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 States and Mexico. Clauda W. Ruitenben is an associate professor in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her research interests include political education, ethics of hospitality, philosophical research approaches, and philosophy of medical education. She is editor of the Philosophy of Education Yearbook (2012) and the collection What Do Philosophers of Education Do? (And How Do They Do It?) (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) and coeditor with D.C. Phillips of Education, Culture and Epistemological Diversity: Mapping a Disputed Terrain (Springer, 2012).

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In his essay On the Aesthetic Education of the Citizen (Rancière, 2002), 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 Rutenberg, 2009). I will return to these points in the next section. 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 to educate 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 (1990) appreciation for the dissenting force 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.”

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

**Citizenship as a Dialectic between Inequality and Equality**

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

- "Citizenship… has always marked two distinctions: it is bound to the existence of a state and therefore to public 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 tie 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 can be 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 of 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 attaches oneself (Balibar, 1996). Today, since the state is always the same, 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-constitution: "the expression of a collective political capacity to constitute the state or the public space" (Balibar, 1996, p. 364). 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), that "defines the statutory aspect of citizenship as a relation of subordination to the state and the constitutional aspect as a relation of autonomy to the state" (p. 367). This reinforced the statutory aspect 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 (2016) states:

*Citizenship is not so much a status, something which can be achieved and maintained, but… it should primarily be understood as something that people continually do: citizenship as practice.*

By definition, citizenship cannot be "have," but first and foremost a practice of identification. (p. 13)

Based on Balibar’s analysis, I would modify Biesta’s argument slightly: While citizenship is both a status and a practice, the emphasis that nation-states and supranational governments currently place on the statutory aspect demands a greater focus on citizenship as a practice of identification with public issues that are of a common concern. (p. 38)

**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 menacing democratic deficit that characterizes citizenship forms the essential driving force of historical transformations" (pp. 1–3).

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

Rancière 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 (see Geddes, 2000). This reinforces the statutory aspect for which change is possible 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 intellect, of speaking being, of sharing, of being bound by the same invest in discourse simply by having the power to speak and wish to have (p. 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 vice versa, you are, me capable of telling me something sensible, 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 kingdom, of class, of gender or any other system of place and rank—begins to fade 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 effort, it is the status of one who has an unbreakable link from all meritorious 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 meritoriously, there is a relation between the egalitarian aspect of citizenship and the idea of citizenship education. Borrowing May’s (2011) description of the immensurability of nation of 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 a particular, not prior, standard. It is the function of a democracy 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 (2016) affirms that “commitment” is in this regard quite an appropriate term, as it involves not just the desire to express oneself, but an emotional involvement. “The democratic subject, we might say, is the one who is driven by a desire for democracy” (p. 98).

Schools, as social institutions, are by definition places of unequal power in the sense of the grade levels of ranks and places of power. For that reason, asserting equality in a school is no easy task (see Ruitenberg, 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 common denominator among children, the possibilities for democratic citizenship education that exist within them, even if limited, should not be discounted. 

**The need for an education of equality**

From the preceding argument, it should be clear that neither Biesta nor I hold that the idea of citizenship that can be fully expressed and defined, or that citizenship education should be understood as the acquisition of that identity. In order to distinguish citizenship education as preparation for a well-defined identity of citizen from citizenship education as fostering commitment to citizenship, Biesta (2016) introduces what he suggests as a helpful concept of political 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 sees 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 this approach accentuates the need to change the current state of affairs in which it acknowledges and addresses citizenship as the democratic political role of holding the state to account. Second, the extent to which the curriculum or policy seems to emphasize the egalitarian or constitutive role of citizens, that is, the extent to which it reiterates and reenforces the idea of education as fostering commitment to citizenship and not just the reproduction of an existing socio-political order and thus of the adaptation of individuals to that order, while [the subjectification conception of civic learning] would focus on the emergence of political agency and thus sees the aims of civic learning first and foremost in terms of the promotion of political subjectivity and agency. (pp. 86–87)

Schools are often deeply invested 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 (2016) 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)
presents citizenship as consisting in democratic participation and contestation but offers this idea of citizenship only as information and with others on civic matters—local to global—for the purpose of reducing problems among students and in the school more generally: “Several of the prescribed learning outcomes in the course IRP create the possibilities for counter-hegemonic discourses to take root—provided the teacher holds the belief that teaching is a political act. I am one such teacher” (p. 212). Orłowski 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 society as well as current social and economic issues, in municipal, provincial, national, and international contexts” (p. 152).

His experience teaching Civic Studies 11 was clearly positive, and he provides several examples of the ways in which his students fulfilled not only the requirements of the “socially relevant” project but also the more ambitious goals of improving human rights and exercising democratic rights. In spite of the claim that “this framework focuses attention on the participatory view of citizenship that is valued in Canadian policy and curriculum documents” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 3), the democratic potential of the document is one that emphasizes the responsibility as a desirable quality of individual students, which will reduce problems among students and in the school more generally: “Currently the standards are being implemented in schools throughout the province. The standards are designed to improve school and school climate, dealing with school issues (e.g., fighting, vandalism), enhancing subject-specific learning activities or units (e.g., study of the hedonists), giving direction to leadership, service and social justice clubs, assessing the progress of individual students. (p. 3) There is nothing in this list that suggests a political or democratic priority in the sense of students’ equality and their capacity to monitor the state. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the document identifies that its “standards for social responsibility … carry skills of civic discourse and dispute resolution, including consensus building, negotiation, compromise, and majority rule” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2001, p. 3). The concern this deliberative angle raises is that it emphasizes the egalitarian, constitutive aspect of citizenship, which positions the citizen not as rational, deliberative contributor to the state but as a critical assessor of the state and potentially in disagreement with it. Indeed, they are not exercising deliberative Rancière rights and responsibilities (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 4). The curriculum framework seems to be of two minds about citizenship: the first two sets of expectations suggest a social and personal orientation, the latter two use the firm political language of “defending human rights” and “exercising democratic rights.” In spite of the fact that “this framework focuses attention on the participatory view of citizenship that is valued in Canadian policy and curriculum documents” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 3), the democratic potential of the document is one that emphasizes the responsibility as a desirable quality of individual students, which will reduce problems among students and in the school more generally: “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 the standards 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). Simons, however, identifies that “one of the great challenges of civic education” (p. 9) is the need to connect the classroom to the world: “It is expected that students will demonstrate a knowledge of historical and contemporary factors that help define Canadian civic identity. . . . Students will identify 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, 2010, pp. 22-23).
The reason I say it is legitimate to include such elements of civic socialization in the curriculum is that several studies suggest that there is a connection between political knowledge and political engagement. William Galston (2001) summarizes the research as follows: "The more knowledge citizens have of civic affairs, the less likely they are to experience a generalized mistrust of, or alienation from, public life" and "the more likely they are to participate in public matters" (p. 224; see also Torney-Purta, 2002). Biesta (2010b) acknowledges that "young people themselves have indicated a lack of knowledge and understanding in this area" and that this is good reason not to dismiss entirely some of the more traditional approaches to citizenship education (p. 6). However—this is a big however—if educators, curriculum designers, and educational policymakers wish to take democratic citizenship to 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 consider the democratic potential of citizenship beyond that which 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 and 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 (Murra, Morrell, Cain, Scorsa, & Ford, 2013).

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 fact that citizens are also subject to the state. The conditions of that subjection, especially the borders that separate those who can consider themselves a part of the state from those who cannot, are that subjection, especially the borders that separate those who can and cannot participate in the daily process of resistances and vindications of basic rights on the part of the foreigners, which make them members of an active community of citizens, even before they are generally recognized formal citizenship” (Baltzar, 2010, p. 320). And it would afford students opportunities to publicly voice their views about, or participate in, such resistances and vindications.

References

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Baltzar, E. (2009). Egalitarian democracy and the citizenship test. In British Columbia Ministry of Education (Ed.), 2013, So, if we are looking at the Civic Studies 11 curriculum, we should keep in mind that the course descents (yet) reach a decision number or percentage of the BC students.


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Biography


Notes

1. I am indebted to Marya Plant for educating me about this issue.

2. Both Baltzar and Rancière were students of Louis Althusser at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and contributed the book Reading Capital (Le Capital) with him, but only Balibar is mentioned as coauthor in the English translation of the book available today. So, there are certainly differences in the relation their authors have to the work of Althusser (and to Marxism more generally), but in this paper, I am not concerned with the extent to which their work is faithful to Marxism or not.

3. Adamfight (1996) and others have earlier made this distinction between citizenship as status and identity and citizenship as practice. Audrey Osler (2013) further elaborates on this distinction in a framework of citizenship as agency.

4. I am indebted to Karen Backmore on this point.

5. In 2013/14 only 62% of BC students who wrote an exam in one of the courses did so in Civic Studies 2. The vast majority (47,566) did the exam in Social Studies 9 in BC Ministry of Education, 2013. So, if we are looking at the Civic Studies 2 curriculum, we should keep in mind that the course descents (yet) reach a decision number or percentage of the BC students.

6. Biesta (2010b) argues that "questions about the definition of citizenship" and "a critical examination of the conditions of young people’s citizenship" should be part of citizenship education (p. 16). Such a self-reflective citizenship education, a citizenship education that considers its own conditions and boundaries, would include, for example, discussion about which members of society do not have rights as members of the polity. It would discuss how people can enact citizenship as equality even if they have not achieved citizenship as status. It would educate students about “the daily process of resistances and vindications of basic rights on the part of the foreigners, which make them members of an active community of citizens, even before they are generally recognized formal citizenship.” (Baltzar, 2010, p. 320). And it would afford students opportunities to publicly voice their views about, or participate in, such resistances and vindications.


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