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The role of formal schooling in building active citizenship

ABSTRACT:

This paper addresses the complex reasons for the current interest on citizenship education. This is more than bemoaning the fact that people are no longer interested in political parties and only interested, if interested at all, in single issue politics. It includes the policy concerns over the cohesion and the identity of the newly enlarged European Union and our relationship with Third Country Nationals, attempts to control migrant labour and refugee and asylum seeker flows, and the implications of putting subsidiarity into practice. This list is far from complete, as recent events related to the rejection of the Constitutional Treaty in the referenda in France and in the Netherlands is resulting in critical debates about the future of the EU itself, and this now is being presented as a stark choice between an “Anglo Saxon” and “Social Protection” model for the future development of Europe.

The paper explores the building of citizenship in this context and sets it in the wider context of the growth of nationalism and the growing recognition of addressing the position of faith communities. The active citizen is only one idealised type of citizen, in reality there are many options for addressing the concept of citizenship and there are boundaries of active citizenship. These boundaries often have a negative impact on specific traditional target groups of learners.

It argues against the political over-dependence of the nation state as the dominant determining factor in exploring concepts of citizenship and in developing educational curricula to respond.

The paper advocates the development of a concept of “multiple identity” rather than a collection of identities, and with this multiple identity, the need for multiple learning opportunities about active citizenship. Experience has shown that to date very little about the idea and active practice of citizenship has been learned through formal education at any level.

Formal schooling offers the chance for a formal curriculum, formally taught. In the UK, citizenship education is reported to be the worst taught of all disciplines. The paper looks at formal curriculum development, and suggests that this begs radical change. The role of formal schooling is limited to one contribution among many concerned with promoting awareness and understanding of citizenship.

Schools and colleges are more than what they do. They have an impact on citizenship that results from what they are as institutions, in terms of ethos, environment and structure. Formal schooling is then one resource to promote active citizenship in a very complex present and uncertain future.