NGOs and Education: Some Tentative Considerations

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to contextualise the ‘community involvement’ and the ‘skills of participation’ – particularly the use of NGOs – within English National Curriculum and wider international contexts of citizenship education. It asserts that the use of NGOs in education is a largely under-explored area of research for citizenship. On the basis of an empirical pilot study of the use of human rights-focused NGOs in university-based initial teacher training, the case is presented that an emergent relationship between citizenship education and the NGO sector has potentially contentious implications. The paper may raise more questions than it answers, but one of the unintended outcomes of a small-scale piece of research reveals that the ideological role of NGOs in citizenship may have unseen implications which challenge the core aims of education itself.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is interested in the dimension of community involvement and or active participation in citizenship education. Citizenship education invariably includes the use of a range of agencies external to the respective educational context (school, university, and so forth; Gearon, 2003; Osler and Starkey, 2006). Those external agencies most committed to effecting social and cultural, political and economic change are often non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and these are highly desirous of involvement within education generally and citizenship specifically. Though new evidence is emergent from the ongoing longitudinal study at the National Foundation for Educational Research (www.nfer.ac.uk; and links), we do not know the nature and extent of involvement of external agencies, especially those ideologically most committed like NGOs, nor less the patterns of ideological commitment of those groups drawn into the educational arena, in schools nor universities, nor even less the effect of such groups upon patterns of teaching and learning or political participation, understood in the widest sense.

On the specific matter of defining NGOs this literature, like the increasingly expansive NGO sector itself, is burgeoning. The NGO Research Guide at Duke University is a good hub of sources (http://doc.lib.duke.edu and follow links). An NGO is defined by its title, that is, an organisation working independently of governmental influence with a specific remit for cultural, economic, social and or political change. That said, the larger and established NGOs often have close affiliation with nation states either directly or via inter-governmental organisations or IGOs such as the United Nations (UN) or its agencies such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) or in the case of those NGOs working on economic matters, there will be connections with
agencies such as the World Bank. Without any intended bias, well-known, household name examples of NGOs working on human rights are Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch; NGOs working on environmental concerns are Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth; an NGO working specifically on matters affecting children is Save the Children, and so forth. Many NGOs are however much smaller than these cited examples, and might be involved in very specific targeted campaigns, and thus the boundaries between charities, voluntary organisations, and (in the US) not-for-profit organisations have become blurred. The term NGO is likely to cover any campaigning group with independence from national government but if the definition causes a looseness in focus then this is itself part of the issue that this paper simply attempts to raise; not only asking what are the patterns of involvement by NGOs but their ideological bases, the suitability of their use within schools or universities, the impact of their involvement (Willetts, 2002) (1).

The paper is based on a relatively value-neutral stance – as much as this is possible – but is an attempt to open up a potentially interesting area of theoretical and empirical research, and actually one at the operational heart of not only the values but aims and purposes of education. At this stage, the theoretical and empirical investigation is fairly open, but it does not exceed the present bounds of the paper to assert that our collective thinking needs to be refined in regard to the involvement of NGOs generally before we can assert more particularly whether they are to be encouraged or discouraged.

Drawing upon recent, systematic literature reviews and alluding to the theoretical context of critical theory and critical pedagogy, ‘NGOs and Education’ presents some tentative considerations for the use of NGOs for citizenship education. The article is divided into three sections: the first examines research reviews for some sense of the international context of citizenship education; the second shows how National Curriculum Citizenship fits in with this; the third, drawing upon an empirical pilot study of the use of human rights-focused NGOs in initial teacher training (ITT), specifically examines the use of NGOs in citizenship education.

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: THE INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

The educational trend toward making citizenship explicit is a response, over recent decades, to dramatic changes in the world in which we live (Gearon, 2003; 2003a; 2004). Increased complexity in many aspects of social and cultural, political and educational life has led to educational initiatives like citizenship. A review of citizenship education across countries in response to such dramatic change (Kerr, 1999a; 1999b; 2002; 2003) reveals a common set of issues and challenges that the unprecedented pace of global change was presenting to national educational systems:

- the rapid movement of people within and across national boundaries;
- a growing recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples and minorities;
- the collapse of existing political structures and the fledgling growth of new ones;
- the changing role and status of women in society;
• the impact of the global economy and changing patterns of work and trade on social, economic and political ties;
• the effects of the revolution in information and communications technologies;
• an increasing global population and the consequences for the environment;
• the emergence of new forms of community and protest.

(Kerr, 2003)


Osler and Starkey’s (2006) review usefully analyses such national and international pressures necessitating citizenship education into six interrelated but distinctly identifiable areas: global justice and inequality; globalization and migration; concerns about civic and political engagement; youth deficit; the end of the Cold War; anti-democratic and racial movements (Osler and Starkey, 2006; cf. Torney-Purta et al. 1999; 2001; Gearon, 2003; 2003a; 2004; EPPI, 2005). Citizenship education, then, is an active – and at present highly transitional – response to these challenges.

CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: THE NATIONAL CONTEXT

The Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship, chaired by Bernard Crick (Crick, 1998; QCA, 1998, 2001; cf. Crick, 1999) formed the basis for the subsequent National Curriculum Citizenship Order (DfEE, 1999). Its aims are evangelical in their sense of mission – fundamentally political as much as educational: ‘We aim at no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally’ (Crick 1998: 7). Such a vision and purpose is a challenge to the perceived indifference of young people especially to politics, democratic process and active, community involvement. Crick’s transformative aims represent what McLaughlin (1992; 2000) has characterised as a ‘maximal’ as opposed to a ‘minimal’ definition of citizenship. Crick represents the citizen as having the potential to participate actively in democratic and political processes in the widest sense (a ‘maximal’ approach) rather than, simply upholding democratic ideals and participating in such according to the regularity of local and national elections through voting (a ‘minimal’ approach).

The major curriculum conclusions formulated by Crick are a fourfold framework: ‘Aims and Purpose’, ‘Strands’, ‘Essential Elements’, and ‘Learning Outcomes’. The three strands are the most prominent and regularly cited aspects of Crick:
• **Social and moral responsibility**
  children learning from the beginning self-confidence and socially and morally responsible behaviour both in and beyond the classroom, both towards those in authority and towards each other;

• **Community involvement**
  pupils learning about and becoming helpfully involved in the life and concerns of their communities, including learning through community involvement and service to the community;

• **Political literacy**
  pupils learning about and how to make themselves effective in public life through knowledge, skills and values.

Crick’s principles drew largely upon the definitions of Citizenship by Marshall (1950) and adapted to identify three strands in Citizenship which were to prove important to its development as a National Curriculum subject: social and moral responsibility, community involvement and political literacy. These – altered only slightly in terminology – were to form the bedrock of National Curriculum Citizenship when it set out what schools were required to teach, expecting pupils to have:

• Knowledge and understanding about becoming informed citizens;

• Developing skills of enquiry and communication;

• Developing skills of participation and responsible action.
  (DfEE 1999)

This can be contrasted with Audigier’s (2000) model, influential upon the Council of Europe, suggesting four dimensions to citizenship, favoured by Osler and Starkey (2006): political and legal; social; economic; cultural. Osler and Starkey draw upon the last element of Audigier to distinguish between a citizenship learning that needs to have a political/structural dimension and a cultural/personal one if it is to effectively engage learners.

**NGOS AND EDUCATION: SOME TENTATIVE CONSIDERATIONS**

Amongst the most cited and substantial international studies of citizenship has been that by the IEA and it provided an overview of approaches to citizenship education as well as a wealth of other contextual information (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo, 1999; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz, 2001; Steiner-Khamsi, Torney-Purta and Schwille, 2002; cf. Gearon, 2003; NFER, 2002; Osler and Starkey, 2006). Here, the ‘third dimension’ of ‘active participation’ remains little explored, though typically there is a range of opportunities for its curriculum implementation. Potentially this is a controversial aspect of citizenship education, for in the process of drawing students into community or drawing community to students is revealed a distinct model of citizenship, yet one in which the ideological bases may hidden. In 2005, a systematic international review of the literature pertaining to empirical research in citizenship suggested that although community
involvement and active participation are integral to citizenship education, there is little evidence to show either patterns of involvement or their ideological bases (EPPI, 2005).

The emphasis placed upon community involvement has therefore research as well as the more obvious pedagogical implications. Participation in social action as part of the wider community beyond school necessitates links with external agencies. The focus upon NGOs is useful because they represent an extreme instance of ideological commitment, driven by often very specific goals of economic, social and political change. Superficially, citizenship is motivated by an explicit ideological commitment to liberal democracy based upon human rights. This, however, cannot be taken \textit{prima facie} as any indication that either (a) those groups involved in citizenship are themselves thus committed, nor (b) that the notion of liberal democracy based upon human rights is not itself a model beyond interrogation; indeed it is the tension between points (a) and (b), and the implications therein, that are a cause for concern and or at least worthy of pedagogical and research attention. We simply do not know what patterns of ideological pedagogy are in place within schools, nor do we have evidence to suggest whether NGOs (as an example of community involvement and active participation) are part of the process of upholding such ideological values or subverting them. NGOs in education, as in other spheres of their activity, derive their raison d’être from an emancipatory model of education; they exist to campaign, as advocacy groups, as champions of social structural change, often present radical agendas which challenge democratically elected governments and indeed trans-national and inter-governmental bodies like the United Nations and the World Bank, if the pace or direction of such change is seen not to be sufficient. Pressure upon the G8 nations in regard to the Make Poverty History Campaign is a good example of a collective of around five hundred NGOs collaborating on a complex economic fight against social injustice, for fair-trade, and so forth.

A TTA-funded research project, ‘The Role of Human Rights-Focused NGOs in ITT Citizenship’ (Gearon, 2005), was a small beginning to such an enquiry. A small-scale, pilot study, the research focused on the role of NGOs in human rights education within university-based initial teacher training (ITT), specifically postgraduate certificate of education (PGCE) citizenship courses (Gearon 2005). The research stopped short of investigation of ideological bias or influence and was more simply a broad-based examination asking preliminary questions about the use of NGOs in teacher training. The research centred on the following research question: ‘What is the nature, extent and motivation of the reciprocal relationship (if any) between university departments of ITT and NGOs in the provision of initial teacher training in citizenship, with particular reference to the construction of curricula for human rights education?’ The evidence base used was documentary written sources (course handbooks, websites) and some supplementary interviewing of course leaders for PGCE citizenship. Although the research did not produce statistical evidence of findings, nor could it be said to provide rigorous case study data, as a preliminary enquiry it went some way to adding to our basic knowledge and understanding of one critically important aspect of citizenship education, the use of human-rights focused NGOs in ITT, and a start into a wider investigation into the use of NGOs and indeed external agencies in teaching and learning more widely.
The research highlighted, then, the use of NGOs through university initial teacher training in citizenship education in England. It discovered a less than systematic use of NGOs in teacher training, the use of NGOs at times being ad hoc and varying greatly from institution to institution. Indeed, although NGOs featured universally throughout all courses of initial teacher training, very few specific NGOs featured consistently in terms of direct involvement with initial teacher training. For example, Amnesty International invariably featured but its direct involvement on courses of initial teacher training was often limited to reference to websites. The relationship of NGOs to the UN and IGO lacked focus almost universally. While this small scale and pilot study was particularly interested in human rights-focused NGO, patterns in the use of types of NGO (human rights, economic, environmental) was often idiosyncratic. One feature predominated, however, and that was the use of locally-based NGOs campaigning on specific issues often related to wider, especially economic or environmental concern, from the (then emergent) Make Poverty History campaign to local social justice issues and local crime prevention initiatives to (in a coastal university) Surfers against Sewage.

This diversity of course raises issues about defining NGOs and the nature, scope and extent of community involvement and or active participation at all levels of education. The research also provided a useful, initial theoretical basis for consideration of major shifts in the delivery of human rights education in terms of related, practical and policy objectives. If such shifts were to be seen as evidence of a distinctive agenda of increased political involvement of a particular sort – defined perhaps by a radical agenda of social-structural change – this might arguably be regarded less as the introduction of a political education through citizenship than politicization of education through citizenship. The point, of course, is arguable. Even if the National Curriculum Citizenship programme of study (DfEE, 1999) is presented overtly as a means to a ‘healthy and just democracy’ any evidence of emergent and unintended radicalism or extremism through citizenship would contribute to the debate about politicization. In other words, it should not surprise us if an overtly moderate ideology of wider political aims directed through compulsory National Curriculum Citizenship might have unpredictable consequences. The role of trainee teachers would be important here; and though trainees were not interviewed in the project this would seem to be an interesting future lead, as these trainees and beginning teachers are, so to speak, on the frontline of influence and change within schools.

The project, limited in scope though it was, formulated five key findings: (i) the use of external agencies in general and in regard to human rights-focused NGOs in particular within ITT citizenship remains at an early stage of development; (ii) the use of external agencies in general remains a matter of personal contact, and there is an emphasis upon the local in the use of NGOs with the Internet remaining a focus for information gathering of larger, international NGOs; (iii) the links between NGOs and governmental and inter-governmental (for example, UN) agencies remains largely underdeveloped and under-‘exploited’; (iv) there is a clear need for research-informed, practical guidance for ITT citizenship in regard to human rights education curricula (including use by university lecturers/ school-based mentors on citizenship teacher training courses in citizenship); (v) more research is needed to inform further university, government-related and NGO thinking on human rights education within ITT citizenship, as many policy, philosophy and
practical issues remain as to the use of such agencies in ITT in general and ITT citizenship in particular.

The project’s recommendations were threefold: (i) The development of a structured approach (for example a programme of guidance) in the use of external agencies in general and in regard to human rights-focused NGOs in particular within ITT citizenship; (ii) The need for support for practical initiatives in policy development of human rights education curricula of use to university lecturers/school-based mentors on citizenship teacher training courses in citizenship; (iii) More research to inform further university, government-related and NGO thinking on human rights education within university initial teacher training, especially in practical strategies for working with adults other than teachers to support pupils’ learning.

Further, the project identified two major areas for further investigation: (i) philosophical investigation of the issues centring around the use of multiple agency involvement in the teaching of citizenship, and the implications of using such agencies in state education, especially the potentially problematic use of agencies critical of government policy (not only in education but in a wide range of human rights issues including international development, foreign policy, and so forth); (ii) practical resource development for guidance on the use of external agencies within ITT, including but not exclusive to human rights-focused NGOs.

CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

Citizenship education is based upon explicit political principles of liberal democracy and universal human rights. Yet ever since the inception of universal human rights within the UN era, and on which there is an extensive literature, the notion of human rights has itself been used and abused. As Mansell argues ‘a study of the discourse of human rights since the Second World War suggests that the rhetoric on human rights has been determined most clearly by the propaganda value it represented’. According to the following lines of political expediency, for example, ‘the difference in the sort of human rights different states proclaimed was dictated by the political ideology of each state’; ‘international financial institutions have, by their operation, made the protection of economic rights almost impossible for poor states’; ‘the aftermath of colonialism continues to bedevil colonial peoples in their attempts to promote and secure self-determination’ and ‘regardless of proclaimed international standards on human rights, there are some states which may regularly, persistently and blatantly ignore world opinion if their strategic or emotional importance is exceptional’ (Mansell, 1999: 49). The principles of liberal democracy and universal human rights need themselves, therefore, constant justification and scrutiny. The potential mis-use of ideological education is as fraught as the historical risks of indoctrination in religious education.

Thus how citizenship and the goals of citizenship are defined – including by groups such as NGOs involved in education – will fundamentally affect how participation is engendered and responsible action understood (Lindsay, 2001; Osler, 2004). Though the QCA provides
guidance for teachers on the teaching of ‘controversial issues’, it is here that active participation often involves pressure groups and NGOs, sometimes running counter to dominant and mainstream political parties and representative democracy (cf. Crick, 1998; Hahn, 1998; 1999; DfEE, 1999; QCA 2001; 2001a; 2001b; 2001c; 2001d; 2001e; 2001f). Arthur, Davison and Stow (2000) have suggested a correlative to such raw and under-analyzed empirical data, conceptualizing citizenship according to a typology, useful even if it sets forth a basis for contesting ideological bias.

Arthur, Davison and Stow (2000) distinguish between normative and communal, and between pragmatic and individualistic models:

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<th>NORMATIVE/COMMUNAL</th>
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<td><strong>Paleoconservative</strong></td>
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<td>Tradition</td>
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<td>Loyalty</td>
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<td>Family</td>
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<td>Parochialism</td>
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<td>Fraternity</td>
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<td>Morality</td>
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<th><strong>Libertine</strong></th>
<th><strong>Libertarian</strong></th>
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<td>Individualism</td>
<td>Market forces</td>
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<td>Materialism</td>
<td>Pro-enterprise</td>
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<td>Permissiveness</td>
<td>Elitism</td>
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<td>Hedonism</td>
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<td>Apolitical</td>
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The suggested typology defines the varieties of citizens and corresponding models of citizenship education. It sets a potentially interesting research agenda for citizenship and can be used to present an outline hypothesis that different definitions of citizenship result in different forms of citizenship education. Little research is available on the ideological assumptions of teachers of citizenship, or the effects this has (in schools) on pupils or (in university-based departments of education) trainees teachers. What would be interesting to know is how the utilization ‘community involvement’ in order to develop ‘skills of participation’ is applied in curriculum planning, and a programme of relevant research might usefully focus on the effects of NGOs in developing specific models of the citizen.
Arguably, possibilities for overt ideological manipulation were inherent in Crick’s *Final Report of the Advisory Group on Citizenship* (QCA, 1998) which formed, the following year, the basis for the National Curriculum Citizenship Order (DfEE, 1999). As noted earlier, its aims are evangelical in their sense of mission. Yet Crick, and much of what followed from Crick, is ‘contentious, disputed in its most basic terms, and, in terms of the mandate for the use of “we”, highly controversial (as well as self-evidently undemocratic)’ (Gearon, 2003:6). This is certainly not to denigrate Crick, but in terms of unintended consequences, and particularly at the level of citizenship education in schools and teacher training in universities, the specific effects of ‘community involvement’ or in developing ‘skills of participation’ are as yet unclear. Integral to citizenship education, community involvement and active participation are therefore ideologically charged forms of pedagogy, but all the more highly charged when involving NGO actors; and such thoughts are not simply scaremongering but part of a wider discussion about the effects, as much as the stated intentions, of citizenship.

Indeed, such questions have been subject to long debate, particularly in recent decades where critical theory has been applied from political to educational contexts (Giroux, 2003; cf. McLaren, 2003). The Frankfurt School has probably been most influential in this radicalization. The political leanings of the Frankfurt School’s ‘critical theory’ (space prevents a wider consideration of Habermas et al. latterly associated with an important international movement in the social sciences, started originally in 1920s Germany), adapted, with significant reservations, a Marxist interpretation of socio-economic and political power inequalities and injustices within society. Critical theory presents a model of society in which innate inequalities are presupposed, the aims of critical theory as a radical ideology being to contribute to social structural change in order to shift towards more equitable structures.

It was Giroux (2003) in particular who drew an explicit link between critical theory and critical pedagogy. Originally, however, the defining text was Freire’s (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. This encapsulated a model of education which is not simply concerned with maintaining the social structural order but which seeks to empower the learner to change the system as Freire’s efforts ‘were never simply confined to discussions of methodology or applications of teaching practice’, rather he ‘forthrightly inserted questions of power, culture, and oppression within the context of schooling’:

> In so doing, he reinforced the Frankfurt School’s focus on theory and practice as imperative to the political struggles against exploitation and domination. Through his views on emancipatory education, Freire made central pedagogical questions related to social agency, voice and democratic participation – questions that strongly inform the recurrent philosophical expressions of critical pedagogical writings even today. (Darder et. al., 2003: 6)

Critical pedagogy thus adopts a philosophy of education which is more than developing skills and conveying knowledge but centrally concerned with *emancipation*, the overcoming of injustice, a rearrangement or even dismantling of those structures which perpetuate inequality.
CONCLUSION

As we have noted, NGOs in education as in other spheres of activity derive their raison d’etre from an emancipatory model of education; they exist to campaign, as advocacy groups, as champions of social structural change, often present radical agendas which challenge democratically elected governments and indeed transnational and inter-governmental bodies. In the educational as in the political context, NGOs invariably fit, then, within such an emancipatory educational framework. The relationship between campaigning and education is, however, too little explored either in university initial teacher education and training or in the school context of ‘community involvement’ or in developing ‘skills of participation’. In this specific context, it is not so much the emancipation we might object to but the uncoordinated implanting of ideological bias by those who presume they know they are right; activism is based upon this principle, but the extent to which education is or should be is arguably more open.

This is part of current debate not only about pedagogy but also about the nature of research – how much should research be at the service of governmental policy and how should it be involved in its critique or even subversion (Hammersley, 2002; Bridges, 2003; Pring, 2004; Oancea, 2005), debates that have, as yet, been little applied to research in citizenship (cf. Gearon 2006; cf. Griffiths, 1998). Griffiths (1998) has been important in determining that educational research in the widest sense (not only in relation citizenship) should be committed to social structural change, what she calls ‘getting off the fence’. In short, though, and in regard to the narrower concerns of NGOs in education, even amongst the most seemingly laudable of NGOs, but especially amongst smaller and less regulated groups, more awareness and greater debate is required around this under-analyzed aspect of citizenship education. In an arena where educationalists have a surfeit of practical guidance on teaching citizenship, including materials for use in developing community involvement and active participation (www.citized.info; Gearon 2006), we nevertheless presently lack, for example, the developed means of disaggregating religious or ideological bias (cf. Gearon, 2006a). There is an unarguable need for the tools for interrogating the theological and/or ideological basis of NGOs and their emergent role in citizenship education.

It has, then, been the unintended outcome of a small-scale piece of research to hint that the ideological role of NGOs in citizenship may have unseen implications which challenge the core aims of education itself; that citizenship, on occasion, could be less about the introduction of politics to education than the politicization of education. Though there is insufficient evidence to present this as a finding, it is a supposition worthy of further research.

NOTES

REFERENCES


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