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Please cite this publication as follows:

Leighton, R. and Nielsen, L. (2017) Ethnicity, gender, social class and citizenship: comparative views from England and Sweden. *Teaching Citizenship*, 45. pp. 42-43. ISSN 1474-9335.

Link to official URL (if available):

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Ethnicity, gender, social class and citizenship: comparative views from England and Sweden.

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Please note.

What follows is a summary of the second stage of ongoing research comparing the experiences of students and teachers of Citizenship Education in Sweden and England. A more complete and detailed version is expected to appear in a leading refereed journal later in the year, and a book proposal relating to all stages of the research is currently under consideration. While we await confirmation of the submitted proposals we cannot identify the journal or the prospective book publisher, but it is in those sources that more detailed and nuanced analysis and explanation will be located.

Introduction

The National Curriculum provision for Citizenship Education in England clearly requires that the subject must be taught throughout KS 3 and KS 4, with content indicated and a public examination available at KS4; until recently, there was also an A level. In Sweden - where Citizenship Education is not a separate subject - the content is vague and teachers' interpretations of the assignment differ distinctively between the different schools and programmes. This contrasting provision between two countries which have both prided themselves on their welfare provision and policies of inclusive citizenship was considered ideal to examine the extent to which different approaches produce more or less aware, articulate and active citizens.

We interviewed teachers and secondary school students, asking them about their experiences and opinions regarding Citizenship Education and the nature of citizenship. The following questions formed the core of the interviews:

- What knowledge and skills does a citizen need in a democracy and how is the meaning of citizenship connected to gender, class and ethnicity?
- How are personal liberties affected by the citizen's gender, class and ethnicity, according to the respondents?

- What are teachers' and students' experiences of Citizenship Education and how does school pay attention to citizens' conditions based on gender, class and ethnicity?

These questions were only the core, however. As researchers we didn't want to impose our world view or our version of events, so each interview was constructed around the interests and preferred direction of those being interviewed.

Our main theoretical reference was the work of T. H. Marshall¹ and his theory of Citizenship. The main thesis of this is that citizenship in Western industrialized countries could be divided into three forms:

- i. Civil Citizenship, which is represented in equality before the law, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and other personal liberties;
- ii. Political Citizenship, typified by universal and equal suffrage
- iii. Social Citizenship, including the right to education, health care, and other conditions for social welfare.²

Civil and political citizenship are fairly self-evident but social citizenship requires clarification. Social citizenship concerns the extent to which the members of any socially constructed category have sufficient conditions and capabilities to be considered as full citizens, not only with regard to legal status but also their experiences in relation to those of other citizens and as seen by those other citizens. For example, equal pay and employment legislation needs to be reflected in people's daily experiences and to be accepted by all as natural and proper for social citizenship to be a reality.

We know from research in both countries, and elsewhere, that gender, class and ethnicity have determining influences on students' conditions and results in school to varying degrees. We also know that they have a significant impact on youngsters' future prospects as citizens and that the impact is inconsistent, depending on the combination of those variables. For example, a middle-class female student of Asian origin in England might not share her experiences and conditions of schooling and of life more generally with an English middle class girl of European origin, nor with a middle-class Swedish girl of Asian origin.

¹ Marshall, 1950/1991.p14

² Ibid

Summary of findings

Ethnicity

Students in both countries perceived that ethnicity can act as a hindrance to social citizenship, but not an insurmountable one. In Sweden, some of the students interviewed expressed anti-immigrant beliefs: e.g. preferential treatment for migrants, albeit presented anecdotally rather than on the basis of evidence. Respondents in both countries presented ethnicity as a social hierarchy, although students' attitudes to the importance of ethnicity for Citizenship differed between the two countries and within Sweden. All the English students, and those Swedish students studying academic programmes, expressed support for a multicultural society - aware that anti-immigrant views existed but they did not consider them widespread or deeply entrenched.

Gender

Perceptions of women's citizenship experiences are common to both countries, although the English students identified and condemned this irrespective of gender whereas in Sweden it was of greater concern to female students. Women were understood to be legally entitled to the full rights and obligations of citizens but the reality in both countries was that, especially with regard to wages and important positions in society, it is still men who make the most money and hold the greatest power. Students in both countries were confident that gender equality would improve when the generation currently in charge of society has handed over power to the younger generations.

Social Class

Among the English respondents, social class was considered less significant than income and opportunity. Teachers and students in England were largely in agreement, putting less emphasis on the importance of class and ethnicity for citizenship than was the case among the Swedish respondents. The Swedish respondents had a clearer understanding of social class than their English counterparts. In Sweden class was identified as directly related to income and social status of occupation whereas, in England, students were more likely to refer to particular areas and stereotype attitudes and income but avoiding the use of 'class' as a descriptor.

Differences in responses could be related to the students' class backgrounds rather than their national backgrounds, presenting one example of how different social locations can affect students' judgements of their own and others' perceptions and meanings of belonging.

Other general points

Political awareness

All respondents in both countries agreed on the importance of political knowledge in the sense of both understanding the system and knowing how to get involved and influence on politics. English teachers, and the Swedish teachers of pre-university students, had a greater belief in their students' political awareness than was the case among the Swedish teachers on the vocational programme. We are aware that this could reflect the nature of the samples rather than being an absolute truth, as most the students in England had studied Citizenship Education and most of the teachers were subject specialists. This gives rise to there being more opportunities for students and teachers to discuss political issues and to demonstrate their political knowledge.

Language skills

In the Swedish context, the importance of adequate language skills were discussed as a key issue both as an important general question for the integration of immigrants, but also as a tool to be able to participate actively in society.

Most of the students of Swedish as a second language had arrived as adults and so having a sufficient grasp of Swedish to access civil society was of particular importance to them. The teacher on the university preparatory programme emphasised language in a different way, highlighting the need to equip students with sophisticated concepts and language so that they can take participate in scientific, philosophical and political debates and discussions at a higher level.

The issue of language was not raised by the students or teachers in England.

Citizenship Education as a subject

Students and teachers had some similar experienced from Citizenship Education in general, but the differences seemed to be more between the two countries when it came to paying attention to conditions based on class, gender and ethnicity. Students who were studying Citizenship at the Advanced Level in England and those on academic programmes in Sweden placed considerable emphasis on the importance of Citizenship Education for their further studies and adult lives, and did so to a significantly greater extent than was the case for other student groups.

Virtually all respondents were keen to develop and expand Citizenship Education. Within the teacher groups of both countries they believed that the inadequate teaching was caused by the lack of time and other resources, and that many did not feel fully competent for the task. Among the Swedish teachers this uncertainty was especially regarding issues of class, gender and ethnicity, which may be perceived as controversial to discuss in the classroom, whereas the specialists in England had been educated to teach about controversial issues – and did not regard class or gender as controversial.

School provision

The English students and students on the Swedish academic programme thought that their schools challenged stereotypes – particularly in relation to gender and ethnicity. The Swedish students on vocational programmes highlighted the importance of social class more, both regarding their own identity and conditions as well as the conditions of class society in general. As noted above, both the Swedish teachers and students considered social class as a more important aspect for citizens' conditions than what was the case among the English respondents.

The students' experiences in England were that stereotypical notions of ethnicity and gender were challenged in school. In the Swedish context the contents of education were more dependent on the access of time and the teachers' experience in the area. The teachers in both countries mentioned limited time and resources as the main reasons for not being able to develop their teaching as they wished.

Formal v real

When we discussed how equal citizens are before the law, we also got quite similar answers. Most respondents - both students and teachers - felt that formally we are all equal before the law, but in reality, we are treated differently. There are significant similarities in the responses from England and Sweden, as well as a few notable differences. The disparity between legislation and reality is a common perception, that the law might claim to treat all the same, but social reality does not present this as a lived experience.

Finally

During the interviews it became clear that the socially constructed categories of ethnicity, gender, and social class presented a too narrow forum for discussion. Teachers and students in both countries raised other categories which they felt were due consideration; categories we had decided not to include as they might make the interview process too complicated. [Note to selves – do not underestimate research respondents.] Amongst the categories we will need to consider in the next stage of research are sexuality, dis/ability, and region. No doubt we will find others, both through self-reflection and by listening more carefully to our respondents.

To return to our starting point of T.H. Marshall's (1950) classifications of Citizenship – Civil, Political and Social – our findings indicate some degree of consistency within and between the two countries. While in England students appear to want more depth of analysis and more opportunities for social action, the students in Sweden differed more in their experiences according to the programme they studied. There is otherwise agreement that Civil and Political Citizenship appear to be present but that Social Citizenship is haphazard at best.

Reference

Marshall, T.H. (1950) "Citizenship and Social Class" in C Pierson and F.G. Castles, *The Welfare State Reader* Cambridge: Polity, 2006.