenship?

The starting point is a recorded and transcribed material containing conversations between three different groups of compulsory school teachers at three different schools. Each group, in which five to twelve teachers participated, came together six times each during one year. They were asked to talk about ethical issues of their everyday work. In the analysis of the material, the way the teachers talk about the students, who they are and should be, appeared as a main theme. This theme will be presented and further developed below (Irisdotter, 2006). Using this material, we would like to point out aspects of teachers' notions of their students and their development, which are in line with what several contemporary sociologists describe as typical tendencies in neo-liberal times. Some attitudes exemplified below, we will argue, support a neo-liberal understanding of what it means to be an active citizen, which in turn risks contributing to education towards an instrumental, *a priori* adaptation to a commercial, mainstream society. Even though not all remarks on the students seemed to be colored by a neo-liberal understanding of what the student should become, we claim it to be a rather significant discourse identifiable in the teacher conversations.

Our theoretical starting point holds the assumption that our sense of selfhood and identity are constituted in meetings with others. Considering school as the main public arena for young people, the meetings conducted in this arena are crucial for how they think of themselves as persons, students and citizens.

Examples: The market orientation on teachers' notions of their students

In the excerpt below a teacher describes students in a way that gives the impression that students play no or a very small part of their own in becoming full members of society. One can interpret the teacher attitude towards the students as quite instrumental and market oriented as the teacher claims that:

... we are supposed to produce this without any material. We are supposed to get it done. I mean, they have to give us more resources if we are supposed to get the members of society that we really want.

The attitude expressed reveals a notion of the student as a passive recipient who becomes a certain type of citizen due to the effort of the teacher, which in turn is due to the financial resources provided. Another teacher, who took part of the same discussion group, talks about the difficulty of fostering students in a commercialized society, since market forces are affecting the ability to develop into a good person:

The question is whether it is too difficult for humans in this consumer society. We have so much to resist, and so few moral guidelines.

The same group of teachers further discusses whether it is possible, desirable or professionally acceptable to foster students in ways that makes it possible to make a living in a cynical world of competition and corruption, even though the teacher personally believes in other ways of living and valuing. Especially one teacher interprets her professional mission in this way; she is willing to:

... teach them [the students] to deal with situations that are real even if I personally don't accept them.

One interpretation, in terms of active citizenship, is that the fostering goals are not at all connected to ethical educational ideals and visions of the future society but rather remarkably pragmatic or instrumental in relation to both pupils' personal development and the society in which the students will live. When the same teacher talks about a society which provides benefits for the strong at the expense of the weaker individuals, it is tempting to understand her position as a surrendering to a neo-liberal value system where the self-made and active man is the ideal.

Along with a distanced relationship to the students, as exemplified above, an opposite approach is also represented in teacher groups. A very close, intimate relationship to the students may also be understood in the light of a neo-liberal ideal of who the student should be. In the following excerpt, the female students' wishes and preferences are reduced to nothing as the teacher seems to have decided in advance that the students should identify with her. She is stepping into the girls' private zones without even reflecting upon the integrity and will of the students. The teacher corrects the student's lifestyle with what seems like indisputable right. As in the example above, the potential interpersonal meeting is at risk of becoming an instrumental, one-sided non-meeting.

Teacher 1: I felt that it was very important to change [in the locker-room] with these girls, so they could see.... "but, you don't have to be skinny ". Because I live a happy life anyway, even though I weigh a few pounds too much. And I think it's important to see.

Teacher 2: Maybe you can tell them that there are boys and men who like other things than push-up bras? Love can look like this, love can look like that...

Worries

By exemplifying the approaches above, we want to highlight how teachers in different ways tend to play down the student's role in his or her own life. This tendency is identifiable when the students are described as a workable mass. Another tendency among the teachers is to put the students' private lives in the spotlight, but without taking any account of the autonomy or integrity of the students. We read these two tendencies as manifestations of a neo-liberal approach among teachers. Students will become active citizens by fostering efforts in a certain direction, towards some certain skills and personal qualities, but they disappear as unique individuals in the very same project. What is lost is compassion for and recognition of the other.

Individualization and commercialization of society can be interpreted as two neo-liberal tendencies. An increased and one-sided focus on the needs and abilities of the individual can be understood as a consequence of what we call individualization. But the individualization project is paradoxical because it is a very specific type of individual who is considered desirable. Since the self-centred and competent individual is likely to be a good consumer, a focus on the individual's private life in public spaces holds potential for economic gains. This change of focus does lead to new ways of speaking and new kinds of expression in public spaces. We are less formal and speak more openly about the private and intimate (cf. Sennett, 2006; Fairclough, 1989, 1995).

These tendencies of both instrumentality and intimacy can to some extent be identified in teachers' notions of their students, as outlined above. If these changes of interactional styles and attitudes among teachers are based on an urge for potential profit, teachers risk treating students as objects and means rather than as fellow human beings in the process of becoming full members of society on their own terms. Neo-liberally influenced thinking among teachers, we argue, allows them to some extent to escape from interpersonal responsibility in meetings with students. The voice, will, need and uniqueness of the other person may be overseen for the sake of efficiency, reaching goals or moulding a consuming, active citizen.

Possibilities

A social climate that allows for closeness, open communication between individuals and the ability to question traditions holds possibilities for a genuine active citizenship, which serves both individual and collective interests. Teachers who strive to develop mutual relations with their students and show respect for students' own desires and integrity, can be good role models for a more compassionate and ethically sensitive way of acting within the frame of fostering. They can also be nuanced and emphatic supporters of the young students' personal development. However, in a neoliberal context in which the subtle problematic tendencies should be resisted, the teacher needs theoretical guidance in the meeting with the young student. Such guidance is, in our opinion, provided by Iris Marion Young (2002) when she emphasizes the moment of "greeting" that should precede any kind of interaction between people. In greetings, we establish both the sense of recognition, "I see you and I am ready to listen" and a sense of distance, "you are different from me, you are your own person".

Although Young formulates these principles with a political communication in mind, we find it highly relevant for interaction between teachers and students. Greetings in this sense hold elements of both recognition of the other, and distance between me and the one I face. On one hand, recognition represents, in my interpretation, compassion, warmth and personal contact established between teacher and student in interaction. If the recognition is genuine, the student is treated as a competent person in the eyes of the teacher; someone worth listening to and learning from. On the other hand, distance, which is threatened by an increasing controlling, intrusive intimacy in societal communication, represents respect for the other's integrity and autonomy, and the recognition of the other's right to choose who should come close.

If the other person is met with respectful distance and recognized as an equal, this can pave the way for an understanding of active citizenship which includes belonging, power and possibilities for the individual, under the unique conditions of each and everyone. Education for active citizenship must include an ethical, democratic awareness in order to safeguard

democratic values in a world where certain neoliberal trends threaten to undermine them. Otherwise school will end up educating so-called active citizens with instrumental, one-sided civic competences and lacking feelings of selfhood, self-esteem and compassion for others different from one self.

The third context: Refugee students' identity creation in Swedish schools

Following our analysis of an emerging neo-liberal interpretation of active citizenship through policy and teachers' notions of students, we now want to look at this from a students' point of view. In policy texts, the ideal citizen takes shape as someone who is active by default, not by choice, while teachers' notions of students show an instrumental approach to the future, ideal, active citizens. However, there are groups that do not fit the mould of the "ideal citizen". Immigrants and refugees, who are often categorized as culturally different, are left to find other modes of identity. This identity tends to be focused on culture, ethnicity and/or religion and is one dimensional in another way (cf. Vermeulen, 2000) than perhaps the "ideal citizen".

Actively creating an identity is a task that all (western) people are engaged in (Bauman, 1998; 2000; Giddens, 1991). There is also a strong connection between perceived national characteristics and self-identity. Bauman (2000) uses the term liquid modernity to signify modern society, and the way that human beings identify themselves. Man now has to determine his own identity with whatever means are at hand. The rise in use of cultural or ethnical identities as terra firma, can, according to this view, be seen as a substitute for lost communities. That refugee students in Sweden think about their identity, then, is not unique, but the terms under which identity is created differ. In this part of the article, we will look at these young minority students talk about their identity in relation to a perceived Swedish majority identity (Wigg, 2008) and in relation to a neo-liberal colouring of active citizenship. The analysis is based on life history interviews with young refugees who arrived in Sweden during their school years.

Examples: The consequences of active citizenship for identity creation among refugee students

Several of the young refugees in the study quoted draw on perceived national traits when defining themselves in their stories, and refer to values and characteristics as being "Swedish" or "not Swedish"; values and characteristics that they to almost exclusively learnt in school. These examples are intended to show that a focus on identity and belonging that hinges on the mechanics of active citizenship in a neo-liberal sense locks people into cultural trajectories of thinking about their identity. Dalila, a young woman, expresses that she feels a sense of community with other people from Bosnia, but trying to explain why leaves her scrambling for words:

Yeah, I don't know, you're drawn to each other, it just happens, you have more things in common ... it's this whole thing with music and ... culture ... and Bosnia. I mean it's "well now we're going there" and stuff ... I mean us being Muslims and everything, religion ... yeah and then the how we, the way we are and the traditions we have and everything.

It is a sense of belonging that seems difficult for her to put into words. When defining who they themselves are, the interviewees draw not only on what they perceive are the traits of their group, but also on how they feel different from Swedish people their own age. Two of the students, Amel and Anja, were particularly articulate about a sense of limbo as a result of being exiled at such a young age. Anja talks about how she feels about the country she lives in and the country she was born in, and how neither is necessarily home:

I can't say "yes I'd like to live my whole life in Sweden" but at the same time I don't know if I'll ever get to the point where I return to my home country either. So you're a bit, it feels uncertain, knowing that you don't really know where you're going to end up down the road and then, if you've left you're home it's almost like it doesn't matter where you go. Once you've left your own home, nothing else seems so bad.

The feeling of limbo is also expressed by Amel, who also feels a kinship with others who have the same experience:

You're sort of suspended in mid-air, in no man's land /.../ all people who have fled or emigrated are in that situation, they're suspended in mid-air, and there are more of them every day, they have their own way of thinking, it's like a world within the world, and if you meet someone with a foreign background you understand each other more because you have something in common /.../ I can't say to you that I am Swedish and you can't say that you are Bosnian, but we can both say that we are European /.../ but where you live is a different issue.

What Amel and Anja are putting words to in these last examples does not fit with the way "culture" is often used to explain differences between groups of people. There is a sense of loss that is being expressed, but there is also identification with something that goes beyond cultural traits. And this is where we would like to try to make a different interpretation, that allows an understanding of identity and individual experience, which isn't connected to the neo-liberal ideas of active citizenship.

Worries

The identities expressed by these eight refugee students, are based on perceived national characteristics – their own and the Swedes. But their identities can also be understood as a sense of not fitting the mould that would allow them to be included in the neo-liberal definition of active citizenship. One way for people who don't fit this mould to have a voice in society is to attach themselves to a group based on cultural belonging, and thereby lends some weight. This focus on minority groups is often heralded as a solution to multiculturally defined problems in a neo-liberal context, in which individuals that are not ideal have to be mended somehow (Froggett & Chamberlaynelain, 2004; see also Bauman, 1998; 2000). The worry expressed here is that identity creation in this neo-liberal framing offers a sense of belonging, while risking cementing differences based on perceived cultural, ethnical or religious traits. It locks the members of these different identity groups into a different mould, which seems equally difficult to break free from.

Culture, ethnicity and religion as a base for understanding human identity, and by extension, human action is often put forward as if these terms themselves are explanatory. Critics of this line of thought maintain that this is an oversimplified view, which can be referred to as a

culturalistic fallacy (Vermeulen, 2000). Students who are categorised as other, i.e. not a part of a majority culture, use different aspects in their identity formation, and talk about it as if it was based on a cultural or ethnical belonging. A closer look at the terms they use to express themselves can be interpreted like this: the way they talk about their identity is influenced by the neo-liberal colouring of what a citizen should be, and an assumption that they are not ideal citizens. The concept of active citizenship, as it travels from policy to refugee students' identity creation creates a paradox. In a neo-liberal framing, the focus is on the individual as active, consuming and market adjusted. But those who do not or cannot fill these shoes (cf. Bauman, 1998), are left to other, pre-packaged collectives to find a place as citizens.

Possibilities

What is crucial in the examples and analysis presented above, is that it is not primarily cultural differences that are described by the refugee students, but rather a difference in experience. However, they frame it in a neo-liberal line of thought, in which a preset cultural identity as a means of belonging in a way hides what is unique about their (varied) experiences. Identity is construed as a choice between fixed alternatives; a colouring of identity creation by active citizenship as a neo-liberal idea. This line of thought also colours their view of their place in society; there seems to be awareness that they are not considered to be real citizens in Sweden, despite the fact that this has been their home for a large part of their lives.

There is a relation between lived experience, practice and policy which would be better served by a different notion of active citizenship than a neo-liberal one; a perspective on active citizenship that puts the emphasis on the individual as unique (Froggett & Chamberlayne, 2004) through the power of his or her lived experience. Further, identity creation for students who are not perceived as part of the majority culture, in this view, cannot hinge solely on culture, ethnicity or religion. Students with a non-Swedish background should have other possibilities to be active citizens, and to see themselves and be seen as real citizens, than having to attach themselves to the cultural grouping, which is nearest to them in order to have a voice. Benhabib (2002) puts forward the idea that all cultural belonging should be mutual and voluntary, and that it should also be possible to leave a cultural grouping if one wishes to. One of the refugee students, Navid, has this to say about why he sometimes feels that he has more in common with other refugees from the same country:

Mm, I think it has a lot to do with these other shared ... experiences /.../ it means a lot because for example, me and a friend might be talking about "shit, can you believe we're sitting here" and I can't have that conversation with a Swedish friend cause they might have a bunch of reasons like "yeah what if I had missed the train this morning" except that's not what I meant, I meant that this bomb exploded 300 feet from my house in Iran or that your dad was in prison, and things like that, it's more ... somehow you understand each other on a different level.

Here, it is not the national or cultural belonging that is put into play, but rather a shared experience. Based on the above analysis, and in the light of criticism pointed at a neo-liberal framing of identity, in this educational context we would argue for an understanding of active citizenship that takes into account individual, lived experience, but that also demands mutuality and complexity; an individualism which sees the individual both as a unique individual and as a part of a collective. This entails a step away from the culturalistic fallacy (Vermeulen, 2000), allowing people to be an active part of society on the terms of their own

unique, lived experiences, as well as allowing culture to be a different form of collective that does not hinder those who choose to be a part of it. This is more in line with the origins of the concept active citizenship as a tool for empowerment and voice, rather than a more neo-liberally coloured understanding that, in the examples given above, paradoxically seems to hinder the individual's voice rather than enabling the same. This is also in accordance with the UN Convention of the rights of the child, particularly articles 12 and 13, which state every child's right to freedom of opinion, the right to have their voice heard and the responsibility of the state to guarantee these rights. School, in which all children in Sweden spend time regardless of where they originally come from, holds enormous potential to bring about a change, by allowing complexity and mutuality of experience.

Discussion and outlook

In our analysis above, we have presented worrying tendencies in the neo-liberal understanding of active citizenship. In short, Swedish education policy tends to nurture the envisioning of an active citizen who is presumed to be active, competent and self-made in a certain, fixed and pre-defined way: she is assumed to centre on the ability and 'knowability' to choose skilfully, in order to take on a certain identity making process and direction of her life project. Seemingly, the opportunities for the individual to choose autonomously are on one hand open and infinite, but on the other hand the qualifications of the individual tend to be quite determined. The envisioning of the educational task to foster active citizens in Swedish education policy thus involves an active, supposedly autonomously choosing citizen whose life project at the same time is relatively pre-defined and pre-determined. The alleged goal in question for the educational formation of active citizens can be interpreted in terms of an empowered character suitable for and limited to a life in a neo-liberal society of competition and market orientedness.

In the Swedish teachers' notions of their fostering task and of their students, we can notice a difference in focus regarding the possibility for individuals to have control over and choose their own lives. The idea of the active citizen with qualities of self-sufficiency, which is emerging in policy texts, transforms in some ways when travels to a teacher perspective. The teachers don't talk about their students as free, choosing individuals with capabilities. Instead, the fostering task is described as an instrumental moulding of a desirable character. The student is rather passive in becoming the one he or she should be. In this sense, we can again speak of a pre-packaged idea where the teacher has the legitimacy to define desirable traits. These traits are among some teachers closely attached to the values of a marketized society, while others put emphasis on more traditional values and virtues.

We note another transformation regarding the neo-liberal idea of active citizenship when young refugees talk about their identity creation in meeting the Swedish school system. Facing the ideal of the active citizen, which takes prominent place in today's society, the refugee student finds herself to be faulty and therefore cannot identify with this ideal. Instead, she is relegated to a collectively defined other; a form of collectivism that is a paradoxical, sociological consequence of the ideal of the individual on a policy level. Here also, the categories are pre-defined, and pre-packaged according to a logic based on the ideal citizen and those who fall short.

A potential shift in direction

Despite the rhetoric of the individual's free choice, rights and abilities, there tends to be limited space to define one's own needs, identity, voice, attitude, belongings or non-belongings in the neo-liberal framing of active citizenship in the Swedish educational setting. There are, in other words, only a limited range of differences that are possible to choose between. We argue that the strict predefinitions of who belongs to whom, and who should be active where, how and why entail an instrumental understanding of identity, character and participation in society rooted in neo-liberal ideas. We find this to be a problem in relation to equality, democracy and social justice; since it holds back not only groups of people, but also plurality and societal change as well as individuals that are meant to be emancipated as active citizens, and prevents them from taking place in society based on their own terms. In order to seek potential ways of redirecting the idea of active citizenship, we want to bring to the fore three themes that emanate from the analyses above; (1) voice, (2) ethical awareness of distance and recognition and (3) complexity and mutuality of lived experience.

Voice: With a point of departure taken in multiple voices, the redirection of the concept of active citizenship in educational policy and practice can be depicted as a matter of contextually sensitive self-making that takes young students' autonomy into account in a way beyond that offered by a neo-liberal frame. If self-making by choice in neo-liberal registers tends to nurture sameness and homogeneity, self-making by multiple voices may enable plurality, conflict and difference to emerge as central aspects of the task to provide for an active citizenship through education on individual and collective level (Mouffe, 2005). Taking voice, instead of neo-liberal choice, as a starting point for the framing of education policy on active citizenship not only requires an altered depiction of empowerment of young people through education, but also strengthens their role as potent speakers about what it means to be an active citizen. It also demands a stress on the sensitivity of the hearer, the receiver of different expressions, enactments and activities related to the concept of active citizenship by the young students themselves, which is in line with the second guiding concept in our aim to redirect the meaning of active citizenship.

Ethical awareness of distance and recognition: In meetings between teachers and students, and between representatives of the society in general and private persons, there needs to be an ethical awareness of how the qualities of such meetings affect our opportunities to express ourselves and "self-make" our lives. Iris Marion Young (2002) touches upon two essential qualities, recognition and distance, that ought to be present in every public and civil dialogue or discussion. Our standpoint is that these qualities are especially crucial in meetings where one person is responsible for the growth, fostering, development or education of the other. If these qualities signify the meetings, there are fewer risks of instrumental approaches in meetings with the other. The other gets a chance to take his or her place as a self-made individual, if recognized as someone with status, importance and voice. Thus, the moment of recognition must also accommodate the important quality of distance that provides room for an identity, life style and active citizenship that does not fit in to pre-defined packages of understanding of the other.

Complexity and mutuality of lived experience: Self-making by voice enables the individual to express his or her own lived experience, rather than to fit into a pre-defined collective, with pre-defined identities and needs. Lived experience can never be pre-packaged, and has to allow for complexity on the part of the individual, as well as mutuality in relations between

individuals and collectives, and in meetings between representatives of school and students (cf. Osler & Starkey, 2003). Culture or ethnicity may be an important part of the lived experience of the individual, but if we allow for complexity we will not assign attributes to individuals or groups based on those aspects (cf. Benhabib, 2002). Further, we cannot expect people to take an active part in society, if there is not at the same time mutuality in respect for the complexity of identity creation, in relation to each individual's specific context (Torney-Purta, 2009). If active citizenship is understood to be based on the logics of these three themes, instead of neo-liberal logics, there are opportunities for a truly multidimensional citizenship. The Swedish school system, on all levels, holds a privileged position in its potential to begin bringing about such a change.

In conclusion, we have attempted to map what we see as worrying tendencies in Swedish education. Hopefully, we have made a contribution by highlighting opportunities to return to what we see as the original ambitions of the concept of active citizenship. Together with the suggestions for a potential shift in direction and further development of the concept, it may serve to deepen the outlook for policy makers and professionals on different levels in the field of education, and a social justice agenda, in the vital task of forming active citizens in contemporary society.

Notes

1. In terms of 'fluid modernity' Bauman (2000) highlights this void by making a distinction between the conditions of individuals *de jure*, i.e. of their obliged or duty-bound choice making as regards their lives, and their chances to gain 'real' control over their destiny (p 39).

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