

## Chapter 22

# Theorizing Young People's Perceptions of Their Citizenship Identity

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The paradigm of social justice gives voice to those without the resources to deal with responsibilities imposed by a neoliberal agenda. The authors focus on pupils in Sweden and England, countries which have moved from a sense of communality to the growth of neoliberal societal individualism. To clarify real citizenship (rather than formal), they apply the concepts of intersectionality and of human capabilities in place of rights, which means that people adhere to numerous simultaneous collectivities and having the capability to do something requires more than an entitlement to it. While everyone might have the right to an education and to a dignified life, many live in powerlessness and in political, social, and economic exclusion. Sufficient human capabilities are required in order to receive the education necessary for citizenship in its real meaning, and the intersectional approach enables interrogation of factors that coalesce, rather than viewing in them in isolation.*

### **BACKGROUND**

We research and write with conscious commitment to the paradigm of social justice, aspiring to give voice to the powerless and the unheard. It is our contention that citizenship education must be relevant to the lives of learners and to their contexts of multiple communities if it is to have any worthwhile effect. We recognize the potential of citizenship education as an area of study which should enable learners to understand their own situations and their own potential to effect change, and which should enable them to become active participants in the creation of societies which serve the interests of the many rather

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than those of a small and powerful elite. We have come to recognize that the status of ‘citizen’ cannot be understood simply as a legal description or category as it must also relate to people’s daily experiences. It is not enough that the law provides for equal rights, for example, if not all people have equal and unequivocal access to those rights; it is essential that we understand the extent to which “social domination is exercised through the selective inclusion and exclusion of functions and people in different temporal and spatial frames” (Castells, 2010 p465) and the inequalities of life experiences, including the nature of citizenship, which result from that domination.

We have found it both helpful and necessary to differentiate between two forms of citizenship – the *formal*, official version to be found in government documents, legislation, and official pronouncements, and which national and international citizenship education curricula promulgate, and the *real*, everyday experiences of people as they encounter systemic and long established structural limitations on their ability to access the rights and responsibilities enshrined in citizenship in its *formal* condition. These forms overlap in some ways and to a limited extent, but they are fundamentally different. Of particular value to us in this discussion and research has been the concept of intersectionality as proposed by Yuval-Davies (2011) and the capability approach identified by Sen (1999) and by Nussbaum (2000). The background to this chapter stems from a currently ongoing comparative study of Sweden and England (Nielsen and Leighton, 2017) which is summarized below to provide a context for our comments and observations. We consider that our comparative approach can aid the visualization and identification of how similarities and differences between different provisions for citizenship education, as well as differences in young peoples’ conditions, may be explained by a common western context, and what circumstances may be declared as specifically national or local. While we recognize the dangers of generalization from a narrow research base, we would also propose that the insights gathered thus far indicate that young people’s experiences of citizenship are much more complex than is often assumed. Indeed, we are convinced that it may well be even more complex than we identify here.

## **EARLIER STUDY**

We conducted one-to-one interviews with teachers and focus-group interviews with pupils in both Sweden and England, adhering to the same interview schedules and with identical sample sizes. They were asked about their experiences and opinions regarding Citizenship Education and the nature of citizenship, with a particular focus on ethnicity, gender, and social class. We found that the relationship between students’ education and the real conditions for citizenship is complex, exacerbated by the meanings of frequently used terminology and images in the field of Citizenship Education not always aligning with teachers’ and students’ own opinions and perceived meanings. Considerable and ongoing public debate and published research have shown that, in order to understand the *real* meanings of citizenship, it is necessary to understand and interpret *formal* citizenship rights and responsibilities from individuals’ social and cultural conditions as characterized by gender, ethnicity and social class.

### **Social Class**

One of the most interesting results of the study is how the respondents of the two countries answered on the importance of social class. In the Swedish context there was awareness of how the combination of class and ethnicity interact and make circumstances challenging for certain collectivities, while the

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