

Book Review



Rethinking Citizenship Education: A Curriculum for Participatory Democracy
by Tristan McCowan
London: Continuum Studies in Educational Research (2009).

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Review by **Kenneth V. Anthony**

Tristan McCowan states that democracy is the “preeminent form of government” (p 3) in the world at this time, but are citizens prepared for life in a democracy? Do they have the skills, knowledge, abilities, and dispositions necessary to guarantee their effective participation in the democracy? Does the citizenry as a whole participate in a manner that supports the continuance of the democracy? White, van Scotter, Hartoonian and Davis (2007) lamented that “American citizens have endangered the republic by failing to educate new generations of citizens about civic responsibility” (p 228). McCowan explains that the rest of the world has similar problems with civic education. In his introductory discussion of the various tensions involved in citizenship education, he identifies that there is much written about the aims and objectives, but little written about the process. Though the subtitle of the book is *A Curriculum for Participatory Democracy*, McCowan declares that his goal in the book is not to argue in favor of participatory democracy, “but instead to understand the complex process of bringing about this, and other forms of citizenship through education” (p 16).

McCowan accomplishes his task by offering the reader the results of his research into the process of citizenship education. The most significant contributions that he makes are the curricular transposition model used to study how ideas become reality in the classroom and students’ lives (p 90) and the idea of seamless enactment which protects the integrity of ideas as they move through the process of curricular transposition. McCowan effectively argues that citizenship for democracy in schools should be democratic and involve as much as possible the input and participation of students, families, and teachers. The curricular transposition model and seamless enactment are flexible tools for researchers of citizenship education and other areas of the school curriculum.

The strength of McCowan’s book is that he builds a strong theoretical framework from the beginning. He provides insights into citizenship and citizenship education from a variety of perspectives and nations (Asian, European, North and South American, developed, and developing). As indicated above he also discusses various theories of citizenship education. In presenting this theoretical framework, he is careful to present nuanced views of each position. An example is how he handles the discussion of the tension between criticality and conformity in citizenship education. While he advocates a critical approach to citizenship education, McCowan acknowledges the significant criticisms others have made of the position. He continues this approach throughout the book. Rather than making outright declarations that a particular approach will lead to a citizenry that is able and more likely to participate in their own governance, McCowan offers hope, but also realism that there are

many factors that influence the successful transposition of any idea from the mind of individuals creating a curriculum to the hearts, minds, hands, and feet of students.

The book is organised in the manner of a scholarly research article. Part I includes the framing and statement of the problem, the presentation of existing scholarship, and then the identification of a gap in the existing literature. Part II is the presentation of his research and findings including the model or theory of curricular transposition that he uses to conduct his research. Part III is the implications of his research findings.

Though laid out in a similar fashion to a research article, he offers several creative ways to present his ideas. The first is in Part I. Rather than just focus on existing scholarship into citizenship education he offers a comparison of Paulo Freire and Bernard Crick's views of citizenship and citizenship education. Though he acknowledges that his personal view and the book are more in line with Freire's positions, he offers a balanced view of both and acknowledges their contributions to citizenship education. The second creative way that McCowan presents his ideas is through his choice of research subjects and locations. Rather than focusing on citizenship programmes in the United Kingdom or the United States, he offers three case studies of varied programmes in Brazil. Studying the process of citizenship education in settings unfamiliar to many readers offers a fresh, unique way to consider a new approach unencumbered by their own ideas of how citizenship education works.

McCowan effectively lays out his research design providing the necessary elements to evaluate his methods including his criteria for choosing cases, his methods of data collection, and limitations to his study. He explains his use of qualitative methods, indicating that qualitative methods are more effective at studying curricular transposition than quantitative methods. The three cases he presents are from the Landless Movement, the Plural School, and the Voter of the Future programme. Interestingly, the value of the chapter comparing Freire and Crick is highlighted in that two of the programmes (the Landless Movement and the Plural School) are based on Friere's ideas of citizenship education.

McCowan provides detailed descriptions, analysis, and comparisons of each case using the curricular transposition model. He offers balanced conclusions on the implementation and success of each program. He identifies the role of the teacher as one of the biggest blocks to successful implementation or transposition of curricular. A significant finding is that if the teachers do not buy in to or support the ideals of the programme or feel that they had little involvement in their development, they can hinder the educational goals of the programme. His research design should be replicated in other settings to study the process of citizenship education (or any other part of the school curriculum).

McCowan completes his work by introducing the idea of seamless enactment. In seamless enactment, McCowan calls for "a radical rethinking of the relationship between ends and means" (p 183). Interestingly, McCowan's own theory of seamless enactment results in the dissolution of his curricular transposition model, "Taken to its fullest extent, the whole framework of curricular transposition begins to disappear (or perhaps converge on a single point)" (p 185). Here we see one of the most important arguments that McCowan makes. In order to educate for democracy, we must do it democratically. We cannot hope to educate for democracy effectively using non-democratic methods. The means or methods used must match the ends or objectives we seek.

Rethinking Citizenship Education: A Curriculum for Participatory Democracy is a well documented, thoughtful, readable, research based, and balanced study on how to conduct citizenship education. It addresses a large gap in previous work on citizenship education focusing on the process of citizenship education rather than the aims. The only weaknesses found were based on my own philosophical views and most of those were addressed by the

author. One example: when I thought his ideas were a bit utopian, a few pages later, McCowan acknowledged that indeed his ideas might be utopian, but that utopian ideas were necessary in citizenship education. This happened several times throughout the book, indicating that he has indeed created a work that engages and challenges the reader to rethink citizenship education.

References

White, W. E., van Scotter, R., Hartoonian, H. M. and Davis, J. E. (2007) The Problem: Democracy at Risk. *The Social Studies* 98, 6, 228-230.