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Confronting Inequalities! The Role of Citizenship Education

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Introduction

Thank you very much for inviting me to participate in this opening panel. I want to do three things in my brief presentation. First, to give a quick overview of citizenship education in the United Kingdom (UK); second, to set out some of the reasons why citizenship education has dropped down the political and education agenda in the UK and across Europe since the turn of the new century; and, finally, third, to suggest the need to urgently reconceptualise our approach to citizenship education so that it can better help to address the challenges we face in politics, society, education and in democracy at this point in time in the 21st Century.

Citizenship education in the United Kingdom (UK)

The first thing to say about citizenship education in the United Kingdom (UK) is that the UK is four countries in one nation, namely: England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. You will have noted that I have deliberately listed them in alphabetical order so as to show no favouritism. The UK has very complex relations between these countries over history and time and particularly at the current time. It is often stated that the relationship is one of love and hate. The Scots love the Welsh, the Welsh love the Scots, the Northern Irish love the Scots and Welsh, and vice-versa, and everyone hates the English. There remain considerable political divisions between the countries at the present time but if you dig beneath the surface you will come across a complexity of links, identities and conflicting identities. For example, if you take me. I am English born and speak with an English accent but I am not English bred. My father was Scottish, from Aberdeen in the Highlands and my mother is from the Republic of Ireland so I grew up steeped in lots of Celtic blood, music and culture. I have a British/UK passport but could also apply, via my mother, for an Irish passport. Who knows with the current push for Scottish independence I may also be able to apply for a Scottish passport in the not too distant future.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the complex history and traditions of the four countries of the UK plays into the nature of their education systems and their approaches to citizenship education (Kerr et.al, 2008). What is clear is that citizenship education is present in the education systems of all four UK countries and has common aims and goals. However, it is present in different forms in each country, with different emphases





and approaches as influenced by time, place, values and the changing political landscape. The influence of devolution for N. Ireland, Scotland and Wales over the past ten years has been particularly marked. Devolution has seen each of these countries being given devolved powers over certain areas of government, including education and social care, via new National Assemblies with elected representatives. Meanwhile, the three countries continue to elect Members of Parliament (MPs) to the UK Parliament in Westminster, London. Ironically, policies in England, including for education and social care, continue to be decided by the UK government rather than a separate English National Assembly and the Department for Education (DfE) in London.

In brief, this is the current situation regarding citizenship education in each of the four UK countries. As we are in Glasgow where better to begin than to describe the situation in Scotland.

Scotland

In Scotland citizenship is part of the Curriculum for Excellence, a curriculum framework from all ages and phases of education, which has been a long time in development, and which comprises 8 broad curriculum areas. The overarching aim of the framework includes a statement that young Scots should become 'successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors. Citizenship education is a non-statutory component of the Curriculum for Excellence and approached as a cross-cutting theme which permeates all areas of school life. There is a particular emphasis over the years on its promotion through the subject of Modern Studies and more recently through Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) and Global Citizenship.

Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland has a challenging political and social history around 'the Troubles' which influences the nature of its education system and approach to citizenship education. The primary school curriculum (pupils age 5 to 11) is centred around six Areas of Learning and the secondary school curriculum (pupils age 11 to 18) around nine Areas of Learning. In primary schools there is a strong emphasis on the Area of Learning 'Personal Development and Mutual Understanding', what was previously termed Education for Mutual Understanding (EMU). Meanwhile, in secondary schools the Area of Learning is 'Learning for Life and Work' which includes within it the statutory strand of Local and Global Citizenship. You will notice the absence of the word 'national' in this strand. There is also a GCSE (General Certificate in Secondary Education) nationally accredited course for 14 to 16 year olds entitled Learning for Life and Work.

Wales

In Wales citizenship education is not a stand-alone subject or area of learning but rather part of three areas of school provision. The first is Personal and Social Education (PSE), which includes within it active citizenship, sustainable development and global citizenship. The second is Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship (ESDGC) which is an overarching curricular theme. The third area is the Welsh Baccalaureate qualification for 16 to 18 years olds which includes the topics of Community Work and Wales, Europe and the World. Wales is also the only UK country where School Councils are compulsory in all schools.





England

In England the National Curriculum has an overarching aim of creating 'responsible citizens' and 'equipping young people with the knowledge, understanding and skills to play an effective role in public and democratic life'. Following the report of the Crick Group (Crick, 1998), since 2002 Citizenship is a non-statutory strand alongside PSHE (Personal, Social, Health and Economic Education) at primary school level (pupils age 5 to 11) and a statutory National Curriculum subject called Citizenship at secondary level (pupils age 11 to 16). The Citizenship subject curriculum was revised by the Conservative Government in 2013 to be much more about pupils learning a canon knowledge rather than the skills of active citizenship, with an emphasis on learning about: government and legal institutions and the monarchy; 'precious liberties' rather than human rights; volunteering; and financial capability. There is also a GCSE nationally accredited course called Citizenship Studies for pupils age 14 to 16.

Citizenship education in the UK and Europe since 2000

It is fair to say that citizenship education has dropped down the political and education agenda in UK countries, particularly England, and in many other European countries from the early part of the 21st century, from 2006 onwards. This is in contrast to the high position it held in such agendas in the 1990s and early 2000s. It has lost ground, influence, support and resources. The reasons for this are many, varied and interlinked. They include across the UK and much of Europe the cumulative effect of a number of factors.

The first factor is the impact of the worldwide economic recession. The emphasis in politics and education at the onset of the recession shifted from promoting citizenship education and participation to a focus on restarting the economy and ensuring that young people had the necessary core knowledge and skills to get jobs, through an emphasis on literacy, numeracy, sciences and languages. Citizenship education was viewed more as a luxury for when economic and political times were good. The second factor was the removal of left and centre-left governments in many countries, including the UK, and their replacement by right and centre-right governments. These new governments had a changed, narrower view of citizenship education being more about conformity, producing responsible citizens, and nationalism than the previous governments who promoted active citizens and a more universal, participative approach. In England, for example, the new Conservative government, as mentioned above, altered the Citizenship curriculum to be more about knowledge acquisition rather than the skills of active citizenship and made clearer links between citizenship education and the learning of national history and traditions, with less emphasis on learning about Europe and the rest of the world.

The third factor is the changing education policies and priorities brought in by the new governments. In England, for example, the new Conservative government introduced policies predicated on creating a market in education, fuelled by putting information and data in the hands of parents and encouraging them to help drive up educational standards through parental choice and the opportunity to set up new schools funded centrally by the government rather than through local authorities (LAs). At the same time, it has taken education funding away from LAs and given it directly to school leaders to take control of paying for staff and resources. This has led to a variety of new types of schools being set up directly by the government, including Free Schools and Academies which do not have to follow the National Curriculum as well as the





growth of chains of schools, often termed MATs (Multi-Academy Trusts), and controlled by private companies. These are no longer accountable to local communities as LA schools used to be but rather report directly to the Secretary of State for Education. Fragmentation, compartmentalisation and competition are now the key words in the education landscape as the variety of schools battle for pupils, staff, resources and parental patronage. This revolution in education has come apace since 2010 and made the education system less democratic, collegial and cooperative.

The fourth factor is the increased tension and volatility in politics and society at large driven by the impact of the economic recession and the heightened challenges to the stability of democratic societies. This is evidenced in the rising cases of xenophobia, racism and sexism in society in all countries and the threats posed by violent extremism and terrorism by Islamic extremists through IS as well as by far-right extremist groups. This has seen many countries, including England, react to these threats through the promotion of national values in the education system, termed Fundamental British Values (FBV) in the UK, as well as programmes designed to spot those in danger of being radicalised by extremists in schools and communities. This programme in the UK was termed Prevent (i.e. preventing people from becoming terrorists or supporting terrorism through radicalisation) and it has been copied by a number of European countries (UK Government, 2011). These new education initiatives around fundamental national values and prevention programmes have been introduced in the UK and elsewhere as individual initiatives missing the opportunity to promote them as a natural part of existing, established citizenship education curricular and subjects.

The fifth and sixth factors relate specifically to the UK namely the impact of what has come to be termed as 'Brexit' since the vote in June 2016 to leave the European Union (EU) and the growing calls of UK countries, particularly Scotland, following devolution for their own independence away from the UK and Westminster. These factors have heightened tensions and divisions right across UK society in the last few years and meant that there has been very little domestic policy in education and elsewhere. The cumulative effect of all these factors has been for citizenship education to struggle to get political and education attention and recognition and as a result to slip sharply down the list of pressing political and education priorities in the UK and in many European countries.

Citizenship education currently and the need for reconceptualization

So, where does this leave citizenship education today in 2019 in the UK and across Europe? In the four countries of the UK there remain pockets of excellent citizenship education practice in schools and local areas in each country but there are also many cases where young people are not getting their education entitlement (both statutory and non-statutory) to citizenship education as set out in education law and curricula. This is a cause for concern for the future of our democratic society and the ability of young people to participate and engage in democratic life as informed, responsible and active citizens going forward.

The current situation raises the question as to whether citizenship education has reached a crossroads in 2019 in the UK and across Europe and the extent to which it needs to take stock and be reconceptualised for the changing realities of politics, society and education systems in the 21st century. I would argue strongly for such a reconceptualization in the UK and elsewhere in order to revitalise and relaunch citizenship education so that it is relevant to meet the current political, social, cultural,



economic and environmental challenges facing our societies and better educate young people to face those challenges with increased confidence not anxiety and fear.

Citizenship education was strong in the late 1990s and early 2000s when it was largely about education with the aim of supporting or consolidating democracy. However, since the turn of the new century there have been growing challenges posed in our countries and communities from forces in politics and society with the intention of deconsolidating democracy, of pulling it down. These destabilising forces include the combined impacts of: globalization and the movement of peoples in and out of countries and continents; rising tide of populism and nationalism; growth of fundamentalism and extremism; negative use of social media; rapid advances in technology and science; changing nature of employment and work with the rise of internships and zero hours contracts around the 'gig' economy; and the challenges posed by questions of sustainability and the stewardship of the planet.

The cumulative effect, particularly in the UK if you add in the impact of Brexit and calls for Scottish independence, is that we are in danger of reaching a point soon potentially of a crisis in democratic life with the erosion or exhaustion of democracy. There are certainly clear signs of that currently in the UK as the politicians of all parties wrestle, argue and struggle to find a solution to the Brexit issue. People are beginning to switch off from politics in their droves with the ensuing threats to the future of democracy and democratic life and participation going forward. At present, their frustration is aimed at the politicians and political parties. People, including young people, still largely believe in democracy but just do not trust or like the politicians who are in power. However, this situation could change rapidly with them switching off from the political process and participation permanently.

The current situation in the UK and across Europe raises the key question namely: as currently conceived how far can citizenship education address the new challenges to democracy in the 21st Century going forward? I would argue that the answer is not very well if citizenship education continues to be largely a late 20th Century conception of being about educating people, particularly young people to support and promote democracy. There is a real danger now that this approach will be increasingly counterproductive. It will not support democracy but rather create and perpetuate a growing gap, particularly for young people, between their 'learned' citizenship education and 'lived' citizenship education experiences.

What I mean by this is that people are educated or learn how to support and promote democracy and participation but the reality of the world around them – their lived citizenship experiences – shows many forces trying to destabilise and pull down democracy and its institutions and processes. Therefore, there is an urgent need to reconceptualise citizenship education so that how it is taught closes the gap between learned and lived citizenship education experiences. This means that rather than just educating to support and promote democracy citizenship education also gives people, particularly young people, the necessary civic competences – knowledge, understanding, skills, attitudes, experiences and outlook – to also defend and protect it from destabilising forces at the same time.

So in practice this means that such an education would emphasise and promote the need: to educate people from an early age about civic institutions and structures and their importance to democracy, including the school as a civic institution, and how to continually question and challenge those institutions and structures so that they are



robust in promoting the values of democracy in the face of ongoing changes in society; to give people effective experiences of engagement and participation, including from a young age in schools, that prepare them to be informed and active citizens going forward; and, to help people, including young people to handle controversy and conflict through dialogue and debate rather than through violence so that they can address the controversies and uncertainties in modern society which threaten and weaken democracy.

In summary, I believe we have reached a point in time where we need to have a proper conversation about not if we should but rather how we should reconceptualise citizenship education and our approach to it so that it better fits with the realities of democracy and democratic life in the 21st Century. We need a strong and effective citizenship education that educates and prepares all people not only to support and promote democracy but also to defend and protect it with confidence and resolve in an of increased volatility, unpredictability, rapid change, tension and conflict. The Australian academic Kerry Kennedy, who lives in Hong Kong, sums up the challenge we face in his latest book as the need to:

‘...explore the challenges facing a volatile world and the ways that civic and citizenship education might address some key issues. It is the beginning of a conversation, but hopefully not the end. It is only as we talk together as democratic communities that we can learn not only how to support democracy but also defend it. This is our challenge for the future.’ (Kennedy, 2019)

I agree with Kennedy but would argue that is our challenge not just for the future but for now and that we urgently need to begin these conversations about how to reconceptualise citizenship education in the UK and across the rest of Europe. I hope I have provided a useful canvas or backdrop to frame our discussion in this panel and our conversations across the rest of the conference and beyond.

References

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