



This paper is taken from

*Creating Communities: Local, National and Global
Selected papers from the fourteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2012

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-19-5**

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Ververi, O. (2012) 'Essentially contested...Representations of social reality in textbooks: The case of the
'Education for Democratic Citizenship' programme', in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) *Creating
Communities: Local, National and Global*. London: CiCe, pp. 242 - 249.

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Essentially contested...Representations of social reality in textbooks: The case of the 'Education for Democratic Citizenship' programme

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Abstract

This paper examines the Council of Europe's (CoE's) discourse on citizenship as it appears in two citizenship education textbooks of the programme 'Education for Democratic Citizenship' (EDC). Focus is placed upon the representations of social reality within the textbooks and their relation to the suggested conception of citizenship enclosed in them. I apply Critical Discourse Analysis on the key themes that support the 'new' citizenship conception and also proceed to an intradisciplinary discussion. The findings of my analysis are that the two textbooks exhibit a distorted representation of social reality which seems to stem from a 'Neocommunitarian' conception of citizenship. In addition, there is a profound tendency for moral relativism and acceptance of either poverty or war as natural phenomena. The paper concludes that although the 'EDC' programme is a positive endeavour, the content of its textbooks is an issue that should concern the CoE. In addition to this, it seems that European citizenship identity should not be constructed upon objectively false representations of social reality nor should it be oriented to moral relativism. For this reason, 'Neocommunitarianism' does not seem to be a recommendable citizenship conception and we should instead seek for a different form of communitarianism upon which we could build the European citizenship identity.

Keywords: *Citizenship education textbooks, European citizenship identity, Education for Democratic Citizenship, Neocommunitarianism*

Introduction

In this paper I explore how social reality is represented in two citizenship education textbooks and how these representations are associated with the citizenship conception enclosed in them. Using the case of the EDC programme textbooks, I apply textual and transdisciplinary analysis and examine the citizenship conception informing the representations of the social reality.

The two textbooks are namely *T-KIT 7 Under construction: Citizenship, Youth and Europe* (Lopez et al, 2003) and *Compass Manual* (Brander et al, 2002) which are part of

the ‘Education for Democratic Citizenship’ (EDC) programme¹, organised by the Council of Europe² (CoE).

EDC posits that traditional citizenship does not efficiently meet the challenges of modern societies and that a more inclusive form of the concept is preferable, stressing the importance of active citizenship. In *Resolution on Results and Conclusions* (CoE, 2000) it is stated that the programme is based on a multifaceted and process-focused approach to citizenship which includes six dimensions; the political, legal, cultural, social, economic as well as the European and Global dimensions. In *Basic Concepts and Core Competences for EDC* Audigier (2000:7) proposes an ‘individualistic and instrumental conception of citizenship, a citizenship that gives pride of place to the individual and his rights and relegates to the background the affirmation of collective and partial, in the geographic and cultural sense, identities embodied by States’. Epigrammatically, we could say that the EDC programme promotes a multi-dimensional and post-national approach to citizenship. With reference to the last two dimensions, we can observe that a spatial element is added in citizenship viewing it as extending beyond the boundaries of the state. Audigier’s (ibid.) use of the term ‘conception’ on the other hand, implies a diversity of meanings for citizenship; this is not of course something new as citizenship is considered to be an *essentially contested concept* and this has an impact on citizenship education. The various citizenship conceptions inform accordingly citizenship education textbooks writing in terms of certain meanings, ideas and messages inherent in the representations of the social world. Following this line of argument, we could argue that we equally have *essentially contested representations* of social reality conveyed in citizenship education textbooks.

Method

Textbooks seem to comprise the technology for the dispersion of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). As Issitt (2004: 688) states ‘at the extreme, the textbook is the vehicle for the transmission of authorised dogma. In its role as an essential site of learning, the textbook is a key mechanism for the production and reproduction of ideas’. He (ibid.) concludes that textbooks are cultural objects forged from the social processes and conditions in which they are created. Following these views on the role and aim of textbooks, I applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough: 2007) for analysing the representations enclosed in the programme textbooks. CDA holds a realist philosophical position and is based on the belief that language, discourse and ideology are involved in context-specific or causal efficacious circumstances enabling us to examine issues of power, representation and subjectivity through discursive and social practices in general (Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer: 2002). Fairclough (2007:14) commenting upon the realist position explains that reality cannot be reduced to our

¹ The EDC programme runs voluntarily in schools across Europe and is based on a series of textbooks – including T-KIT 7 and Compass Manual – which are used by their participant teachers.

² The Council of Europe (CoE) is a separate organisation from the European Union. It was established on 1945 and has 47 member states. Their main mission involves legal standards, human rights, democratic development, the rule of law and cultural co-operation

knowledge of it, which is contingent, shifting and partial and this applies also to the reality of texts; ‘there is no such thing as a complete and definitive analysis of a text’. This analysis is extendable to the ‘transdisciplinary’ approach which according to Fairclough (ibid.) ‘aims to enhance our capacity to ‘see’ things in texts through operationalizing social theoretical perspectives and insights into textual analysis’.

For the textual analysis of the EDC programme textbooks, I constructed an analytical tool using a number of analytical categories that fitted the nature of my data (see table 1). My analysis was complemented by transdisciplinary discussion so as to give an interpretation as close to the reality as possible, acknowledging however the limitations of the interpretivist research paradigm, including critical social theory and CDA.

Table 1.

<i>STEP 1: Qualitative Textual analysis</i>
Higher Level Semantic Relations
Representation of Social Events/Reality
Assumptions
Arguments
Intertextuality
Discourses
<i>STEP 2: Evaluation</i>
Summary of the overall Semantic textual analysis

Findings of textual analysis

My analysis involved a deep and repeated study of the text and identification of the key themes in both textbooks and their semantic relation. The key themes in T-KIT 7³ refer to a ‘new’ citizenship conception and the aspects of it as well as the general landscape in which contemporary citizenship is placed⁴. The key themes in Compass Manual⁵ are

³ The book is divided into the following chapters: Chapter 1 ‘A history of Europe and Citizenship’, Chapter 2 ‘Contemporary Approaches to Citizenship’, Chapter 3 ‘Future Developments’, Chapter 4 ‘Our Conceptual Framework’, Chapter 5 ‘Contemporary Approaches to education for European Citizenship’, Chapter 6 ‘Our Educational Approach to Citizenship’, Chapter 7 ‘Citizenship Scenarios-Project examples’. In the first six chapters one may read the theoretical approach to citizenship while the last chapter is dedicated to the implementation of European citizenship education through a series of project examples. The first six chapters include sub-chapters relevant to their main topic as described above.

⁴ These are the role of the nation-state, the role of identity and senses of belonging, the distinction between society, community and civil society. Additional issues are the distinction between individual (denizen) and citizen, the role of institutions, the distinction between E.U and CoE, the nature of society today and phenomena influencing it.

⁵ The “Compass” manual is divided into the following five chapters: Chapter One “Human Rights Education and Compass, a Brief Guide for Practitioners”, Chapter Two “49 Practical Activities and Methods for Human Rights Education”, Chapter Three “Taking Action”, Chapter Four “

active citizenship and its attachment to NGOs and Human Rights⁶. The higher level semantic relation between the two textbooks is the ‘new’ citizenship conception (T-KIT 7) and its realisation or else its practical application (Compass Manual).

Representation of social reality in T-KIT 7 and Compass Manual

The EDC discourse in T-KIT 7 exhibits a most abstract representation of political and social reality, stemming from the ‘new’ citizenship conception, viewed as ‘dynamic, integral and complex’ standing in opposition to the ‘status’ understanding of citizenship. The representations of both citizenship and the general social and political landscape seem to be most abstract because the authors make assumptions without following an explanatory, causal and expository course in order to support them. Additionally, they express essentialist positions (i.e. nation-state, individuals and citizens) without citing tangible examples or pointing out how the social relations are constructed. Hence, they provide a quite distorted representation of political and social reality, also supported by the logic of appearance⁷.

The representation of nation states as under extinction entities, the ‘recent developments’ (such as globalisation, immigration, terrorism, European integration etc.) as out of control phenomena (and not processes), the equalisation of ‘individuals-denizens’ and citizens with assumed common conditions of life, seem to act as the landscape that this new citizenship conception is placed within. The ‘new’ citizenship conception is represented in opposition to the ‘old’ citizenship. This classification involves the concept of values for the new understanding of citizenship, along with the social, political, cultural and economic *skills* replacing the *rights and obligations*, the latter linked with the old understanding of citizenship. Moreover, the ‘static’ understanding is attached to the nation state while the ‘dynamic’ is related to the concept of community. The emphasis placed on the spatial dimension of the two concepts, implies a move from the ‘closed’ nation state to the ‘broad’ community, denoting a framing of the different scales of social life, a trait of the genres of governance⁸ which aim at the construction of global ‘space-times’. In addition, civil society attached to NGOs is represented as having a governing jurisdiction; governing though partly, is stated to be their aim but the authors do not explain how governing takes place as NGOs are independent from the institutional ensemble.

The EDC discourse in Compass Manual exhibits a discourse with quite concrete representations of the issues under examination in comparison to T-Kit 7 book.

Background Information on Human Rights” and Chapter Five “Background Information on Global Themes”. Each Chapter contains sub-chapters dealing with relevant issues. As far as the analysis is concerned, emphasis was placed on Chapters Three and Four, for the theoretical part.

⁶ Further themes involve depreciation for formal politics, representative democracy, citizens, Human Rights, active citizenship and Human Rights culture.

⁷ Explanatory logic involves the tracing of causal relations between the issues. Logic of appearance lies in elaborative sentences, assumptions and statements.

⁸ Genres of Governance illustrate the genres which aim at the governance of society by linking different scales of social life (i.e. local, regional, national, global). Genres of governance include promotional genres (Fairclough, 2007: 33).

However, the analysis of additional key themes focusing upon active citizenship and the human rights culture, exhibited a quite similar discourse to T-KIT7. The new key themes display a quite different discourse quality which is based on assumptions and subjective opinions, which are similarly presented as true and objective. In addition to this, an implicit course of assertions making is applied, excluding different opinions and interpretations. In general, we could say that explanation, causality and contingency of processes are not fully stressed. Additionally to this, essentialism is expressed regarding a series of issues such as citizens and politicians, where the latter are represented as driven only by their professional competence and sometimes fail to apply laws which are however represented as fair and just by nature. In addition, citizens are represented as passive by nature. Last but not least, human rights are represented as susceptible to reduction introducing in this way moral relativism to the consciousness of the reader. This representation is based on a misleading conceptual platform, where rights are conceptually conflated with interests which in reality comprise two different and in many cases opposing concepts. Consequently, this erroneous identification leads to the relativist view for human rights, which cease to carry their axiomatic and universal status. Human rights become susceptible to judgement, evaluation and in many cases restriction/violation with arithmetic criteria based on the 'conflict of rights' assumption, legitimising in the consciousness of the reader the practice of e.g. NATO led wars.

Intradisciplinary discussion

In the intradisciplinary discussion following the textual analysis, I mainly draw on *governmentality* literature⁹ regarding the main claims upon which the 'new' conception of citizenship is built upon. According to the following discussion, it seems that the EDC discourse is highly influenced by the Neoliberal ideology.

The assumed 'crisis' of the nation state institution is a Neoliberal view aligned with the birth of 'community', which according to Dean (2007) actively undoes the features of society which among others pertain to the welfare state and the sense of solidarity. Fraser (2003) names this process as *desocialisation*, *denationalization* and *transnationalisation*.

Additionally to this, Ferguson and Gupta (2002: 983) argue that the idea of civil society which is identified with NGOs has been embraced by advocates of Neoliberalism, and has been opposed to the state as a 'zone of mediation between an 'up there' state and an 'on the ground' community'.

⁹ Governmentality is a notion that describes the development of disciplinary power, biopolitics and the technologies of subjectification that concerned Foucault's thought. Foucault (1991) drew a distinction between sovereignty and government in that government can refer to any practice of the objective is to establish the 'right disposition of things, arranged so as to lead to a common end' so as to examine how power is operationalized. As Rose-Redwood (2006: 474) states 'one of the main focuses (sic) of the governmentality literature is examining how the apparatuses (sic) of knowledge production and the rationalities of rule are implicated in the processes of governing individuals and collectivities'.

Lemke (2001: 201) also states that the neoliberal forms of government ‘develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them’. In addition, he (ibid.) argues that one of the characteristics of Neoliberalism is the amalgamation of all forms of human action and behaviour as an economic rationality, which seeks to form the entrepreneurial mentality aiming at efficiency, competitiveness (Dean, 2007: 102), self-management and modulated social adjustment (Walters, 2004: 35). These Neoliberal governmental techniques seem to be akin to the conceptual conflation of skills with rights pointed out earlier in the EDC discourse, in relation to ‘new’ citizenship. In conclusion, it seems that the EDC citizenship conception is highly influenced by Neoliberal communitarianism or else ‘Neocommunitarianism’, which merits further focus.

Neocommunitarianism is a term used by Jessop (2002 in Staeheli, 2010: 394) in his analysis of the ways in which neoliberalism has infiltrated governance. As Staeheli (ibid.) argues it represents a reassertion of the role of communities in fostering ‘active citizenship’ and addressing social exclusion through the voluntary sector. In the 1980s and 1990s, the putative return of responsibility for social welfare to civil society and communities represented a redefinition – and frequently a retrenchment – of the state’s role in social welfare provision and in ensuring the social rights of citizenship.

According to DeFilippis, Fisher and Shragge (2006: 676) the local community is situated as the site and solution to social problems skirting the role of capitalism and the state (ibid.). Simply put, the effort for social change is purported to occur without challenging both the economic and political status quo. According to Parazelli and Tardif (1998) the community sector becomes linked to the technocratic apparatus of the state and as a consequence, social problems become fragmented and local organisations subcontractors of the state.

In the EDC discourse, Neocommunitarianism seems also to be enriched by governing rationalities that expand beyond the nation state per se and the tackling of social problems. The ‘relativist’ human rights culture which should drive ‘active citizenship’ seems to render the community as subcontractors for wars participation, giving their full consent to the state to intervene abroad where conflict of ‘rights’ occurs.

Conclusion

The citizenship conception that informs the EDC citizenship education textbooks results in distorted representations of the social reality and promotes moral relativism. European – as well as all citizenship identities – should not be constructed upon an objectively false and distorted worldview also imbued with moral relativism. The CoE should be concerned about the content of the EDC textbooks and should seek for a different form of communitarianism to Neocommunitarianism.

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