The Practice of Equality
A Critical Understanding of Democratic Citizenship Education

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Abstract
This essay proposes a conception of citizenship that highlights its political aspects. Based on the work of Balibar, Rancière, and Biesta, it is argued that democratic citizenship education must include the education of equality. This means that students must have the opportunity to experience not only the membership aspect of citizenship that subjects them to the state but also the democratic aspect of citizenship that positions them as equals to each other and capable of political intervention. The increasing emphasis in state policies on the membership aspect of citizenship must be counterbalanced by an emphasis in education on the democratic aspect of citizenship: the education of equality. The proposed conception of citizenship can be used to evaluate approaches to citizenship education.

Introduction
Citizenship is a contested concept. As Mike Bottery (2003) explains, citizenship involves, fundamentally, the relationship between individuals and a political body, and “at the present time the political body defining the terms and boundaries of citizenship is something called ‘the nation state’” (p. 102). However, the nation state is a historically contingent, and not a necessary or self-evident, form of political organization. “A growing awareness of this artificiality and of its claims to citizen allegiance is increasingly one of its weaknesses” (p. 104). For example, transnational people such as the Kurds, the Roma, and the Saami are members of nations that stretch across multiple states. For transnational people, an allegiance to the nation does not map onto an allegiance to the state in which they happen to live. Some of the indigenous peoples of North, Central, and South America are also transnational in the sense that their nations span the borders of current states such as Canada and the United States or the United
In spite of its contested nature, the concept of citizenship has not disappeared from either political or educational theory. In fact, Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman (1994) observe that, after the concept of citizenship went out of favor in the 1970s, it saw a resurgence in the 1990s. Citizenship scholarship and citizenship education have therefore become important in academic circles and have been explained by a combination of factors such as lower turnout and concerns about civic disengagement, increasing cultural diversity and concerns about social cohesion, and growing awareness of large-scale problems such as climate change that require the cooperation of citizens on a global scale.

In this essay I propose a way of understanding citizenship that places political aspects firmly in the center. For this framing I draw from philosophical work that I describe as post-Marxist: recent work by the French philosophers Etienne Balibar and Jacques Rancière. In particular I am interested in how they understand the concept of citizenship in a specific context (i.e., citizenship as status accorded by the state) and equality (the enactment of citizenship in holding the state to account). From these theoretical perspectives, I draw the conclusion that citizenship—as equality should be the focus of citizenship education today. Finally, I examine two cases of citizenship education curriculum and policy from British Columbia, Canada, to see how they hold up under this theoretical lens.

**Democracy, Institutions, and Disruption**

The work of Rancière affords a particularly critical lens for thinking about questions of democracy and citizenship in education. I appreciate Rancière’s (2002) uncompromising insistence on equality as a premise, an axiom, not a goal.

Equality is not a goal that governments and societies could succeed in reaching. To pose equality as a goal is to hand it over to the pedagogues of progress, who widen endlessly the distance they promise they will abolish. Equality is a presupposition, an initial axiom—or it is nothing (p. 232).

Rancière’s counterintuitive stance on equality is sometimes misunderstood because it is often reduced to a platitude: namely, society would be better if the people in it were more equal and more thoughtful (p. 340).

In this essay I examine the extent to which unequal educational opportunity results in fundamentally unequal access to political power. Indeed, as I argue in this essay, the institutional dimension of democracy is often misunderstood as a refusal or failure to acknowledge the seriousness of social and, especially, material inequality. This is a significant misunderstanding, indeed, as Rancière’s work highlights the scandal between the inequality of social conditions and the equality of consciousness—or, in Rancière’s (1987/1991) terms, the “equality of heart”—that all men and women share.

Todd May (2009) explains that “intelligence” in this Rancièrean sense is quite straightforward:

> We are, unless we are deeply damaged in some way, capable of creating meaningful lives with one another, talking with one another, understanding one another, and reasoning about ourselves and our situations. Our social and political contexts, while sometimes difficult and complex, do not involve essential mysteries that we are in principle incapable of comprehending without the assistance of a savant of some sort. In short, we are capable of formulating and carrying out our lives with one another. (p. 7)

In positing equality as “initial axiom” (Rancière, 2002, p. 231), Rancière inverts the usual order of observing inequality today and aiming for equality tomorrow; instead, he argues, we should presuppose equality between human beings and seek to verify it in our actions. Taking equality as presupposition means we don’t ask how we may help people achieve the equality of consciousness that would allow them to reflect on their situation intelligently. Rather, we ask what new possibilities emerge when people are treated as if they already have equality of consciousness and already reflect intelligently upon their situation (see Ruitenberg, 2008). I will return to these possibilities in greater detail.

I have also been inspired by Rancière’s insistence on the centrality of disagreement in the democratic process, especially because, certainly in Canada, there is a strong desire for agreement and consensus in education, and the dominant approach seems to be deliberative. Deliberative conceptions of citizenship and citizenship education range from those that emphasize the Habermasian ideal speech situation and the promotion of communicative skills and dispositions for rational deliberation, to those that acknowledge the messiness of the democratic process and the need to balance deliberative and more confrontational approaches. Among the latter and, in my view, more productive approaches are Nancy Fraser’s (1995) articulation for the dissenting voice of subaltern counterpublics and Iris Marion Young’s (2003) critical understanding that “individuals and organizations seeking to undermine injustice and promote justice need both to engage in discussion with others to persuade them that there are injustices that ought to be remedied and to protest and engage in direct action.”

In this essay I combine the views of Rancière with those of Mouffe so that we can see democracy as both a problem to be overcome in democracy but rather a constitutive feature of it (see Ruitenberg, 2009). However, I am concerned with Rancière’s dismissal of the institutions that organize society as places where democracy and politics by definition do not occur. Rancière (1995/1999) considers the social order and its institutions “the police” because this order “defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that . . . bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task” (p. 29). He reserves the name “politics” only for activity that disrupts this order, that “shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination” (p. 39). Rancière, then, political activity does not occur within the institutions of any social order, but only in the disruption of those institutions.

Like Chantal Mouffe, Rancière argues that disagreement is not a problem to be overcome in democracy but rather a constitutive feature of it (see Ruitenberg, 2008). However, I am concerned with Rancière’s dismissal of the institutions that organize society as places where democracy and politics by definition do not occur. Rancière (1995/1999) considers the social order and its institutions “the police” because this order “defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that . . . bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task” (p. 29). He reserves the name “politics” only for activity that disrupts this order, that “shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place’s destination” (p. 39). Rancière, then, political activity does not occur within the institutions of any social order, but only in the disruption of those institutions.

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It is clear that, for Rancière, if citizenship is interpreted as the civic spirit of community building, it has little to do with democracy and politics. Rancière believes citizenship should and can be seen in a more functional way, but it is still a part of the problem of the construction of the sovereign state (p. 526).

I agree with Rancière that the moment of the political is the moment of contestation of the exclusions of a social order, but I agree with Mouffe that such contestation can happen both within the institutions and at the borders of that order. Like Balibar, I believe it is a mistake to leave the institutional dimension out of our thinking about democracy, even if we emphasize the inevitably conflictual or agonistic nature of democracy. In this paper, therefore, I focus more on Balibar’s work and Rancière’s argument for the centrality of equality and to arrive at a fuller conception of citizenship to guide the critical evaluation of concrete citizenship curricula and policies today.

Rancière is more interested in democracy and politics than in citizenship. However, as Balibar has argued in a very lucid analysis of the concept of sovereignty, the relationship between the two is not simple. Balibar finds that, in practice, the problem of democracy is “the problem of sovereignty” (p. 114).

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of citizenship and whose analysis helps to understand the opposing
forces of what Rancière calls politics and the public within citizenship
itself.

Citizenship as a Diadectic

Balibar (1988) traces the idea of citizenship historically and identifies
two central aspects that remain in citizenship today:

- “Citizenship” is essential to the existence of a state and therefore to
  state sovereignty, and it is bound to the acknowledged exercise of
  an individual “capacity” to participate in political decisions. (p. 723)

The first aspect of citizenship Balibar identifies here, that of its
relation to the state, is what else elsewhere calls the “statutory” or legal
aspect by which those who have the status of citizen in a particular state
are distinguished from those who do not have this status:

By definition, citizenship can only exist where we understand a notion
of city to exist—where fellow citizens and foreigners are clearly
distinguished in terms of rights and obligations in a given space. . .
In this respect, the modern nation is still, and must still consider itself,
a city. (Balibar, 1996, p. 358)

The very concept of citizenship involves both a bounded space and
the exclusion of those who are noncitizens from agreements and
rights and responsibilities in that space. This first or statutory
aspect of citizenship introduces inequality as it places citizens
and noncitizens living in a hierarchical relation to the state that
will or will not grant them citizenship. This is the
membership aspect of citizenship that outlines one’s rights and
responsibilities in a contract with the state of which and to which
one is subject. Today, the state is already the closest to
nation-state, this citizenship understood as nationality.

The second aspect of citizenship Balibar (1988) identifies is the
capacity of the individual to participate in public decisions.
Elsewhere he describes this as the aspect of self-determination,
the expression of a collective political capacity to constitute the state
or the public space” (Balibar, 1996, p. 356). In other words, where the
statutory aspect of citizenship shows how the citizen is subject to the
state, this constitutive aspect of citizenship shows how the state
is subject to the citizen. “It is this notion,” explains Balibar (1996),
“to provide the logical introduction to the idea of citizen, according to Balibar,
these two aspects are both undeniable present in contemporary
citizenship: the hierarchical or statutory aspect and the egalitarian
or constitutive aspect are poles in a permanent dialectic. In a
more recent article, Balibar (2010a) uses the concept of antinomie,
a contradiction of laws or principles, to argue that “citizenship’s problem, in its various historical figures, with all their
enormous differences, lies in its antinomic relationship to democracy” and
that, for him, we are in need of a kind of citizenship education that forms
the essential driving force of historical transformations” (pp. 1–3).

Put differently, it is precisely because citizenship involves both
subsumption to the state and constitution of the state, and because
these statutory and egalitarian aspects are inherently in tension,
that change is possible.

Balibar observes that, today, especially under the influence of
European anxieties about migration, increasing weight is being placed
on the statutory aspects of citizenship. Achieving legal
status in the European Union has been made so difficult that
scholars and media commentators now speak of Fortress Europe
(Segredes, 2000). This reinforcement of the statutory aspect calls
for a reconsideration of the egalitarian aspect: “By a symmetry
inscribed throughout the history of the concept of the citizen,
the emphasis on the statutory and hierarchical aspect of citizenship
allows us to reformulate the question in reference to its egalitarian aspect”
(Balibar, 1996, p. 367). In other words, if the state occupies
itself more with the delimitation of citizenship in the sense of
membership and obligation, citizens should occupy themselves
more with their constitutive powers, their capacity to decide the
borders of the demos and to hold the state to account. Biesta (2010b)
puts it as follows:

The Need for an Education of Equality Today

Whether one believes, as does Rancière, that equality is inherently
primary and central in democracy and politics, or whether one
believes that a greater emphasis on the egalitarian aspect of
citizenship is needed today to restore a critical balance with the
megalomania that characterizes citizenship education forms
a similar: it must emphasize equality. I mentioned earlier that, for
Rancière, equality is not a goal but a presupposition. Let me explain
in greater detail what he means by that, and how it affects citizenship
and citizenship education. For Rancière, equality is a funda-
mentalfactor to a principle of public
interpersonal relations, it is not, and cannot be, a quality of society: “the
community of equals can never achieve substantial form as a social
institution . . . Equality may be the law of the community, but
society inevitably remains in thrall to inequality” (Rancière, 1992/1995, p. 84).

Based on this, equality should be understood because it creates order by assigning people a place and rank. This
inequality, however, can never annihilate the equality that already
exists between people and is constantly reasserted: the equality of
intelligences, of “a community of speaking beings” who, together,
involve invent discourse simply by wishing to speak and wishing to hear
(pp. 82, 83). That, then, is the fundamental assertion of equality: By
speaking to you, I assume we are equals, me capable of saying
something intelligible, you capable of understanding what I say. Or Vico,
that you can capable of saying something intelligible, me capable of understanding
what you say. As soon as the people speaking and listening do so within a
social order, the inequality of their places and ranks in that
order—whether of kinship, of class, of gender or any other system of
groups and ranks—begins to chafe against this fundamental equality.

The egalitarian aspect of citizenship refers to the idea that
citizenship is not a right one earns based on age, education, or
affiliation, it is given at an unadulterated distance from all merito-
cratic systems of society. As Rancière (2004) puts it: “Democracy is the power of those who have no specific qualification for ruling,
except the fact of having no qualification” (p. 305). This also means that,
to the extent that education is approached meritocratically,
this aspect is in tension with the egalitarian aspect of citizenship
and the idea of citizenship education. Borrowing May’s (2011) descrip-
tion of the immeasurable nature of equality in Rancière’s work, I say
that the egalitarian aspect of citizenship signifies that one cannot
be a “better” or a “worse” citizen, or a citizen in light of particu-
lar meritocratic standard. It is the fundamental equality to speak and to be heard, to be counted. To truly believe in
democracy, then, is to commit oneself to equality, in the full sense of commitment as a faith and an enactment. Biesta (2010b)
affirms that “commitment” is in this regard quite an appropriate term;
as it involves not just what one believes but an emotional
involvement. “The democratic subject, such we might say, is the one
who is driven by a desire for democracy” (p. 96).

Schools, as social institutions, are by definition places of
multiple and constantly changing rules and democratic processes.
For that reason, asserting equality in a school is no easy task (see
Rutenberg, 2008). Insofar as citizenship education is concerned
with equality, the school may not be the best or primary location
for such education. However, since schools remain the greatest
dynamic denominator among children, the possibilities for
democratic citizenship education that exist within them, even if
limited, should not be discounted.

I argue that education needs to be oriented in the idea of education as
preparation. For example, if citizenship is understood narrowly as
focused on voting, and youth in elementary and secondary schools
do not yet have the right to vote, then citizenship education can be
seen as preparation for the future identity of citizen. Biesta (2010b)
puts it as follows:

If . . . the ‘essence of democracy’ can . . . be expressed as a particular,
well-defined singular order, then citizenship can be understood as a
positive identity—that is, an identity that can be fully expressed and
defined—and thus civic learning can be fully understood in terms of
the acquisition of this identity by individuals. (p. 87)

From the preceding argument, it should be clear that neither Biesta
nor I believe that education should be understood as an identity
expression, defined, or that citizenship education should be
understood as the acquisition of that identity. In order to distin-
guish citizenship education as preparation for a well-defined
identity of citizen from citizenship education as fostering commit-
ment to democracy, Biesta (2010b) introduced the helpful concept of
(potential) subjectification, which he distinguishes from the
socialization conception of civic learning. The latter
would see the aims of civic learning first and foremost in terms of
the reproduction of an existing socio-political order and thus of
the adaptation of individuals to this order, while [the subjectification
conception of civic learning] would focus on the emergence of political
agency and thus see the aims of civic learning first and foremost in
terms of the promotion of political subjectivity and agency. (pp. 86–87)

I have argued that citizenship education today must emphasize the
egalitarian aspect of citizenship, and this egalitarian aspect is best
served by an approach that emphasizes political subjectification,
so that education concerning citizenship will take center stage in the
framework with which we evaluate citizenship curriculum and
policy. How do we know whether a curriculum or policy gives
to room to political subjectification? Two key features emerge.
The first is the extent to which the curriculum or policy emphasizes the
egalitarian or constitutive aspect of citizenship, that is, to what extent
which it acknowledges and addresses citizenship as the democratic,
political role of holding the state to account. The second is
the extent to which the curriculum positions citizenship as something
that can be enacted rather than something for which the
student is being prepared. These two features need to be seen
in conjunction with each other: if a curriculum or policy presents
citizenship as consisting in civic qualities such as helping one’s
neighbor, then the absence of the aspect of citizenship as constitu-
tive or constitutive role of the citizen will not become apparent
and how now does not become political and enforces only the
submissive, statutory aspect of citizenship. And if a curriculum or policy

presents citizenship as consisting in democratic participation and contestation but offers this idea of citizenship only as information about historical events or as relevant to the student’s future as examples and Orlowski’s experience more generally suggest that the course can create opportunities for students to become not just informed decision makers empowered in civic action. The Civic Studies 11 takes a clearly deliberative perspective on civic action. I am one such teacher” (p. 113). Orlowski made enthusiastic use of these possibilities and connected the prescribed curriculum to current political events and developments in British Columbia, Canada, and abroad. For example, he found that “the PLO on political ideologies gave [him] state-sanctioned permission to teach about different versions of the good life, equality or ‘democracy’ that are needed for democratic citizenship education. The emphasis of the BC Social Responsibility framework on reducing conflict and working together in one’s community is not unique in citizenship education. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) noted that in a large number of mentoring in many citizenship education programs and take a clear stand against this lack. “Personal responsibility, voluntarism, and character education must be considered in a broader social context or they risk advancing civility or docility instead of democracy” (p. 244). Simultaneously, personal responsibility as a desirable social and political act. The egalitarian, constitutive aspect of citizenship that I have called the “justice-oriented” (p. 242) conception of citizenship, is more of it” (p. 24). Socialized responsibility as a political and social ethic is entirely lacking in neighborliness, and it runs the danger that the political dimensions of citizenship, including an awareness of the limitations of personal responsibility for effective political action and change, remain invisible and become unattainable for children and young people. The Social Responsibility framework emphasizes community membership in much the same way the UK Big Society initiative does. It encourages youth to be respectful and active members of their neighborhoods and communities, but it remains limited to what it means to “become a responsible” and “participatory” (p. 242) conceptions of citizenship. The egalitarian, constitutive aspect of citizenship that I have emphasized, and that fits in what Westheimer and Kahne have called the “justice-oriented” (p. 242) conception of citizenship, is significantly different from the neighborhoodly encouraged by Social Responsibility as well as the context and the way it orders society is entirely lacking in neighborliness, and it is not essential or promoted in the types of social (rather than political) participation that these approaches advance.

Conclusion

I have argued that citizenship should be understood not only in its statutory sense but also—and, in today’s world, especially—in its sense of the equal capacity of everybody to voice and enact citizenship. In other words, I have argued for the strengthening of the political and democratic aspect of citizenship in citizenship education.

There are elements of citizenship education in elementary and secondary schooling that are legitimately about civic socialization. That is to say, they are concerned with citizenship in its statutory aspect. These elements are what school curriculum in Canada has in common with the prep guidelines for those who wish to become legal citizens of a particular country. For example, Citizenship and Immigration Canada (2014) advises those who wish to apply for Canadian citizenship that as part of the citizenship test, they will be asked questions on subjects such as:

- the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of Canadian citizens,
- Canada’s democracy and ways to take part in Canadian society,
- Canadian political and military history (including the political system, monarchy and branches of government),
- Canadian social and cultural history and symbols, and
- Canadian physical and political geography.

This is not dissimilar from the Informed Citizenship category of the curriculum for Civic Studies 11, which advises teachers:

“It is expected that students will demonstrate a knowledge of historical and contemporary factors that help define Canadian civic identity. . . . These factors include . . . identifying historical roots of the Canadian political and legal systems; describe the division of powers in Canada among federal, provincial, territorial, First Nations, and municipal governments; describe Canada’s electoral systems and processes. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2005, pp. 22–23)”
and education (p. 16). Such a self-reflective citizenship should be part of the education of young people. Los Angeles high school youth critically questioned politicians, "democratic iterations" (pp. 180–181). Balibar (1996), likewise, insists that there is a difference and "tension between the idea of citizenship and its democratic aspect seriously, they put it in the language of Balibar: for education to take democratic citizenship in its democratic aspect seriously, they must ensure that the curricular elements of civic socialization do not overshadow the opportunities for civic subjectification. Or, to put it in the language of Balibar: for education to take democratic citizenship seriously in its global context today, it must place considerable greater emphasis on the egalitarian aspect of citizenship than it has traditionally done. This egalitarian aspect cannot be taught in the relative tidiness of the classroom but must include opportunities for students to enact and practice their equal capacity as speaking beings outside of the classroom—in the larger school community but also in social movements and in the media. The work of the Council of Youth Research, in which Los Angeles high school youth critically questioned politicians, school superintendents, and policymakers, is a good example of this. While the egalitarian aspect of citizenship is important—and currently arguably the most important—it is not the only aspect of citizenship. The statutory aspect of citizenship reminds us of the conditions of young people's citizenship as status or identity and citizenship as practice. Audrey Osler (2005) further shows that in order to have a democratic and participatory citizenship, education in and outside of the classroom needs to be change-oriented.

## References


