Citizenship Learning and Democracy in the Lives of Young People

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Abstract: In this paper we draw upon a case study from our research to identify the relationship between the democratic, non-democratic and non-participative dimensions of the process of citizenship learning. We learn that the process can prove uncomfortable for those involved.

Introduction

Much research on citizenship education particularly in the UK, has focused on the development and evaluation of curricula and school-based practices aimed at the acquisition of democratic knowledge, skills and dispositions, and has been concerned with the formation of democratic skills and dispositions and the 'production' of a particular kind of democratic citizen. The overarching aim of the research on which this paper is based has been to deepen understanding of the ways in which young people's participation in the communities and practices that make up their everyday lives impacts upon their citizenship learning. The research has comprised an interpretative study over a 4 year period in the South West region of the UK. Thirty six young people have taken part in the research, all of whom were aged between 13 and 21 at the time of first interview. Twenty eight of the interviewees have been interviewed twice and eight of the interviewees have been re-interviewed for a third time. Fifteen of the interviewees were drawn from city-based and urban contexts, with the remaining 21 interviewees located in towns and rural villages in the region. We sought to incorporate as much variety and variation as possible within the research design. We approached young people through a variety of different channels – through school, college and work and also through targeted groups and organizations. Many of these groups (such as Fair Trade, recycling, Youth Parliament, Woodcraft) were located outside of educational settings. All of the young people were encouraged to talk about their lives and to share their experiences and opinions with the interviewer. Probing questions were used to encourage the respondents to explore and elaborate on their understandings. Interviews were generally completed within one hour. Second and third interviews followed a similar pattern with further probing to check out themes and ideas, anomalies and contradictions that had been identified from earlier interviews. All the interviewees were volunteers and were at liberty to withdraw from the research at any time. Each first interview has been analyzed as a case study, as well as coded for key themes. Through this process further questions and themes for second and third interviews were identified for follow up and exploration.

Central to our approach is the distinction that we make between the idea of *citizenship-as-achievement* and *citizenship-as-practice* (Lawy & Biesta, 2006). We reject the idea of citizenship articulated in much of the official policy and practice discourse, where it has been linked to the language of duty and responsibility, whether in the passive and benign form of the 1950s and 1960s or in its more 'active' 1980s form. Central to this view is the idea that young people are not-yet-citizens and that a specific trajectory of citizenship education is required to enable individual young people to achieve their citizenship status. By way of contrast, *citizenship-as-practice* does not start with a set of assumptions about the outcomes of a

citizenship trajectory nor does it start with a set of assumptions about the role of the education system in preparing young people to become 'good' and contributing democratic citizens. It is inclusive rather than exclusive and assumes that young people routinely engage in the practice of citizenship, rather than moving from non-citizenship into citizenship. Whereas the idea of *learned citizenship* implies that the education system should be directed towards 'improving' the socialization of young people through effective teaching, including political socialization, and other policy initiatives, the idea of *citizenship learning* is concerned to emphasize the intimate relationship between democracy, participation and learning.

Operationalizing the Research

Whilst it is generally agreed that family and significant others represent the most important influence upon children and young people (primary socialization), other contexts such as school and the workplace follow closely behind as contexts where young people are influenced. Socialization enables individual enculturation into the norms and values of a social group. It is not so much about transformation or change of society or culture as it is about continuity through generations, in ways that serve the 'well-being' of society. Lave & Wenger (1991), for example, have shown us how individuals become socialized into and 'learn' patterns of behavior and action through apprenticeship or acculturation. While young people are generally more malleable, and susceptible to outside influences, than older people (Smith et al., 2005, p. 426) they are not 'cultural dopes' who respond in a prescribed and predictable way to outside events and influences. This begs the question of whether policy and practice can, or should be designed to change behavior and attitudes, and of the extent to which young people can exercise their agency in the process. This is linked to the broader question of the role of education, as a mechanism of social control through which knowledge can or should be transferred through successive generations (Bernstein, 2000).

Without doubt one of the most significant educational initiatives in the UK in recent years has been the Crick report (QCA, 1998). This has provided a precursor to recent programs that have sought to encourage appropriate democratic behavior (e.g., Davies et al., 2005) through the development of a coherent citizenship curricula both within the mainstream school sector and more recently in the post-16 sector (see QCA, 2004). These initiatives have been underpinned by an Enlightenment view of the individual subject as 'a self-motivating and self-directing, a rational subject capable of exercising individual agency' (Usher & Edwards, 1994, p. 24) and by a means-end model of human rationality that necessarily 'directs' subjects towards an agreed and consensual set of goals. Here there is an assumption that it is possible to manage the socialization of young people, and that a rational consensus concerning what needs to be done and how to do it, can actually exist.

The approach of our research makes no such claims, rather it has been informed by a *broad conception of democracy*, where democracy is not confined to the sphere of political decision making but extends to participation in the 'construction, maintenance and transformation' of social and political life (see Bernstein, 2000, p.xxi). We have approached democracy not merely as a form of government but as something that is much broader in scope – a form of life, that is, 'a mode of associated living, a conjoint communicated experience' (Dewey 1966, p. 87). This implies that democracy is not about majority rule but about inclusive ways of social and political action. Notwithstanding the non-reflective socialization dimension of learned citizenship, we have paid particular attention to young people's experiences of inclusion, belonging and 'having a stake' in social life (Bernstein 2000, p.xx)

or, following Dewey, to the opportunities for young people to shape the contexts that in turn shape their opportunities for action.

During the course of the first round of interviews (see Biesta, Lawy & Kelly, working paper) we found that in order to fully understand the nature and character of young people's democratic citizenship we needed to describe the various different contexts in which the young people can learn. We found that the composition and quality of their citizenship learning was mediated by their relationships with peers, family, teachers; moreover, that their prior experiences and dispositions was also significant for their learning. In the next section we draw on an exemplar case to explore these issues.

A Case Study: Rose

Rose was brought up in a city based environment in the SW of England and volunteered as an interviewee through her involvement in Woodcraft. This is an organization for young people with a set of democratic aims based on equality, peace, social justice and co-operation. Rose explained that her parents were both artists and that she had two older brothers who had since left home. Her parents had separated when she was eight years old and at the time of her first interview was living at home with her younger sister, brother and mother. Rose was eighteen at the time of her first interview in November 2003 and was attending a local further education college whilst completing her studies for her A-level examinations. She was interviewed for a third and final time in September 2006. At this time she did not have a full-time job but spent part of her time working with dog owners and training dogs, and another part of her time working with her mother in her art business. She maintained her commitment to Woodcraft throughout all of this and was a regular attendee at their meetings and summer camps.

Despite the fact that Rose had developed an enquiring and reflective outlook and would routinely analyze and reflect upon the world around her, she struggled with the fact that the whole world did not operate on the same principles and that outside of the Woodcraft world, people acted and behaved in ways that she found difficult to comprehend. However, she remained committed to her Woodcraft values and principles:

> Well, in practice, I've learnt it [the principles and philosophy] through Woodcraft. … I don't feel that the kind of, in the wider world you're given as much support in learning it. It's ok to understand the democracy involved in Woodcraft and it's very idealistic really. But in the wide world it doesn't work like that. (Interview 1)

> Well it's equality isn't it? It's everybody playing a part in, I don't know, even if it's just organizing kind of thing, everybody plays a part in woodcraft, on the camps it's not just like the grownups that do stuff for the children, the children have to cook and clean and stuff like that, when I was a kid I remember doing it and I didn't… People always assume that the children would not look forward to it and hate it, hate the fact that they had to wash up but when I was a kid I loved it cause I was feeling involved, that's where I learnt to cook I think, I learnt to cook on woodcraft camps. (Interview 3)

For Rose, there was a perceived mismatch between the theoretical principles which underpinned her values and beliefs, and the practices which she encountered in her everyday life. As she said, 'my family believe it, whereas Woodcraft have shown me how to do it' (Interview 2). Rose contrasted the way in which decisions were taken within a supportive network and structure, and her experiences of school which was in her words 'authoritarian'.

Whereas she played a part in the decision making in Woodcraft, in school she was expected to simply accept a given fact or set of principles without question. As she explained:

> *I always knew, through Woodcraft I think, I always knew ... how to kind of bend the rules. Like I knew that if I looked at the rules and it didn't say you could dye your hair, then I would. And he [deputy head teacher] would say, why are you doing this and this, and it's not in the rules! And he didn't like that at all. And so they actually made up loads of rules, just for me. Like you're not allowed to wear cords any more, and you're not allowed to dye your hair anymore ... (Interview 1)*

By the time of her third interview Rose had become Woodcraft leader. As she explains herself, she modeled her practices on what she had learned in her home, rather than in school.

> *[T]hey're fantastic kids, they've got their hearts in the right place, but they are so hyperactive, and so noisy. But, as soon as you start shouting and try to be intimidating, to get the kind of, power, if you like, they, throw it back. You can't use that, you have to use positive methods, and you have to kind of, entertain them, more than, control them. So, yeah, definitely, mum isn't very authoritarian, it's that word again, can't say it. Authoritarian. Yeah, she isn't very, I mean, she's tried to be, I've noticed, but it doesn't work. So I've tried not to use it with the younger kids, it really doesn't work, and it's, I don't like the idea of intimidating people to get what you want. I like the idea of being positive, to get it. (Interview 3)*

After leaving the FE College, following her A-levels, Rose did not choose to take up a university place, she felt she needed more time to make her decision about what to study. However, what started as 'gap' year extended from one year to two and three years. During the interim period she became disillusioned with what she saw around her. Explaining, for example, how she had voted in the General Election she said: 'I used to think that when you voted it was really empowering but it felt useless' (Interview 3). Whilst this response is not unique amongst young people, it needs to be understood in the context of her broader life. Whereas within Woodcraft she was surrounded by a supportive group of like-minded young people, outside of it she faced series of conflicting paradoxes. This extended outwards from her family.

Rose explained that her mother had met a 'new man' and, without engaging in a discussion with either herself or her younger sister, had decided to sell the family home. It seemed the world of dogs and dog training was one of the few remaining certainties in her life. This was an environment where she was working collaboratively with people to help them train their dogs and with the dogs themselves. There was a clear structure, and under these conditions, she knew how to operate:

> *Well, there's two different styles, in dog training, like there is in people. There's the authoritarian, you have to do it or else, and there's the if you do it, I'll give you something (laughing) or positive methods. And I'm definitely kind of positive, positive methods or rewards, and avoid punishing – oh I hate that word! Avoiding negative. And there's this particular lady ... and I .... saw her hit this dog, and I made a proper complaint, and I wrote a letter to the committee, and I said, you know, that's not on, I really don't like that. And it kind of was thrown back at me... (Interview 3)*

Rose was conscious that others had a different view of what she was doing. Indeed, one of her students (dog training) had commented on this, 'Rose it's really ridiculous that you don't do anything, you're wasting your life.' … and I said: 'Well, what do I do about it?'

Later in the same interview Rose spent some time talking about her oldest brother (5 years older than her) and how she respected him. It seemed that he represented an ideal for her to aspire to. He certainly had not retreated from the world in the way that she had:

> *He's very strong so his strength in opinion, and he's very.. . He has no fear of being different or he's got no fear of keeping his ideals even if everybody else around him doesn't believe them. And he knows, he's very clear that if he learns all he can about a subject and he makes up his mind, he knows what he wants but equally if he doesn't know everything about the subject he won't be opinionated, he won't stick to what he feels, does that make sense? So he's open to learning but he's strong with his opinions at the same time. (Interview 3)*

Commenting on her sense of loss and her response to it, she said:

> *It's fairly sad, but I didn't notice I had done it but I kind of replaced them (her brothers and her father) with the dogs and my sister pointed it out to me the other day, the dog training or being involved with the dogs. Cos' when my dad left we got Murky [dog] and then when my eldest brother left we got another dog, and then when James left we got another dog so I've kind of replaced one personality with another personality, does that make sense? .. It's just some of them are hairy and some of them aren't so hairy. But it's not humans. (Interview 3)*

Discussion

As a child Rose was encouraged to ask questions and not to accept anything at face value. She learned about how to make use of the democratic systems, processes, and structures that were available to her. However, she found that in other aspects of her day-to-day life, decisions were often made without recourse to democratic rules or principles. She did not learn from these experiences and indeed, over the three years of the research there did not appear to be a substantial change in the way in which she understood and engaged with the world around her. It seems that she did not use the opportunity to expand her horizons and learn from her experiences of different contexts and relationships. This contrasts with other cases that we might have presented. Jane, for example, demonstrably changed over the same period from being an *acceptor* – a young person who largely accepted what she was told without question – to a young person who became more of an *originator*, more confident and questioning, able to exert her agency in the world around her (Lawy & Biesta, working paper). On the other hand we might have focused upon Richard who had for the most part remained an *acceptor* but had done so consciously as a way of preparing himself for his future career. Rose was different, she knew how to question and ostensibly how to operate democratic processes and systems but she had yet to become an *originator,* excepting very specific contexts. She was not able to act upon and transform her knowledge and understanding into action.

Our research has allowed us to highlight dimensions of democratic learning and citizenship that would have remained invisible had we focused exclusively school learning. In the early part of the paper we distinguished between *learned citizenship* as an aspect of socialization, and *citizenship learning* which emphasizes the intimate relationship between democracy, participation and learning. Latterly, we identified at least two contexts/episodes in Rose's life that provided her with strong messages about the value of democratic practices. Outside of these clearly defined contexts Rose seemed to withdraw from the world rather than engage with it. She retreated into the safer worlds of dog training and Woodcraft where she was valued and where her actions and influence were felt. The upshot of this was that her social networks were limited which in turn meant that she missed important opportunities for

social interaction and hence for citizenship learning. While it is not possible to generalize from just one case it does suggest that young people can learn from the opportunities for action, participation and reflection that are afforded by the practices and communities in their everyday lives. However, as we have seen, this process can prove uncomfortable for those involved.

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