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Exploring the Implications of Citizenship-as-Equality in Critical Citizenship Education

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Abstract

This is a response to Ruitenberg's (2015) argument that citizenship-as-equality should be the focus of citizenship education. My aim in the response is to offer clarifying comments and questions and suggest further ideas for expanding her analysis, highlighting in particular two perspectives that deserve more attention: first, the role of emotions in the constitution of political subjectification and the practice of equality; second, the possible openings that might be created when the notion of citizenship-as-equality is utilized as a point of departure to instill more criticality in students' understandings of and feelings about citizenship.

This article is a response to:

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RUITENBERG (2015) HAS written a compelling article in which she argues that citizenship-as-equality should be the focus of citizenship education. Ruitenberg grounds her analysis of the meaning and role of *equality* in citizenship and politics in the work of Balibar (1988, 1996, 2008, 2010a, 2010b) and Rancière (1991/1987, 1995/1992, 1999/1995, 2002, 2004, 2006) as well as in Biesta's (2011a, 2011b) discussions on the implications of Rancière's ideas in the context of education. Rancière has maintained that equality is a premise rather than a goal in thinking about democracy and citizenship; as he has suggested, there is already "equality of intelligence" among human beings, because we are capable of creating meaningful lives with one another. Therefore, equality is not something to aim for, but rather it constitutes the point of departure for reflecting on ourselves and our situations. Taking equality as presupposition, suggests Ruitenberg, does not imply that we fail to recognize or struggle against the inequality of social conditions; rather, the emphasis shifts from what we can do to help people achieve the equality of consciousness they already have

to the new possibilities that emerge when people are treated as if they have equality of consciousness. Ruitenberg uses these theoretical positions to instill back in citizenship education its lost criticality and politics; she argues that if we are to move away from citizenship education as preparation for a well-defined identity of citizen attached to nation-state and move to a conception that fosters commitment to equality, we need curricula and policies that give room to political subjectification and engage students in the enactment of this political role.

I concur with Ruitenberg's (2015) argument, and I find her analysis of citizenship-as-equality as well as the idea of

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practice-of-equality in the context of citizenship education extremely insightful. My aim in this response is to offer clarifying comments and questions and suggest further ideas for expanding her analysis, highlighting in particular two perspectives that, in my view, deserve more attention: first, the role of emotions in the constitution of political subjectification and the practice of equality; and, second, the possible openings that might be created when the notion of citizenship-as-equality is utilized as a point of departure to instill more criticality in students' understandings of and feelings about citizenship.

Ruitenbergh (2015) begins her article by acknowledging that *citizenship* is a contested concept. Indeed, as it is documented in the vast literature on this topic, *citizenship* refers to a number of things such as membership to a nation-state, identity, community, rights and responsibilities, and shared values or morals (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). In his classic work on the different elements of citizenship and its progression over time, Marshall (1964) traced how the conception of citizenship expanded in the last two centuries to include civic, political, and social aspects; Marshall's analysis showed the complexities not only of this expansion of the conception of citizenship but also the fierce debates in scholarly and other attempts to define citizenship and its boundaries. These complexities and debates are particularly evident in recent social and political developments as a result of worldwide immigration and transnational movements; at the same time, however, it is recognized that the idea of citizenship as membership to a nation-state has not lost its currency (Banks, 2008; Pinson, Arnot, & Candappa, 2010). Ruitenbergh rightly points out that citizenship education's emphasis on the personal and the social (e.g., the notion of "good citizenship" as smooth community relations among people) is highly problematic, because the political aspects of citizenship are ignored. That is, in an effort to push personal and social understandings of citizenship to respond to the new challenges of multicultural societies, something important is lost in the process. What is needed, therefore, according to Ruitenbergh, is an understanding as well as a practice of citizenship that places its political aspects in the center. To accomplish this, Ruitenbergh turns to the work of Balibar and Rancière and uses their ideas to restore the lost centrality of the political in debates about citizenship.¹

In particular, Ruitenbergh (2015) highlights that Rancière and Balibar make a significant contribution "because they emphasize not just the importance of disagreement but, more particularly, disagreement about and in the name of citizen's *equality*" (p. 3, original emphasis). Ruitenbergh's concern with the importance of disagreement emphasizes the political aspects of disruption that comes with/from disagreement. Unlike Rancière—and like Balibar and Biesta—Ruitenbergh insists on democracy and politics as taking place within institutions of any social order, not only in moments of disruption. Ruitenbergh's move to consider the institutional dimension in her discussion of disagreement is important, because schooling is a typical institution around the world; therefore, the implications of theorizing disagreement are particularly relevant for education. If disagreement is valorized, it is because it constitutes an important political tool of contestation

and disruption of what is taken for granted in institutions like schooling. Ruitenbergh's turn to Balibar instead of Rancière at this point makes sense, because Balibar's understanding of disagreement within institutions of any social order provides a wider political theorization of disagreement and disruption.

More particularly, Ruitenbergh (2015) uses Balibar's distinction of the historical idea of citizenship into two central aspects: one that is tied to the state and introduces inequality as it distinguishes between citizens and noncitizens (statutory or legal aspect) and one that refers to the capacity of individuals to participate in public decisions and introduces equality as it emphasizes the capacity of citizens to create and change the borders of the community to which they belong (egalitarian or constitutive aspect). Unlike the focus of many contemporary nation-states in the former aspect of citizenship, Balibar and therefore Ruitenbergh are more interested in the latter, because their concern is how the egalitarian aspect is constituted and cultivated within a community. Although Ruitenbergh, after Balibar, acknowledges that there is an inherent tension between these two aspects of citizenship, a clarifying point or question arises: How can citizens reclaim their constitutive powers, when contemporary nation-states still exercise their immense power to delimit citizenship in statutory terms? Ruitenbergh's suggestion that the current emphasis on statutory aspects of citizenship demands greater focus on citizenship as a practice of identification with public issues that are of a common concern is not a response to above question. Rather, this suggestion seems to ignore a powerful driving force that navigates citizenship-as-practice toward directions that may in fact reinforce citizenship in statutory terms: how citizens (are systematically taught to) *feel* about their attachment to a nation-state and their belonging more generally.² Ruitenbergh acknowledges in passing Biesta's point that commitment to equality as citizenship is not just a rational understanding but an emotional involvement, yet the issue is not further developed. But why is this point so important, especially in citizenship education?

Notions of citizenship as loyalty and attachment to the nation or citizenship as compassion for the Other are citizenship practices that entail important affective elements (Fortier, 2008). The concept of *affective citizenship* is used in recent years to mark the emotions that citizens are encouraged to feel about their membership or belonging to a community such as the nation-state (Jones, 2005). Regardless of how citizenship is defined—for example, either in statutory or in egalitarian terms—citizenship constitutes an affective practice highlighting which emotional relationships between citizens are recognized and endorsed or rejected, and how citizens are encouraged to feel about themselves and others (Johnson, 2010). The egalitarian aspect of citizenship, for example, entails certain emotional injunctions such as "embracing the Other" (p. 77) as equal. In light of arguments that these emotional injunctions imply ambivalent rather than monolithic notions about the (affective) citizen being promoted in schools, all assumptions that inform discourses of citizenship education in contemporary multicultural societies need to be critically interrogated for their underlying emotional implications and the ambivalent obligations they may create (Zembylas, 2014).

Studies on the cultural politics of emotion in the last decade suggest that notions of citizenship and identity have a deeply affective basis (Ahmed, 2004; Fortier, 2008; Westen, 2007).³ The affective basis of citizenship is achieved through what Fortier (2010) called “governing through affect” (p. 17), that is, the prescription of one’s feelings for the community to which he or she belongs and for those who are deemed similar or different. At first glance, this definition might seem to apply only to the statutory aspect of citizenship; however, as Fortier explained, governing through affect has two important components that make it relevant not only to the statutory aspect of citizenship but also to its egalitarian sense. First, governing through affect determines how individuals are affectively governed by others (e.g., the state, fellow citizens, social and political organizations). For example, the struggle of citizens to change the borders of the community and make it more inclusive, as part of the egalitarian sense of citizenship, is not affectively neutral or utterly noble; this struggle and the strategies it entails operate on a biopolitical mode of power that is deeply affective (Fortier, 2010). Engaging students in citizenship as practice, then, as Ruitenberg (2015) suggests, has important affective and political consequences that need to be examined.

The second component of governing through affect is that it indicates how affective subjects learn to govern themselves by expressing “appropriate” feelings and especially those of “good citizenship.” For example, what would be the affective and political consequences, if students learned to express intense disagreement and even anger against inequalities in their communities?⁴ What would be strategically the most empathetic ways of showing solidarity to the Other in a community in which there are strong feelings against the Muslim neighbor, the suicide bomber, minorities, and so on? It is important to remember that any sense of citizenship can work as governing through affect, that is, as a way of policing the emotional constitution of a community, even if the efforts are toward expanding the boundaries of this community. The danger here is replacing one “tyranny” with another and using that to instill new “noble” feelings that are (supposedly) more inclusive.

I want to argue, therefore, that a critical understanding of democratic citizenship education might be contrived, if it ignores important elements of affective citizenship (see also, Hung, 2010). For this reason, I want to expand Ruitenberg’s (2015) analysis here by arguing more explicitly that critical or transformative citizenship education (Banks, 2004, 2007, 2008; DeJaeghere & Tudball, 2007; Johnson & Morris, 2010) could be enriched in ways that acknowledge the contributions of citizenship as an affective practice too. That is, an enriched version of democratic citizenship with perspectives of affective citizenship could identify more effectively and critically the multiple emotional attachments of students and teachers and their implications in everyday life (Zembylas, 2014). For example, thinking critically about the affective aspects of citizenship may help students engage in examining the ways in which the nation-state uses various mechanisms to establish and police boundaries of belonging in the community or may help them interrogate the consequences of these mechanisms for how citizens engage in the democratic

process, when students from a young age are systematically directed to feel certain emotions (e.g., pride) about the nation-state, while silencing others (e.g., shame).

A broader understanding of democratic citizenship education along the lines of affective aspects of citizenship would imply the acknowledgement that emotions constitute an important part of citizenship education’s emphasis on equality, not the least of which is addressing the questions: What emotional practices are required for the constitution of citizenship-as-equality? How can educators in citizenship education respond to the emotional complexities of cultivating the notion of citizenship-as-equality? In what ways does interrogating the affective aspects of citizenship education help students engage in the practice of citizenship-as-equality?

Responses to these questions could indeed enrich efforts toward a critical understanding of democratic citizenship education that would problematize how emotional attachments and citizenship discourses and practices are entangled in the day-to-day routines of life in a multicultural society. This critical understanding could also lead to a more nuanced analysis of how students’ different emotional histories influence their decision making, their actions, and their understandings of membership, identity, and community (Zembylas, 2009). For example, students bring to school their own emotional histories about the people they are becoming—in relation to crucial social and political factors such as gender, race, class, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and nationality—in their own communities and what implications that has for how they engage in the practice of citizenship-as-equality. It is possible, then, that nation-state citizenship may serve to establish exclusions and disempower individuals and groups (e.g., recent immigrants, refugees, or asylum seekers) who conceive of and feel about citizenship differently. This perspective is particularly relevant given the historical and contemporary engagement of citizens-in-practice (but not in status) in arguing for rights they know they have—having already achieved equality of consciousness. Therefore, an integrated understanding of affective citizenship and democratic citizenship education would provide a more holistic description of the ways in which students’ emotional histories are embedded in wider contexts of sociopolitical forces, needs, and interests. This would further highlight the role of citizenship education as fostering commitment to equality through the notion of *political subjectification*—another important idea that is discussed in Ruitenberg’s (2015) article.

Following Biesta, Ruitenberg (2015) argues that a curriculum or policy needs to provide space to political subjectification; for this purpose, she suggests, there are two key features that need to be fulfilled: the first is the extent to which a curriculum or policy acknowledges and promotes an egalitarian sense of citizenship, and the second is the extent to which a curriculum or policy positions citizenship as something that can be enacted now rather than something that prepares students to enact in the future. Although Ruitenberg recognizes the challenges of determining how these features might indeed be present in a curriculum or policy, she makes an attempt to examine whether two particular cases of

citizenship education curriculum and policy hold up under this theoretical lens. In the first case, Ruitenberg examines a curriculum document for Civic Studies 11 in British Columbia in conjunction with its teaching at a high school. In particular, she refers to the teacher's narration how one of his students became passionate about a public issue and delivered an unsolicited speech about this issue outside the Parliament. Ruitenberg concludes that "the course *can* create opportunities for students to become not just rationally but also passionately involved in political issues" (p. 6, original emphasis). In the second case, Ruitenberg takes up a curriculum framework on social responsibility in British Columbia. In her analysis of this document on the basis of the two features set earlier, Ruitenberg points out that this curriculum framework encourages personal and social aspects of citizenship and fails to cultivate the egalitarian and political aspects of citizenship that she has emphasized.

Needless to say, the choice to examine two specific cases, whether a curriculum or a policy, provides space to political subjectification is a laudable effort by Ruitenberg (2015) to translate her theory into practice. And, indeed, we should look at these two cases merely as examples of this translation effort, because in reality, the analysis of whether a curriculum or a policy provides space to political subjectification is far more complex and multifaceted than the intentions of a written document or its enactment by a single teacher. For example, the determination of the role and meaning of passion in the context of politics is much more complicated than a student's protest outside the Parliament (e.g., Mouffe, 2002). But, to be fair to Ruitenberg, this lack of detailed analysis is somewhat expected, if one takes into consideration the space limitations in a paper of this scope and length. What is perhaps less expected, though, is a relative fading of the practical meanings and implications of the idea of citizenship-as-equality in the classroom. For example, Ruitenberg reiterates in her conclusion that citizenship should be understood in the sense "of the equal capacity of everybody to voice and enact citizenship" (p. 7). But the following questions arise: What new pedagogical and political possibilities can emerge, when students are treated as if they already have this equal capacity? What would these possibilities look like in practice? What is missing—not necessarily from Ruitenberg's analysis—is precisely an effort to create not only the necessary languages of political subjectification but also the necessary practices and actions in the classroom that enact citizenship-as-equality and explore its tensions and possibilities.

The above questions can be initially described in practice as having four distinctive elements along Cogan, Morris, and Print's (2002) definition of *citizenship education* as the formation of the knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions of citizens. Along each dimension of those elements, some suggestions are provided below concerning citizenship teaching and learning in an effort to exemplify some of the practical implications of Ruitenberg's (2015) proposition (for a similar exercise, see Zembylas, 2014):

- *Knowledge*: Construct knowledge and understanding about the meaning of citizenship-as-equality in different social,

cultural, historical, and political contexts (e.g., are there cultural variations in the experience and expression of citizenship-as-equality?). Identify the underlying assumptions and implications (e.g., emotional, political, pedagogical) of the notion of citizenship-as-equality and analyze how these assumptions are different or similar to statutory aspects and may influence citizens' decision making and actions.

- *Skills*: Develop the capacity to expose and critique the entanglements of citizenship perceptions, emotions, and political structures in schools and multicultural societies. Become capable to critically assess political subjectification and its various manifestations.
- *Values*: Trace how one's own and others' values are entangled with the egalitarian aspect of citizenship (compared also with what has been the traditional emphasis so far) and explore the ethical and political grounds for acting on the basis of egalitarian values. Develop a commitment to an ethic that recognizes the emotional ambivalences and complexities that are involved in enacting those values.
- *Dispositions*: Take responsibility for decisions and actions that are grounded in the notion of citizenship-as-equality. Address in practice the consequences of these decisions and actions and examine whether any they disrupt or perpetuate inequalities and injustices in schools and the society.

The above points are used merely as examples of recognizing the potential contribution of the notion of citizenship-as-equality to critical and democratic citizenship education; they are not exemplary in any sense, and certainly they do not exhaust all the possibilities of what sorts of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions are important in the citizenship-as-equality curriculum. As Ruitenberg (2015) suggests toward the end of her article, a critical and self-reflective citizenship education is one that discusses "how people can enact citizenship-as-equality even if they not achieved citizenship-as-status" (p. 8), that is, "a citizenship education that considers its own conditions and boundaries [and] would include, for example, discussion about which members of society do not have rights as members of polity" (p. 8). An enriched framework for critical and democratic citizenship education that takes into consideration the implications of citizenship-as-equality is more likely to acknowledge the complexities (including emotional ones) that frequently remain unnoticed when the political aspects of citizenship are strengthened in citizenship education.

Reconceptualizing critical and democratic citizenship education in terms of the notion of citizenship-as-equality has two important advantages, and Ruitenberg (2014) along with Biesta and other education scholars are to be commended for their contributions toward this direction. First, it restores a sense of critical and democratic citizenship on the basis of the sense that there is equal capacity of everybody to voice and enact citizenship. This form of democratic citizenship education includes as its important component a mode of political critique that understands the different economies of citizenship as well as

their effects on students and teachers' lives (see also, Zembylas, 2014). Students and teachers may bring different emotional histories with them to school, but they have a capacity to voice and enact their citizenship; the important contribution here is the link that is made between the egalitarian aspect of citizenship and the critical interrogation of naive or romanticized views of democratic citizenship.

Second, the notion of citizenship-as-equality in democratic citizenship education creates openings for constructing and sustaining new spaces of political subjectification. Inasmuch as a democratic citizenship education acknowledges how schooling and other institutions perpetuate hegemonic discourses about statutory citizenship, educators and their students need to examine the political spaces that may be constituted to disrupt these hegemonies. Citizenship-as-equality offers some possibilities for transforming educators and students' dispositions; however, we need more empirical explorations of the challenges in efforts to create these new political spaces. The disruption of normative politics around citizenship is certainly not an easy task for educators (Zembylas, 2009). The knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions of hegemonic citizenship education discourses are not easily suspended, as they are deeply rooted in the emotional ideologies of the nation state (Bekerman & Zembylas, 2012). As a theoretical and practical scaffold, a framework for democratic citizenship education that includes the notion of citizenship-as-equality requires the transformation of the very conditions, emotional and otherwise, of the production and reproduction of the hegemonic economies of citizenship in schools and multicultural societies (Zembylas, 2014). Needless to say, this is a monumental task, yet the work by Ruitenberg (2015) and others shows that there is critical hope in the small openings that seem to emerge from disrupting understandings of citizenship with the notion of citizenship-as-equality.

Notes

1. As one of this paper's reviewers correctly pointed out, my claim here does not imply that the problem is one of theory; the problem is one of culture and practice in citizenship education. Therefore, what I am suggesting is that Ruitenberg is right to turn to Balibar and Rancière in that their ideas are valuable points of departure for recentering the political in debates about citizenship and citizenship education.

2. A classic example of the emotions of citizenship is when children learn to sing the national anthem or patriotic songs (e.g., "God Bless America") from a young age, many years before they learn to think critically about their nation-state. I am indebted to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this example.

3. My theorization here is grounded in perspectives on the cultural politics of emotion (e.g., Ahmed, 2004) and critical work on emotion in education (e.g., Boler, 1999), which challenge hegemonic notions of knowledge and rationality and argue that emotions are crucial to how the social and the political are reproduced through power relations.

4. The legitimacy of emotions like anger is discussed here as part of a wide range of civic experiences and responses to events of

the polis. As one of the anonymous reviewers correctly pointed out, learning to govern—control but express—these emotions is indeed important. Therefore, I am not suggesting a notion of ungoverned anger—which can become violent rage. My point is that anger, conflict, and disagreement are all viable parts of our experiences in our roles as citizens.

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