Navigating Citizenship Education by Employing Critical Race Theory and Social Constructivism

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Abstract

This perspective piece aims to explicate definitions of citizenship and citizenship education in a multicultural society like Canada. In doing so, this paper tries to navigate citizenship education by employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Social Constructivism. Understanding the connections between both theories and citizenship education aims to provide additional perspectives for citizenship education scholars to enunciate the meaning of citizenship education. Critical Race Theory highlights the position of race and racism to understand the structure of our society. Such an understanding would delineate citizenship education with the experiential knowledge of people of diverse social and ethnic backgrounds. Social Constructivism emphasizes the role of social interactions in shaping our understanding of the world. As such, understanding individuals' experiences and their interactions with others would help citizenship education researchers to supplement and refine our current understanding of citizenship education. This paper presents a critical definition of citizenship at the end.

***Keywords*:** citizenship education, Critical Race Theory, Social Constructivism

Introduction

Tracing its philosophical roots to ancient Greek philosophy, debates about the definition of citizenship have existed for a long time (Connolly, 1993; Morgan & Fleming, 2009; Pinet, 2006). Given such a background, definitions of citizenship education also invite many perspectives. To begin with, citizenship education is a traditional and emerging research field. It is traditional because multiple scholars have revealed its inseparable connections with public schooling (Banks, 2009; Broom, 2012; Kymlicka, 2001; Sandel, 2009). It is also emerging as new divisions such as multicultural citizenship education (Banks, 2009; Kymlicka, 1995), global citizenship education (Andreotti, 2006; Carr & Howard, 2014; Shultz et al., 2011), and digital/media citizenship education (Mossberger et al., 2007; Tufeckci & Wilson, 2012; Kane et al., 2016) etc. are still developing within this field. Moreover, citizenship education has a plethora of equivalent names such as civic education, social studies, or even politics. These diverse perspectives present some tangible challenges for citizenship education researchers to define citizenship and citizenship education. Nonetheless, to contextualize the meaning of citizenship education is crucial for citizenship education researchers because such conceptualizations could clarify the focus of citizenship education research. This perspective piece aims to contribute to the definition of citizenship and citizenship education.

To speak to the challenges of defining citizenship education, this paper includes brief discussions of CRT and Social Constructivism, as well as their connections with citizenship education. CRT and Social Constructivism are theories that reify the origin of our knowledge (Garrison, 1995; Yosso, 2014). Understanding the connotations of CRT and Social Constructivism may assist citizenship education scholars to critically examine the meaning of citizenship and citizenship education. After discussing CRT and Social Constructivism, this paper then presents some influential perspectives for defining citizenship and citizenship education. In the end, this paper tries to map out a critical definition of citizenship education.

Critical Race Theory (CRT), Social Constructivism, and Citizenship

Derived from legal scholarship, CRT examines our society and our knowledge of it from the lens of race and racism. CRT scholars believe that racism is embedded in the structure of our social order, making it appear to be normal and natural to people in this structure (Delgado, 1995; Gillborn, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT scholars criticize colour-blind ideology because by creating and imposing a colourblindness ideology, racial issues and the voices of BIPOC people can be silenced (Crenshaw, 2019). As an illustration, the "All lives matter" rhetoric represents a colourblindness ideology not only because such rhetoric is highly adaptive, but as it serves to suppress racial issues in society, to hide the history of oppression, impose inequality and inequity, and promote white privilege discourse. CRT scholars argued that Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998). As a matter of fact, CRT scholars call for a drastic change in the structure of our society that is entrenched in White Supremacy. Moreover, CRT theorists insist on a critique of liberalism based on its inefficacy for the sweeping changes racism requires of our society (Crenshaw, 1988; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT scholars trust the experiential knowledge of BIPOC people in analyzing our society and the structure of it (Delgado, 1990). As such, to enable and embody the voices of BIPOC people is one of the major objectives and ways to uncover racism. As Ladson-Billings (1998) argues, "the 'voice' component of CRT provides a way to communicate the experience and realities of the oppressed, a first step in understanding the complexities of racism and beginning a process of judicial redress" (p. 14).

Understanding the complexities of racism could also help us to visualize the connection between CRT and other scholarship. For instance, the connection between CRT and citizenship can be understood from the perspective of property rights, a notion that can be problematized by the racism experienced by African Americans in the USA. According to legal scholars such as Bell (1987) and Harris (1993), the USA is a nation conceived and built on property rights. However, property ownership made "the American dream of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness' a more likely and attainable reality for Whites as citizens" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 15). In the history of the USA, African

Americans underwent a transformation from being properties to citizens. However, this transformation from slaves to citizens has not been a smooth one (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Furthermore, Harris (1993) asserts that Whiteness was so closely attached to the right to be free and to own property that Whiteness itself became a kind of property right. Williams (1995) argued that "one's sense of empowerment defines one's relation to law, in terms of trust-distrust, formality-informality, or right-no rights (pp. 87-88)." The very different realities experienced by Whites and Blacks could contribute to very different senses of empowerment in their lives. It is therefore important for us to understand these realities, especially the ones experienced by BIPOC people to refine our understanding of citizenship. One way for CRT scholars to understand these realities is to include the "voices" of BIPOC people to present their experiential knowledge. In turn, the experiential knowledge of BIPOC people would help scholars to supplement our current understandings of citizenship.

As interdisciplinary scholarship, CRT has connections with many other epistemological and ontological perspectives. Social Constructivism is one of the most prominent examples. The notion of race, according to CRT scholars (e.g., Morrison, 1992; Stanfield, 1999; West, 1992), is a social construct and signifier. Social constructivism understands learning through social interactions and individual experiences. Thus, if we are to gain knowledge on something, we need to interact with the world and the people in it to learn through this co-activity or practice. Dewey (1900) noted the importance of social interactions in shaping people's understanding of the world. An implication of the importance of social interactions is that students should engage with the real world and demonstrate learning through collaboration with others. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) theory highlights learning through social interactions with a skillful tutor who has better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner. Piaget (1970) acknowledged that exposure to new experiences would revise and re-construct our understandings of reality. Besides emphasizing social interactions and experiences, Social Constructivism also theorizes our knowledge to be constantly evolving along with the universe. Consequently, we need to situate our knowledge in historical, social, political and cultural contexts because we are in this changing and ever-emerging universe (Davis, 2004). Due to the ever-emerging nature of our world and our knowledge of it, Social Constructivism highlights the "temporariness" of our knowing because we can only know what is useful and available to us at the time being (Pfadenhaueris & Knoblauch, 2019). The temporariness of our knowledge probably explains variations in the definitions of citizenship and citizenship education overtime. In the next part, I will present some scholarly perspectives to critically define citizenship education.

Defining Citizenship

This paper focuses on the definition of citizenship and citizenship education in a contemporary sense. Modern forms of citizenship began with the 1789 French Revolution, "which established the authority of the state to define who a citizen was and who was not"

(Fleming, 2015, p. 44). Isin and Wood (1999) and Osborne (2001) argued that *jus soli* (right of the soil) and *jus sanguinis* (right of the blood) represent two major historical frameworks regarding conceptions of citizenship. Under *jus soli* (right of the soil) framework, citizenship is framed legalistically rather than culturally, which means that an individual does not have to belong to the cultural or linguistic group historically associated with being a citizen of a particular place. *Jus sanguinis* (right of the blood), on the other hand, emphasizes whether one is born or assimilated into a particular society. In fact, notions of citizenship in many countries today contain both *jus soli* (right of the soil) and *jus sanguinis* (right of the blood) frameworks. In Canada, for example, the acceptance of bilingualism and multiculturalism encourages new citizens of Canada to learn Canadian values (however problematic this definition might be) and one of the official languages. On the other hand, bilingualism and multiculturalism are also legal concepts in interpreting Canadian citizenship (Fleming, 2015).

Marshall's (1950) understanding of civil, political and social citizenship is another important theory in citizenship research. Within this framework, citizenship can be understood from the perspectives of individual freedom, political and social rights. According to Marshall (1950), the civil element of citizenship involved the rights necessary for individual freedom, such as freedom of speech, the right to own property and the right for justice. The political part of citizenship referred to "the right to participate in the exercise of political power" (Marshall, 1950, p. 11). Social citizenship pertained to individuals' rights to be educated and the entitlement of social services and welfare (Marshall, 1950). Turner (1997, 2009), however, criticized the absence of diversity and feminist perspectives in Marshall's (1950) social citizenship framework. Relating to the discussion of CRT in the previous section of this paper, Turner's criticisms embodied a necessity to include the voices from the underrepresented population in understanding citizenship. This necessity is well aligned with the belief of CRT. Currently, a more inclusive definition of citizenship that removes barriers of exclusion from citizenship, as well as including different ethnicities, genders, sexualities and social classes is desired. Westheimer and Kahne (2004), alternatively, describe a justice-oriented citizenship. Justice-oriented citizens "critically assess social, political and economic structures and explore the root cause of problems" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). In so doing, justice-oriented citizens aim to "change established systems and structures that reproduce patterns of injustice over time" (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004, p. 240). By attending to the root causes of injustice in our society, justice-oriented citizens lead to systems and structural changes that can contribute to a more democratic and just notion of citizenship. As such, this paper uses Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) justice-oriented perspective to explicate and contextualize the notion of citizenship education.

Defining Citizenship Education

According to the previous discussion of Social Constructivism, our understanding of realities evolve with the ever-emerging world we live in. In light of this argument of

Social Constructivism, we update our understanding of citizenship education with the social interactions experienced by us. Many scholars believe that citizenship education has a long tradition in public education. Kymlicka (2003), for instance, stated that "it is widely accepted that a basic task of schooling is to prepare each new generation for their responsibilities as citizens" (p. 293). Additionally, Sandel (2009) suggested that public school has traditionally been a site of civic education, while Broom (2012) confirmed a long and close association between citizenship education and public schools. If citizenship education is closely linked to a public-school system, as these authors contend, then what is citizenship education?

In the early stages of public school development, cultivating good citizens who would contribute to national unity was the primary goal of education. For instance, French philosopher Émile Durkheim (1956) argued that the purpose of education was to build citizens loyal to the (French) nation-state. In the ensuing three decades, Osborne (1985) noted that early schools hoped to indoctrinate values in children that transformed them into good workers and passive citizens. Carr et al. (2014) also argued that one denotation of citizenship relates to the acquisition of civic virtues that are often associated with being a good citizen.

Today's citizenship education shifts its focus, however. Critical thinking is the first updated theme of today's citizenship education. MacMullen (2011) argued that citizenship education should not only teach content that seeks to arouse pride among students, but it should also introduce topics that are shameful in a nation's history to create space for critical reflections. He divided the love of a nation into "patriotic love" and "civic identification" (MacMullen, 2014, p. 74) and advocated for a civic identification. Patriotic love refers to the love of the polity, whereas civic identification refers to a critical stance when an individual reveals a certain felt relationship to the agency of the polity of an organized society (MacMullen, 2014).

Recognizing pluralism and cultural diversity has been another emerging theme in today's citizenship education. Kymlicka (2001) wrote that citizenship education is "not simply a matter of knowledge of political institutions and constitutional principles; it is also a matter of how we think about and behave towards others, particularly those who differ from us in their race, religion, class etc." (p. 304). In concert with this concept, McDonough (2003) justified a conception of multinational civic education. For him, understanding cultural diversity is crucial to resolving potential conflicts between majority and minority groups in a multinational state, such as Canada. Broom (2011) also noted the complexity of citizenship education today, as pluralism, multiple identities, and multiculturalism have become key concepts.

The necessity to address diversity in multinational states like Canada calls for a bolder action in citizenship education – Global Citizenship Education (GCE) – an educative goal that opens up the nation-state and its borders. Indeed, as a result of globalization and international migration, demographics in almost all nation-states have changed in a way that no single ethnicity, cultural or religious group dominates the population (Banks, 2009, 2017). Moreover, in response to issues such as climate change,

poverty, terrorism, and many other problems facing the human race, global citizenship and global efforts have become desirable and indispensable. As such, OXFAM (n.d.) defined global citizenship as the belief that we can all make a difference. Similarly, Banks (2009) asserted that citizenship education should help students to develop a commitment to act to change the world in order to make it more just and democratic. One way to make our world more just and democratic is to address problems of inequality and injustice across the globe. In this logic, Andreotti (2006) argued that GCE should view global issues from the perspective of social justice and critical literacy, rather than charity.

Similar to Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) definition of justice-oriented citizens, GCE aims to empower students with an ability to pinpoint the root causes of many urgent issues humans face as a whole, and to find solutions to eradicate these issues. To attend to these root causes, global efforts are required to make some sweeping changes to our social structure that reproduces inequalities and injustices overtime. Especially, we need to consider and include the voices of the BIPOC population to help us understand the inequalities and injustices they have experienced as a starting point to make these changes. This process cannot just happen in one part of the world. From this perspective, citizenship education goes beyond the national level. Rather, it highlights an understanding of our relationship with the world we live in and a belief that we can all make a difference.

Conclusion

Banks (2017) argues that if citizenship education is to provide a foundation for national unity, educators should find ways to cultivate a sense of shared identity among citizens. This shared identity is based on an understanding our relationships with others. As such, citizenship education not only teaches facts about a nation-state, it also aims to empower students to understand their relationships with the environment and the people around them, both in and beyond the nation-state border. Citizenship education also entails individual abilities to pinpoint the root causes of many environmental and societal problems that we face and to find solutions to make our world more just and democratic. The above definitions of citizenship education consider perspectives from CRT and Social Constructivism. As citizenship education researchers, we need to include the experiential knowledge of BIPOC people, as well as other underrepresented populations to better our understanding of their relationships with the environment and people around them. We should also understand our knowledge as temporary, not definite. In this way, we can constantly add perspectives to refine a better notion of citizenship education based on an understanding of our social interactions with everyone in our society.

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