Are the aims of citizenship education in conflict with the promotion of an ‘employability’ agenda within secondary schools?

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Introduction

Capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what’s going on’ (Terry Wrigley, 2006, p9).

‘We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally’ (QCA, 1998, p7).

Two contrasting interpretations of the aims of citizenship education (CE), introduced as a compulsory component of the National Curriculum at key stages 3 and 4 in September 2002¹, are possible. In this essay, I will argue that while one is highly complementary, the other is potentially in deep conflict with recent conceptions of the ‘employability’ agenda that is also being promoted in schools.

The essay begins, in Part One, with a discussion of the ambiguities embedded in the aims of CE. Using McLaughlin’s (1992) distinction between a minimal and maximal conception, we explore the nature of the vision recommended in *The Crick Report*, set out in the National Curriculum guidelines and implemented in schools, and the political context in which it was formulated – New Labour’s ‘Third Way’. Part Two examines the ‘employability’ agenda and its current manifestation in the 14-19 curriculum. I argue that this places limits on what young people can learn about in school, in relation to both Citizenship and the wider curriculum. Finally, in Part

¹ The revised National Curriculum (2000) also introduced Citizenship as part of the non-statutory framework for personal, social and health education (PSHE) and Citizenship at key stages 1 and 2.
Three, we discuss the ways in which minimal and maximal interpretations of CE complement or conflict with differing perspectives on ‘education for work’.

**Part One: The Aims of Citizenship Education**

Although there is a broad agreement that citizenship education should be part of young peoples’ schooling, there is no such agreement about its purpose. The aims of citizenship education are essentially contested because the concept of citizenship is definitively bound up with our vision of society and individuals’ relationships with it – in particular, whether these are static or dynamic, ‘seen as a matter for continuing debate and redefinition’ (McLaughlin, 1992, p236). In debates about this, the key distinction is between the view that citizenship is a formal, legal status of having certain rights and responsibilities within a particular community, and the view that citizenship is much more than this – that it involves a critical understanding of, and the ability to transform, these rights and responsibilities. McLaughlin distinguishes between a ‘minimal’ and ‘maximal’ conception of citizenship along these lines (1992). On the ‘minimal’ view, citizenship education is focused on providing information – for example, about the legal and political system – and the ‘development of virtues of local and immediate focus’ – such as those relating to voluntary activity (p237). In contrast, the ‘maximal’ interpretation of CE requires the development of a critical understanding of societal structures and processes, in order that they might be questioned, and ‘virtues’ that would empower students to change them (p238).

The renewed interest in citizenship education in the UK must be seen in the context of New Labour’s political project of the ‘Third Way’, which has a particular vision for the relationship between citizen and state, and as such is based on a minimal, or static, interpretation. The Third Way accepts the economic logic of capitalist globalisation, with free markets for goods and services and flexible markets for labour, but recognises that, because certain individuals and groups were excluded from the ‘success’ of Tory Britain, the state is required to provide support and opportunities for people to ‘help themselves’ (Gamarnikow and Green, 2000, p95). Essentially, according to this doctrine, structural change is unnecessary, and is not up for discussion – what is needed is for individuals to change and fit in. The promotion of CE was a
key element in the Government’s policy agenda to combat social fragmentation and exclusion. This reflected a range of concerns, including young peoples’ apparent disengagement from public life – symbolised by the fact that young people are more likely to vote for the winner of reality TV show *Big Brother* than in local and national elections (Deuchar, 2007, p26) – and a preoccupation with the notion of disaffected youth, portrayed as roaming around in hoodies, brandishing knives, binge drinking, taking drugs and having babies. Gamarnikow and Green point out that the terms ‘social inclusion’ and ‘social exclusion’ are ‘Third Way code’ for talking about poverty and social inequalities (p95). This discourse represents the primary division in society as one between an included majority and an excluded minority. What results is an image of society devoid of conflict, in which poverty and inequality are residual rather than endemic. Instead, the causes of social exclusion are located in deficits in individuals, families and communities.

This interpretation of citizenship is suggested by the terms of reference of the Advisory Group on Citizenship (DfEE, 1997) and can be seen in the recommendations of *The Crick Report* (1998). The terms of reference for the Advisory Group on Citizenship were:

‘To provide advice on effective education for citizenship in schools – to include the nature and practices of participation in democracy; the duties, responsibilities and rights of individuals as citizens; and the value to individuals and society of community activity’ (DfEE, 1997).

This implies that the approach from the outset was what McLaughlin would describe as ‘minimalist’ – concerning developing students’ knowledge and understanding of existing political institutions, and engagement in ‘active’ citizenship within existing societal structures. Similarly, much of *The Crick Report* seems to take social and political structures as given, though we will see that it does leave some room for a more maximal approach. It characterised citizenship education as consisting of three related themes: social and moral responsibility, ‘both towards those in authority and towards each other’, community involvement and political literacy (pp11-13). Garmanikow and Green indicate that the development of political literacy appears to be ‘primarily instrumental’ (p106) for students to learn about ‘how to make themselves effective in public life’ (QCA, 1998, p41). This approach suggests that the low levels of political participation that are part of the rationale for promoting CE are rooted in a perception of lack of knowledge, understanding and skills on the part of the individual, rather than institutional
inadequacies. The influence of Third Way philosophy can also be detected in the way that the report emphasises the importance of volunteering and community activity in the context of ‘a shift of emphasis between, on the one hand, state welfare provision and responsibility and, on the other, community and individual responsibility’ (p10). This implies that the terrain of citizenship education is one in which the individual and communities are called to make up for diminishing state responsibility for welfare provision.

In contrast to the minimal interpretation of citizenship education that I argue is entailed by Third Way philosophy, a maximal interpretation realises the radical potential that CE has for developing a sense of agency in students. We can follow Friere’s analysis, in his seminal Pedagogy of the Oppressed, that education either functions as an instrument which is used to integrate the younger generation into the present system and bring about conformity to it (the minimal view), or it becomes the ‘practice of freedom’, the means by which people deal critically and creatively with the system (Shaull, in introduction to Freire, 1972, p14). On the maximal view then, CE becomes a way of liberating people and allowing them to participate in the historical process. Of course, knowledge and understanding about social, political and economic structures and processes are essential, but CE has to be about much more than this if young peoples’ political agency is to be realised.

In the National Curriculum guidelines on the teaching of citizenship, tensions between the minimal and maximal conceptions of CE are apparent. The ambiguities here and the way these have been translated into practice is picked up by the Ofsted report on the introduction of CE in secondary schools when it asks the question ‘the purposes of citizenship: compliance or challenge?’ (Towards Consensus?, 2006, p5). In many ways, the ‘knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens’ (QCA, 2000) and the ‘range and content’ (QCA, 2007a) that students are expected to cover in the updated curriculum can be seen to be geared towards becoming an ‘informed’ citizen in the world, and more specifically, in the UK, as it is. It takes for granted a liberal democratic state where the main mode of participating is through the ballot box. At the same time, there are parts of the programme of study which point towards the maximal view discussed above – citizenship ‘helps pupils to become informed, critical, active citizens who
have the confidence and conviction to work collaboratively, take action and try to make a
difference in their communities and the wider world’ (QCA, 2007a, p28).

Indeed, whatever the policy intention behind the introduction of CE in its current form, the focus
on skills in addition to knowledge and understanding, phrased in the first guidelines as ‘enquiry
and communication’ and ‘participation and responsible action’, as well as the ‘light touch’
approach of The Crick Report’s recommendations and the NC guidelines, leaves room for a more
dynamic, radical vision. The guidelines are not as prescriptive as other NC subjects, giving
schools a lot of freedom about how CE is delivered. For example, whether CE is cross-curricular
or has discrete lesson time; whether it is taught through topical issues, unit by unit, based on
conceptual themes, active projects and so on; and what examples will be used to flesh out the
‘bare bones’ (Crick, 2000, p5), such as whether ‘strategies for handling local and national
agreements and conflicts’ will be explored through the topic of bullying, or the Israel-Palestine
conflict. There are clearly some cases where, even against the background of the Third Way
political discourse, teachers and students are using the space opened up by the introduction of
citizenship as a compulsory part of the curriculum to explore CE in a maximal sense, and more
where there are glimpses of this (e.g. Wrigley, 2006, p107; Hammond, 2008).

But the evidence suggests that these are very much the exceptions rather than the rule. It indicates
that the current model tends to promote active participation within the confines of existing social
norms (Deuchar, 2007, p30). A clear example of this was schools’ response to pupil strikes
against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. In spite of young peoples’ strong engagement with the
issues, the dominant view of the educational establishment was that the strikes were an ‘excuse
for truancy’ (Cunningham and Lavalette, 2004). In its 2004 report, Ofsted observed that most
schools were not making close links between the three strands of the National Curriculum –
knowledge, the skills of enquiry and communication, and participation and responsible action –
that would allow a maximal realisation of the subject (Ofsted, 2004). Analysis of textbooks
illustrates a minimal model of CE (Davies and Issitt, 2005; Wrigley, 2006). Wrigley’s
observations include that even seemingly realistic tasks, such as preparing a short speech to
explain why women are under-represented in parliament, are presented as book exercises for the
teacher to mark, rather than opportunities to interact with a real audience. He concludes that the
books convey ‘an implicit code of authority: that knowledge about the world is fixed, certain, objective, unchallengeable, disconnected and sterile’ (p102).

So, we can see that there are windows of opportunity for a maximal conception of CE to be implemented – that encourages pupils to become agents of social change, developing enquiring minds and the skills of participation – but that there are also barriers. How does this fit in with other agendas that policy makers have for education?

**Part Two: The ‘Employability’ Agenda**

Whether we take a minimal or maximal view of how CE should be, and is, taking place in schools, it arrived on an educational scene that already had a number of policy objectives – which have the potential to complement or conflict with the aims of CE. For the purposes of this essay we focus on the ‘employability’ agenda, seeing education as preparation for work, and how this has come to the fore in New Labour education policy.

Since the industrial revolution and the start of mass elementary education, one of the central motivations on the part of policy makers has been to increase the skills of future workers to serve the needs of the economy. Policy documents of the Victorian period openly stated that working class children should not be educated beyond their station in life. Wrigley suggests that elementary schools were first set up ‘to teach basic literacy and numeracy, to discipline children into the rhythms of factory life’ (p8). Such an approach limits education to what is required for what is seen to be certain young peoples’ role in society, or, more specifically, the economy, and no more. This view of education is an important background to development in education throughout the 20th century too.

New Labour’s 5 Year Strategy for Children and Learners confirms that these concerns about economic growth and the ‘employability’ of young people are still a driving force behind education policy. Of course the knowledge and skills that are seen to be needed for work in the UK’s 21st century technologically advanced ‘knowledge’ economy have changed. The seven-
point framework that the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) asserts is the key to employability is evidently a broad set of skills (CBI, 2007, cited in QIA, 2008, p1).

Nevertheless, limitations that an approach to education with a focus on ‘employability’ puts on young peoples’ education are still present. Even a word count of the government’s 5 Year Strategy is revealing:

‘Employer’ appears 146 times in the strategy, employment on 30 occasions and business 36 times. The words creative and creativity appear once each. The word critical features six times, but always meaning essential rather than thinking critically or challenging the status quo: ‘all young people should be equipped with the skills critical for success in employment’ (Wrigley, 2006, p94).

This focus on employability is typical of the Third Way conception of society, where individuals are responsible for economic prosperity. One of the central premises of Third Way thinking is that the state is relatively impotent in the economic sphere in these globalised times. This is where the role for the enabling rather than the providing or guaranteeing state comes in – helping people ‘improve their own performance’ (Blair, 1998, p14). Responsibility for economic renewal is thus shifted away from the state in the same way that responsibility for social renewal is, as we discussed above. This is precisely what the concept of employability fits in with – as the QIA comment, it ‘places responsibility for securing and keeping employment firmly with the individual. The inability to find work is then attributed to a lack of motivation or skills’ (2008, p2). This perspective is in opposition to an alternative that sees the management of the economy as partly to blame for unemployment. After all, the areas of highest and most persistent unemployment are areas where there are simply no jobs – such as northern towns where now-redundant coal mines and manufacturing industries used to be the largest employers (Rowthorn, 2000; Erdem and Glyn, 2001). Furthermore, the current economic crisis has resulted in thousands of people losing their jobs and it is difficult to argue that this has anything to do with their ‘employability’ (‘New Year predictions point to deepest UK recession for 30 years’, The Guardian, 1 January 2009).

The introduction of Diplomas as part of the new 14-19 curriculum is a particular example of how the government has responded to employers’ concerns through changes to the curriculum. It is described in QCA literature as an ‘employer-designed qualification’ (QCA, 2007b, p9). They are
offered at three levels in 14 broad employment sectors, such as engineering; society, health and development; and construction and the built environment. The ‘Foundation Learning Tier’ and ‘Functional Skills’ aim to tackle the ‘enduring problem of inadequate basic skills among school leavers’ (QIA, p2). Functional skills are the latest in a long line of qualifications (core skills, key skills, basic skills, essential skills, and now, finally functional skills) designed to improve young peoples’ basic skills in English, mathematics and ICT because of constant complaints from employers – British Chamber of Commerce, Federation of Small Businesses and the Institute of Directors (Hodgson and Spours, 2008, p50). Wrigley makes clear the accompanying limitations that these new ‘employer-designed’ developments bring with them – those who follow the Diploma route will ‘be deprived of a broad and balanced education and denied key ways of understanding the world’ (p95). The 2006 Education and Inspections Bill states categorically that those who opt for the vocational course aged 14 are no longer entitled to study history or geography, arts of media, design and technology or a foreign language (DCSF, 2006). There is even a parallel version of English, stripped bare of literature or media studies or fiction or personal writing – down to the ‘functional skills’ needed to operate effectively at work.

Part Three: Complementary or Conflicting Educational Agendas?

On a minimal understanding of CE, we can see that it neatly complements the employability agenda. They are both about ‘including’ young people in society as it exists. In fact, with paid work constructed as the principal contributive obligation of citizens in a Third Way society (Dwyer, 2006, p117), the concept of ‘employability’ is central to this view of citizenship education. The Third Way can be seen as a fundamental challenge to the idea of the ‘entitled citizen’ that was central to the post-war welfare settlement. New Labour has sought to rebuild the welfare state around a work ethic: those who participate in the paid labour market are entitled to the full rights of social citizenship, with those who cannot work reliant on meagre social assistance and those who will not work essentially third-class citizens abandoned by the state (Hewitt, 2000, cited in Dwyer, 2004, p85). From this perspective, preparation for work is one and the same as preparation for citizenship. Although berated for it by examiners and Ofsted, many schools still do pass off work experience as their students’ ‘active citizenship’ projects for GCSE coursework.
On the other hand, if we take a maximal view of citizenship education, there is potentially a deep conflict with the approach to education implied by the ‘employability agenda’. As Wrigley comments, ‘future electricians are rarely encouraged to think about nuclear power, or hairdressers about feminism’ (p97), and this would seem to be even more strongly the case when courses are ‘employer-designed’ as the new Diplomas are. Aiming to fit people into society as it is, the ‘employability’ agenda is the antithesis of what a dynamic, maximal form of CE does in developing socially critical understanding and action.

This is not to say that it is not important to prepare young people to be financially secure and make a productive contribution to the economy. However, as we have alluded to, education should have many goals besides this. It is understandable that work skills and vocational courses are attractive to students growing up in poverty and at risk of unemployment and low wages, but a good education should also help young people to understand the causes of poverty and how to challenge them (Wrigley, p95).

‘Employability’ is itself a citizenship issue. For example, young people can debate the extent to which the difficulty of finding work is the responsibility of the individual or the government (QIA, 2008, p2). Furthermore, CE can also address the issue of what constitutes ‘good work’, an increasing concern of some trade unions. As Keep and Mayhew point out, much employment in the UK is repetitive and dull:

‘Many organisations continue to need workers to perform narrowly specified, closely supervised, repetitive tasks, in an environment where work has been organised…to allow minimal discretion’ (1998, p11).

However, jobs can be designed so that they are more fulfilling. For instance, workplaces can be organised so that they are more co-operative and less hierarchical – through a greater role for the ‘collective voice’ of trade unions and worker co-operatives. Indeed, if ‘education for work’ is seen more broadly than the problematic concept of employability, it could contribute to this in a constructive way.
Nevertheless, despite the possibility of a more progressive notion of ‘education for work’, the fact is that employers and business hold the reins in defining what this is – and the result is ‘employability’ within the status quo. As mentioned above, as it stands, this orientation places limits on what young people are entitled to learn in schools, which affects the terms in which participation in society is open to them – e.g. as good employees and consumers rather than critical social activists or ‘active citizens’, in the maximal sense of the word. Although it is cited by the QIA as a case study of good practice in marrying the employability agenda with citizenship education, the citizenship module of the Honda Apprenticeship Programme is a clear example of this (QIA, 2008, p3). In its ‘Environmentology’ module, will students be encouraged to think critically about the impact of the car industry on society, let alone the environmental limits to the economic growth that companies and country economies alike are striving for?

There are examples where ‘education for work’ is ‘free from the economic stranglehold’ (Deuchar, p22) and where enterprise education is focused on a ‘holistic model of active learning, participation and social innovation’ (p102). But how likely is this overall in the UK, with the Third Way political discourse which leaves the structure of society uninterrogated and the growth of what Simon Ball has labelled ‘Education plc’ – private sector participation in public sector education (Ball, 2007)?

Ball documents how the discourse of ‘the private’ in education has become ubiquitous and how within this discourse, ‘education is re-articulated as a resource for the economy, that is, as productive, as income-generating and as a commodity’ (p30). In classic Third Way style, in his 2001 speech on public service reform, Tony Blair asserted that ‘around the world, the barriers between public, private and voluntary are coming down…if schools want a new relationship with business in their community, as many do, let them’ (cited in Ball, p36). Whether or not schools may want new relationships with business, businesses certainly want new relationships with schools. New Labour’s ‘school improvement’ agenda has seen a proliferation of ‘Academy Schools’, whose sponsors have a large say in the school’s curriculum. With the majority of sponsors coming from the business world, most have a business specialism. The Business Academy, Bexley, fits the National Curriculum into a four-days and devotes Friday to business studies. It has its own mini stock exchange and trading floor (NUT, 2005, p7). How likely is it
that this kind of school will encourage the critical thinking about the way our economy works? It seems that this kind of business agenda cannot help but impact on the form of CE that is possible within these schools.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, are the aims of citizenship education in conflict with the promotion of an ‘employability’ agenda within schools? We have seen that this very much depends both on whether we have a minimal or maximal conception of CE, and how broadly we allow an employability agenda to be defined. The ‘employability’ agenda, as commonly interpreted, complements a minimal Third Way conception of CE very neatly, but it conflicts with a maximal, dynamic conception. A broader view of preparation for work is essential if it is to be compatible, very different from the one currently being promoted within a Third Way discourse that leaves societal structures unquestioned.

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