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It changed me it showed me both sides of the story': Young people's conceptions and experiences of citizenship in Northern Ireland

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Introduction

Meanings of 'citizenship', a concept that has informed teaching practices since nation-states first institutionalised schooling, are shaped over time and through cultural struggles (Knight-Abowitz-Harnish, 2006). Commencing in the 1990s there has been renewed research interest with regard to citizenship /citizenship education. Additionally, citizenship education has been at the heart of a major debate and policy review concerning its purpose, location and practice in schools in Britain over the past decade (Kerr, 1999a and b; Crick, 2000; Smith, 2003; Gallagher, 2007).

Although there is this renewed interest there is nonetheless little research which presents the voices of secondary school students themselves and to what extent political, cultural and educational contexts shapes their understanding and experience of citizenship (Osborne, 1994; Lister, 1997; Kerr, 1999a). In fact it is not uncommon for discussions on the conceptualisation of citizen to exclude young people. As a consequence, the research base for citizenship education is sparse and partial, and is stronger in some aspects than others. Furthermore, much of the research has focused on theoretical (Wylie, 2004; Kiwan, 2007; Lister, 2007) and quantitative approaches (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Kerr, 2004, 2005, 2006; Wenshya-Lee, 2007). In addition, there is a dearth of studies examining citizenship in the qualitative sense with young students, especially those located in predominantly white schools exploring diversity and social integration. Therefore this paper will address this empirical and theoretical void highlighted above by providing an evaluation of attitudes and perceptions of a selection of white female and male students in relation to citizenship education.

Context

The conflict in Northern Ireland has tended to produce two overarching majority ethnic identities- being Protestant and Catholic respectively- that are both informed by very different political projects and both racialised and founded upon a sense of 'whiteness'. Nevertheless over the past thirty years it has become increasingly difficult to represent Northern Ireland as a society marked by two religiously defined communities in which everyone has to be seen as Protestant or Catholic without exception. As newer migrants have supplemented the older Jewish and Traveller populations it is fair to say Northern Ireland has become a society with a host of different minority ethnic groups.[i] Therefore Northern Ireland can be seen as an overwhelmingly white population and an interesting case in both the accommodation and conceptualisation of diversity in education. Speaking specifically on the issue of citizenship education policies Silvia Mussano (2004) posits that that the Northern Irish curriculum 'has to reinforce appreciation and respect for the full range of diversity that exists with in society' (ibid: 2004:7). This reinforces the idea by other writers and academics such as Chris Gaine who sets out the arguments for consistently addressing race equality in schools where some may still think the small numbers of black and minority ethnic pupils do not warrant the effort *(*1987; 1995; 2005*)*. Consequently it was considered that the module provided a focal point where issues of identity and belonging are explicitly on the agenda, providing a lens through which racialization processes through the field of education at a formative moment in the lives of young people can be examined.

Methodology

I conducted interviews with key stage 3 and 4 students (aged 11 to 16) in nine secondary schools across Northern Ireland. The students were selected to participate in the research by the schools citizenship coordinators, who were asked to randomly select eight students for the research, in the case of mixed schools 4 boys and 4 girls were chosen.
The study deliberately adopted a qualitative approach; qualitative methods were chosen to enable me to get at the multiple meaning structures involved in young people's understandings of citizenship and their sense of

voice in schools. It was clear that for this kind of study quantitative methods such as a questionnaire would not get at the subjective understandings of the young people or the lived reality that form these understandings (Gordon et al , 2000;O'Donoghue and Punch, 2003).
With this in mind it was decided to adopt a range of qualitative approaches to help young people articulate what they know, feel and think about the issues around citizenship. It was decided from the outset to conduct the research with students in small group otherwise know as friendship pairs, this type of interview consisted of two friends/peers being interviewed together for approximately 30-40 minutes. The method is advised as an appropriate technique for interviewing younger respondents (see Henderson and TNS System Three, 2005). It has been argued that whilst young students have experiences of working in groups in the school classroom, they may be less comfortable with an unfamiliar researcher in a larger group or one-to-one environment. The friendship pairs were intended to facilitate as relaxed an atmosphere for discussion as possible (Morgan *et al*, 2002). All the sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed and analysed *without* using a software package.
The data collected in Northern Ireland was conducted in the month of June 2007 and in December 2007. Nine schools participated in the study from various secondary school types namely grammar, integrated and state; this was deemed necessary as Northern Ireland's education system is deeply segregated along socio-religious lines.[ii]. Additionally, it was intended to include schools of different sizes, rural as well as urban locations, and single-sex as well as co-educational, boarding as well as day schools. The target sample was chosen to include schools from all five Education and Library Boards (councils). Within the given financial and time frame constraints, a sample of 9 schools was regarded as both apt and manageable.
Ethical consent was sought from Queens University's Research Ethics Committee along with all the parties involved. Therefore a multi-level process of consent involving head teachers, parents (on an opt-in basis) and the children under 16 was obtained. Firstly Head Teachers were approached explaining the purpose of the study and asking for permission to gain access to parents and children. Subsequently parents were sent a letter asking them to *opt-into* the study. And finally the young people themselves were asked to sign a written consent form as well if they wished to participate (see Lewis and Lindsay, 2002 on gaining young participants consent). Where excerpts from the transcripts have been used for illustrated purposes in this paper, the student's names are pseudonyms, chosen by them.

Profile of Participants

A total of 69 students were interviewed, 44 female and 25 male. 27 were twelve year-olds, 23 were fourteen year-olds and 19 were thirteen year-olds. In terms of ethnicity 39 did not respond to the question asking them about their ethnicity (students were asked to leave the answer blank if they were not sure of the answer). Seven considered their ethnicity to be Northern Irish, five Christian, three Irish and the rest gave answers ranging from White Irish to unique. In terms of religious background 21 considered themselves Catholic, 12 were Protestant or Protestant/Christian,9 were Christian, 9 left their religion blank, 3 were Roman Catholic and the rest gave answers ranging from ' majority religion' to 'same as loads of my mates'.
This paper is divided into two sections. Section one presents a theoretical framework representing discourses that construct the meanings of citizenship in Northern Irish secondary schools, identifying five distinct but overlapping frameworks that ascribe meaning to citizenship. Section two will go on to explore student's perceptions and experiences of the citizenship module utilising citizenship concepts (rights, belonging, identity, participation and knowledge) developed and employed in political and sociological theory.

Section One: Conceptions of citizenship

Normative models of citizenship did not fully explain the conceptions and understandings of the citizenship students interviewed in this study; this is not surprising as theories of citizenship have traditionally been predicated upon notions of the universal subject. Feminist, race and disability writers and movements have been at the forefront of challenging such conceptions of citizenship, which are often based on the reality of the 'white-male-able-bodied citizen', leaving little space for the recognition of differences. With the increasing recognition that for many, the dominant, universal conceptions of citizenship are, in practice, hollow and meaningless, concern with developing more pluralistic understandings of citizenship, growing from and giving recognition to, differing forms of identity, have gained new prominence in the contemporary literature (Hall et al,1998; Werbner and Yuval Davis, 1999; Parker,2004; Lister, 2007).

In the following section I have categorized conceptions of citizenship into five main categories moving from the most to the least articulated. This categorization is based on the research I conducted which examined the conceptions of citizenship held by secondary school pupils within the Northern Irish education system.

Universal Conceptions

With this model everybody is understood to be a citizen by virtue of membership of the community or nation. A simplistic narrow version of this model reflected a view that 'citizen' means 'person'. This was the usual response

What is a citizen to you? (Researcher)

A person (Mark, Protestant state)

At its most inclusive, everyone is understood to be a citizen

A person of any colour or religion (Joey, Protestant grammar)

A person, any age, any background (Bethany Protestant grammar,)

This perspective is similar to the liberal thinking where citizenship denotes an identity that is universally defined in order to promote formal equality in rights and obligations for all.

Collective conceptions

This model drew on notions of 'belonging' to either the local or national community.

As this young girl from an integrated school stated

A member of Britain, person who lives in the country (Ricky)

Some of the responses felt that to be a citizen was to be part of a community such as this response from a male participant attending a Protestant state school.

Anyone part of a community (Mr. X,)

More male participants subscribed to this model than female respondents. With the majority of students coming from both Catholic and Protestant backgrounds and equally both middle and working class environments.

This is very similar to the communitarian approach to citizenship where citizenship arises from an individual's sense of identity and belonging to a community or group. Communitarians object to the social concept of the self in liberalism as the self is seen as both socially constructed and embedded in a cultural context (Delanty 2002:163).

Legalistic conceptions

This model is embodied by a person who is living here legally and/or has a right to stay through citizenship laws. As a 14-year-old female from a Protestant grammar school said

'They're here legally' (Catherine)

The model underpinned understandings of legal and illegal status and acceptance by the state. A higher number of females ascribed to this model mostly from the Catholic and Protestant grammar sectors.

A person who is allowed to live in a certain country (Batman)

This quote below from a young female attending a Protestant grammar aligned legal status and acceptance as a pre-requisite, interestingly she, also termed a citizen as male.

Someone who lives in the country, and he like, he has been accepted by the country and he is not illegal (Amy)

This model is closely associated with the civic-republican interpretation of citizenship that emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to the state which itself defines the identity of the citizen.

Rights –based conceptions

A genuine opportunity to have equal rights and be able to express those rights is at the heart of this model which emerged from the responses of a small number of participants. As one white male from an integrated school explained

'A person who has equal rights' (Robin)

Most of the responses that formed this model came equally from Catholic and Protestant females and similarly from middle and working class schools. One Catholic female from a grammar school reflected the model in its entirety

'A person should have rights, be allowed to express those rights and be treated equally' (Sophie)

These views are in accord with the liberal approach to citizenship where citizenship is a status entitling each individual to the same formal rights that are enshrined in law. The function of the political realm is to protect and maximize individual interests. The main emphasis lies with equal rights and independent self-interested individuals.

Economic –participatory conceptions
Here, citizenship denotes a constructive stance towards the community. This ranged from the idea of the economically independent citizen associated with waged employment, to the idea of active citizenship helping people and contributing to society. As a 14-year-old female from a grammar school put it
'A person that has to prove themselves with a job and good income' (Rebecca).
Illustrating the idea of active citizenship a 13-year-old Catholic girl from a state school talked about living in the society and contributing as part of a reciprocal relationship with the community and society
'Anybody who lives in our environment and contributes to it' (Erin)
When you say contributes can you just give me a little bit more explanation.
Someone who works and does different things for it (Lisa)
All the answers came exclusively from the female participants involved in the study with the majority coming from Catholic state schools followed by protestant grammar schools.

Summary
The five models were not mutually exclusive in that some young people subscribed to more than one, sometimes drawing on different models simultaneously. There did seem to be contradictions amongst students who maintained a universal notion of citizenship but when probed further that status was contingent on participatory citizenship or legal entitlements due to the status.
This model points to how everyday understandings of citizenship can have both inclusionary and exclusionary implications. Also, the ways in which, individuals frequently drew on models simultaneously to make sense of citizenship and their own identities as citizens suggests that the lived citizenship of young people needs to be understood in fluid terms, cutting across fixed theoretical categories (Lister, 2003).

Section two: Citizenship conversations

As discussed earlier the main citizenship concepts otherwise known as a *framework for citizenship education* provides a means of organising and linking the data and information collected involving the five components of the study, namely rights, belonging, identity political and civic participation and knowledge. The framework for citizenship education presented below provides a way of understanding student's knowledge, skills (social, political and intellectual), their attitudes (respect for cultural and religious diversity, respect for rational argument) and their values (justice, democracy, rule of law) of the module.

Citizenship as Rights
Writers such as Jeremy Roche (1999) have considered the possibility of rethinking citizenship so as to include young people articulating their sense of rights. Roche argues that '*we need to rethink the value of the language of rights and the social significance of this language*' that includes the voices of children (1999:475). By and large the students I interviewed indicated a sense of rights and schools as a site where those rights were realized. A fourteen year-old female for instance stated
We have now got into secondary school and we have started citizenship and I got to know about it and rights and stuff and then I realised that it was very very important because people have the right to do stuff (Beyonce, Catholic state).

Citizenship as Belonging
Belonging is seen as an essential element of citizenship, and conjures up rich associations and meanings, usually linked to a sense of place or feeling part of a larger entity whether formally, nationally or even global forms of community (Henderson, 2007). Students' articulations regarding the notion of belonging were exclusionary in some articulations and not in others, nevertheless the majority of students felt there was no reason to exclude people from being citizens or becoming citizens if there were of a different religion or nationality. For one 13 year-old female to be a citizen meant

A citizen is like someone whose like someone who belongs to a country and the country has like has the, the person has the right to have the country like protect them and like Police and stuff it is their say what the country does(Lucy, Catholic grammar)

Citizenship as Identity

There is no doubt that the importance of identity to citizenship is increasingly being recognised in the citizenship literature (Isin and Wood, 1999; Stevenson 2001, Turner, 1997). An interesting pattern that emerged from the findings was a recurrent message of 'sameness' from the students across all schools and backgrounds. This seemed to indicate that schools were teaching students that although there maybe people who are different to themselves in terms of religion or ethnicity there were all inherently the same. A thirteen year-old girl summed it up

To be aware that everybody is the same so you don't treat anyone different it's like they're a different religion or something (Mary, Catholic grammar)

Citizenship as Political and Civil Participation

To illustrate in detail the nature of students' participatory citizenship in schools it was considered instructive to understand the role school councils played. The data suggests that in many cases there were high levels of involvement in school councils and school council elections. This in part reflects an interest in as well as the opportunity to take part in, and knowledge of the school council system. A 14 year-old defined her school council thus

It's sort of where people from every class elect somebody that they want to represent their class and in the year the person they want to represent the whole year and if they go on the student council and the students put in the new suggestions and stuff in the box and then they read them out and see if they can get the teachers to do anything about it if they're kind of important(Lucy, Catholic grammar)

Citizenship as Political and civic knowledge

When evaluating the effectiveness of citizenship education another dimension needs to be included in the framework namely political and civic knowledge. It is not enough to gauge how efficient the student's political and civic participation roles are as Crick (1998) recommends, there also needs to be a further dimension and that identifies the children's overall citizenship knowledge base that links their understandings to what they themselves see as positive outcomes and learning processes as a result of the module. The overall response I received from the citizenship students was that citizenship classes had enhanced their understanding around numerous topics. Two participants summed it up

We knew like poverty was going on and you know like people were being horrible to other people because of their colour, citizenship like developed it a bit more (Emma, Protestant grammar)

But there is these little things that were talking about that I thought clearer about and then I understood better. (John, Protestant grammar)

Summary

There was a clear indication the citizenship students possessed rights, were entitled to rights themselves and the importance of rights as citizens. Human rights were the type most mentioned particularly by certain school types –namely Catholic schools. For the students, a 'right of voice' came along with their rights and for some, citizenship classes were identified as their source of their rights base. The majority of the students saw no barriers to membership and belonging for people of other faiths or ethnicities as citizens. What was clearly evident though was a sense of enquiry from the students who wanted to know more about the different cultures and faiths they were coming across either in class subjects or outside the school confines. The schools seemed to relate a message of sameness to the citizenship students which was also evident in their universal understandings of citizenship. Political and civic participation seemed very active in some schools and not so active in other schools. This was clearly evident in the evidence the students relayed as positive examples of their school councils. Democratic dialogue was another positive feature of participation within the citizenship classes which was in the most part encouraged. Interestingly other forms of participation was encouraged and acted upon in some schools where it was lacking in other schools such as lobbying political leaders. Overall the students obtained a huge amount of knowledge from their citizenship classes in respects to their rights identities and political participation.

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[i] However the percentages are still small in that minority ethnic groups have increased their percentage of the population from under 1% in the 1982 to 2.5% in the 2001 census.

[ii] The great majority (95%) of pupils in NI attend schools which are religiously divided. Additionally, the system of academic selection at 11 years (11+ tests) results in post-primary schools which are also segregated by academic achievement, i.e. grammar schools and secondary schools. Therefore a purposive quota sample of schools was selected that represented the different sub-sectors within the school landscape in Northern Ireland