

## Research Note

# Citizenship Education within an Education Rights Framework: the Cases of Northern Ireland and Israel

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**Abstract:** *It is often suggested that education in ethnically, religiously or socio-politically divided societies can play a role in addressing division (Gallagher, 2004). However, education may also be considered inherently political insofar as it is 'the means and the message by which worldviews are transmitted [and] cultures are reproduced (Randall, Cooper & Hite, 1999, p. 10). Such a value-laden approach when applied to citizenship education is controversial in the divided societies of Northern Ireland and Israel, where conceptions of citizenship vary. Could the purportedly universal nature of international educational rights obligations offer a fresh, unifying perspective and an alternative way of delivering the curriculum? Or does the considerable scope for interpretation left to states lead to these obligations acquiring different meanings among citizenship education stakeholders? The international obligations that education be 'acceptable' and 'adaptable' constitute the conceptual framework for this doctoral research. The study employs a qualitative and comparative research approach through interviews and focus groups with policy-makers, teachers and students of citizenship education in order to explore the influence of these '2 A's' on policy development and pedagogy, and their varying interpretations, to date undocumented. This research note focuses on the relevant background information and conceptual framework of the study.*

## Introduction

Education in ethnically, religiously or socio-politically divided societies may play either a constructive or a destructive role (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000). Education also may be deemed value-laden (Randall, Cooper & Hite, 1999), and such an approach is controversial in citizenship education in contested societies, where conceptions of citizenship vary. In two such jurisdictions, Northern Ireland and Israel, the formal aims of citizenship education include the teaching of diversity, equality, human rights and respect for identity (Partnership Management Board, 2007; Ichilov, 2005). Nevertheless, both societies still experience division, and most young people attend school only with those of the same religion or ethnicity (Osborne, 2004; Tatar, 2004). Given the problematic nature of delivering a single citizenship education curriculum to a diverse group, it is posited that a conceptual framework based on universally agreed, legally binding human rights law on education may offer a unifying, alternative perspective on the curriculum. Furthermore, according to Postlethwaite (1988), comparative research offers to each jurisdiction the opportunity to understand more deeply their own education and society, and aid policy-makers and teachers. Therefore, the international obligations that education be 'acceptable' and 'adaptable' constitute the conceptual framework for this doctoral research, an approach absent in the literature. This research note outlines the development of citizenship education, key information on Northern Ireland and Israel, and presents the conceptual framework, research questions, methods and participants involved.

## Citizenship Education in a Contested Society

Citizenship education emerged in Greece during the Archaic Age (Heater, 2004). Knight Abowitz and Harnish (2006, p. 666) suggest that citizenship understandings have influenced

pedagogy since schooling was first institutionalised, and has been 'reshaped over time and through cultural struggles'. Recently, citizenship education has received much attention in plural Western democracies, with its conceptual basis, aims and content varying from jurisdiction to jurisdiction 'due to differences in social, cultural, economic, political and religious terms' (Roth & Burbules, 2007, p. 1). According to Wylie (2004, p. 238), in plural societies, citizenship education can be viewed as 'the imposing of the values of one community on another' due to differing conceptions of citizenship and national belonging, and McCully (2005, p. 2) highlights that teaching controversial issues 'can generate deep emotional reactions in students' that prevent them from engaging rationally. Thus the development of citizenship education curricula suitable for all students poses challenges, discussed below in relation to Northern Ireland and Israel.

### **Case Jurisdiction 1: Northern Ireland**

A dichotomy of views on national belonging lies at the heart of the Northern Ireland conflict. In 1921, the island of Ireland was partitioned into Northern Ireland (remaining part of the United Kingdom) and the Irish Republic (independent of the UK) (Smith, 2003). Although the majority of Protestants in Northern Ireland affiliate themselves with the UK, the majority of Catholics identify more with the southern Republic of Ireland (Whyte, 1990). A history of inequality between these two groups resulted in armed conflict and subsequent peace negotiations. Currently, 45.1% of the population are from a Catholic background, and 48.4% grew up in Protestant households (NISRA, 2012), but until the 1998 Good Friday/Belfast Agreement and subsequent equality and human rights legislation, the political establishment was disproportionately dominated by the Protestant (predominantly unionist) majority (O'Leary, 1999). In terms of the management of the education system, religious groups are influential, and the majority of young people attend school with only their co-religionists (Osbourne, 2004).

Arlow (2001, p. 40) proposes that citizenship and consequently citizenship education are difficult to define in Northern Ireland as there is 'no agreed concept of a 'citizen''. Thirty-five per cent of sixteen year olds think of themselves as Irish, 34% as Northern Irish, 26% as British and 2% as Ulster (ARK, 2011). Thus delivering a citizenship education programme that is acceptable to all in Northern Ireland may be problematic.

Currently, citizenship education ('Citizenship') is mandatory for pupils aged 11—16 years (CCEA, 2007). Citizenship aims to help 'young people learn how to participate positively in society, to influence democratic processes and to make informed and responsible decisions' (PMB, 2007). As regards content, its statutory themes include 'diversity and inclusion', 'human rights and social responsibility', 'equality and social justice', and 'democracy and active participation' (CCEA, 2007).

### **Case Jurisdiction 2: Israel**

In the early twentieth century, the geographical area of Palestine was under Ottoman rule, before coming under British control. In 1948, the State of Israel was established as a predominantly Jewish state on part of the land, with the other part eventually becoming the Palestinian Territories, mostly populated by Palestinian Arabs (Shlaim, 2000; Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1948). The Palestinian minority in Israel comprises Palestinians who remained in their homeland after the establishment of Israel, and the subsequent War of Independence (Abu-Saad, 2006).

In terms of national identity, differing affinities exist: Jewish citizens feel they belong to the Israeli state, but the majority of Palestinians feel a stronger tie with the wider Palestinian nation (Gavison, 1999). Associated problems have led to protracted regional conflict and

Jewish/Palestinian Arab divisions in Israel (Barak, 2005). Demographically, 75.5% of the population is Jewish, with a 20.3% Palestinian minority (CBS, 2010). A survey of Palestinian citizens of Israel shows that they use three principal self-descriptors: 49% see themselves firstly as 'Arab', 25% as 'Palestinian', and only 18% as 'Israeli' (Hadar & Himeyn-Raisch, 2008). Furthermore, Jewish society is inherently diverse in terms of country of origin and secular/religious self-identification (Avnon, 2010).

Against this complex background lies the Israeli political and education systems, which, it has been claimed, exhibit over-representation by the Jewish population (Jabareen & Agbaria, 2010), and where the vast majority of young people attend a predominantly Jewish or Palestinian school. Citizenship education ('Civics') is compulsory in the school-leavers' matriculation examinations (Tatar, 2004). Compared to the aims of citizenship education in Northern Ireland, the goals of Civics appear to be more focused on an identity directly related to a particular state, that is, Israel, aiming to 'inculcate a common Israeli civic identity, together with the development of distinct national identities', and to impart the values of pluralism, tolerance and respect for the 'other'. Thematically it covers Israel as a Jewish and democratic state; the government and politics of Israel; and Israeli society (diversity) (Ichilov, 2005).

Citizenship and identity issues within Northern Ireland and Israel suggest that offering a single citizenship education curriculum may be problematic. Given this research problem, it is posited that a conceptual framework based on universal, internationally supported and legally binding human rights law on education, like that presented below, may offer a unifying, alternative perspective on the curriculum.

## **Education Rights as a Conceptual Framework: Acceptable and Adaptable**

This study focuses on two concepts relating to educational rights in general that may be of particular interest to citizenship education stakeholders in divided jurisdictions, and they are that citizenship education should be 'acceptable' and 'adaptable'. These concepts are drawn from the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, international treaties by which Northern Ireland and Israel are legally bound. It attends to the fact that it is not only the legally binding obligations that are key, but also how the text of such treaties has been interpreted by international courts and experts, who provide non-legally binding but authoritative interpretations of human rights documents. These interpretations, particularly Tomaševski's (2001) work, form the basis of the 2-A framework, according to which an acceptable citizenship education should be relevant; culturally appropriate; of good quality; non-discriminatory; and should involve diverse groups in course development. An adaptable citizenship education should be flexible to the needs of a changing society; to the needs of a particular community; to the needs of an individual student; and should challenge inequalities.

Certain research questions have emerged from the research problem of delivering unified citizenship education curricula in divided jurisdictions and the 2-A framework, and are presented below.

## **Research Questions**

The over-arching research question is:

- How do the concepts and practice of citizenship education in Northern Ireland and Israel reflect the international human rights obligations that education be 'acceptable' and 'adaptable'?

To fully address this question, the following subsidiary issues are considered:

- How have the concepts enshrined in international human rights law with regard to education, particularly the formal interpretations that an education be 'acceptable' and 'adaptable', informed the development of citizenship education policy and curricula in Northern Ireland and Israel?
- How do key stakeholders (policy-makers, teachers and students) of citizenship education in Northern Ireland and Israel understand and interpret the connection between the above elements of education rights on the one hand, and citizenship education on the other, and how does this relate to practice?

## Methods, Research Participants and Emergent Findings

The present study takes a qualitative approach to data collection, locating itself within the interpretive research paradigm (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). The emphasis is on the role played by the 2 A's in informing curriculum development and teaching, and the interpretation of these two concepts by key citizenship education stakeholders, all of whom offer their own subjective perspectives. Interviews and focus groups were conducted among citizenship education stakeholders, focussing on three groups: policy-makers, teachers and students. The latter two groups were drawn from a number of post-primary school types, defined according to ethno-religious or socio-political status. This study received ethical approval from the researcher's home institution.

The interpretations of key stakeholders are currently being analysed thematically and comparatively between jurisdictions, and emergent findings indicate a wide variety of interpretations of both the aims of citizenship education and of the meaning and even the appropriateness of the 2-A framework in a contested society.

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