

The deficit model of education views citizenship teaching as an imposition rather than a right

By Democratic Audit

Citizenship has been taught in British schools for over a decade. Dr Michalis Kakos suggests that citizenship education has the potential to help individuals exercise their democratic rights, but that the flawed, 'deficit model' approach to citizenship teaching used to date has led to a failure to fully realise this ambition.

Thom Brooks recently posed the question on Democratic Audit of whether the citizenship test taken by all immigrants seeking permanent residency in Britain, and those applying for British citizenship, operates as 'a barrier' or as a 'bridge'



A good place to learn about democracy. Credit: Catherine Bebbington (Parliamentary copyright)

to the new citizenship. I find this distinction useful for describing a key issue with relation to citizenship education and its role as a statutory subject on the English secondary curriculum since 2002.

The modern history of citizenship education commenced in 1998 with the publication of the report by the [Advisory Group on Citizenship](#). Under the chairmanship of Professor Bernard Crick, the group recommended the introduction of a new subject to the curriculum. As I have discussed elsewhere, in reference to Professor Crick's vision, citizenship education resembled a Trojan horse with the potential to open the gates of secondary schooling to democratic education and participatory pedagogies [1]. The ambition behind the initiative was substantial: the expectation was that this new educational discourse would bring "no less than a change in the political culture of this country both nationally and locally."

The rhetoric of the 1998 report indicated a rather conservative, and in my view highly problematic approach, to the role of formal education. It also revealed – dare I say – a rather simplistic understanding of the function of schools. This approach, shared by most governments, views schooling as a means to implement particular processes leading to the fabrication of desirable products. From this perspective, formal education resembles computer hardware, which supports the operation of purposefully designed software (curricula), allowing the execution of specific commands outcomes of varying predictability. This approach is evident in the section of the report justifying and outlining the aims of the subject: *“Citizenship education is urgently needed to address this historic deficit if we are to avoid a further decline in the quality of our public life and if we are to prepare all young people for informed participation”*. This expectation that citizenship education address specific ‘deficits’ underpins the eleven years of its implementation, as illustrated by two other milestones in its recent history: the introduction of the fourth strand of the citizenship curriculum [‘Identity and Diversity: Living Together in the UK’](#) two years after the 2005 London bombing, and the recent [curriculum review](#) proposing a focus on economics education.

As someone who has been involved in formal education in a variety of roles, I can identify at least two reasons to explain my instinctive discomfort with this ‘deficit model’ of education and of citizenship education in particular. The first relates to the implied role of the teacher and the second relates to the role of the students themselves as young citizens and to their right to education.

My research has considered the consequences for teachers of the expectations of formal education to address specific deficits. In it I examined the ways that teachers and students make sense of the subject. Despite an overall positive stance, teachers’ consistently responded that there was an implicit irony in the fact that a new subject, intended to enhance and promote dialogical behaviours, to develop participatory skills and instil democratic values was rather undemocratically imposed upon the school community. Moreover, the specific expectations accompanying the introduction of the subject and described in the pre-determined, almost measurable ‘outcomes’ reflect a degree of ignorance of the result-orientated, [‘business-like’](#) discourse of modern schooling, a discourse strongly associated with league tables and [PISA evaluations](#). Since the introduction of the subject, schools seem to have become involved in a struggle to respond to the conflicting expectations associated with different ‘deficits’; moreover, those teachers teaching the subject are finding themselves in a no-win situation. This at least partially explains why eleven years have been insufficient for the subject to become embedded in English secondary education.

Additional to the teachers’ stress and the viability of the subject, is my greater concern pertaining to the impact that implementing a deficit model has upon young people’s citizenship and their relationship to education. A subject developed on [“the premise that the alleged crisis in democracy can be adequately addressed by \(re\)educating individuals”](#) raises *“questions about the most effective way to ‘produce’ good citizens.”* From this standpoint, individuals (citizens) and consequently students as products are approached from outside the context (social, political, cultural, economic, or other) which frames and explains their actions. The implied suggestion is that examining the behaviour of individual citizens can sufficiently explain social malaises, and that re-education should be a sufficient measure to prevent their replication. Thus, surely in the context of the London bombings, the ‘living together’ strand of citizenship should lead to discussions about the responsibility of individuals to integrate, rather than to question the emergence first and later the exclusion of minorities. Similarly, the recent curriculum review in response to the recent financial crisis is questionable in its requisite prioritisation of the (ir)responsibility of individuals to [“manage their money on a day-to-day basis”](#) over any examination of the role of governments, banks and international organisations.

Rather than enabling students to appreciate, protect and demand their right to education, the deficit model of citizenship enhances the view of education as an imposition. Rather than a right, facilitating individuals in the exercise of their citizenship, citizenship education represents a process to be endured in order to ‘qualify’ for full-citizenship status; or, to use Brook’s terminology, a barrier to overcome and not a bridge to their citizenship.

Note: This post represents the views of the author, and not those of Democratic Audit or of the London School of Economics. Parliamentary copyright images are reproduced with the permission of Parliament.

1. Book chapter: 'Embedding citizenship education: An ethnographic tale of Trojan horses and conflicting performativities'. In Jeffrey, B. & Troman, B. (Eds), [Performativity in UK Education: Ethnographic cases of its effects, agency and reconstructions](#), E&E Publishing, 2012

Dr Michalis Kakos is a senior lecturer in education at Leeds Metropolitan University. Previously he was leading the PGCE (ITT) course in Citizenship education at the University of Leicester. He has also held research fellowships in the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights Education (CCHRE), University of Leeds and in the Centre for Research in Inclusion and Diversity (CREID) University of Edinburgh. Michalis' research interests include: Citizenship education; the emergence of self and the construction of identity; institutionalisation in education; 'normality', 'abnormality' and special education. Michalis has taught in Primary schools, Pupil Referral Units, Special, Grammar, Comprehensive and Preparatory schools in Greece, USA and the UK.

