Re-examining the Concept of Civic Education

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Abstract

Defining Civic Education is rather problematic especially to practitioners and researchers of Civic Education. This is because the concept remains fluid at every given point. As such it is becoming important that the concept of Civic Education is clearly re-examined to understand its true meaning. Muleya (2018:109-129) notes that, 'by any stretch of the imagination, there is need to examine the daily application of the concept of Civic Education'. In this article, an attempt is being made to re-examine the concept of Civic Education or Citizenship Education as viewed by scholars in literature. Therefore, this article begins by providing the introduction as way of setting the tone for the discussion on Civic Education. Further, the article discusses the definitions of Civic Education and also explains the evolving debate about Civic Education as well as a discussion on the re-thinking of Civic Education. The article ends with a conclusion.

Key words: *Civic Education; Citizenship; Citizenship Education; Civics*

Introduction

Much has been and is being written about Civic Education also known as Citizenship Education (See Gopinathan, 2012; Lee, 2013; Alviar-Martin and Baildon, 2016; Muleya, 2015; Muleya, 2017a; Muleya, 2017b; 2018). To some people Civic Education is now seen as just one of the subjects in schools whose focus is only political in nature. While to others it is an extension of the old phrased Civics. For others, they even question its meaning and relevance to society. They argue that it is just as one of those political courses that can be taken by anyone person.

Dadvand (2018) observed that in Australian education policy, Civics and Citizenship are driven by "one size- fits-all" assumptions. In other words, Citizenship Education is often framed as a status that all young people achieve uniformly as they transition to adulthood. Such a one-size-fits-all approach, as Dahlgren (2006, p. 269 cited in Dadvand, 2018) explains, reflects an assumption in the liberal theories of citizenship that individuals emerge as fully-fledged citizens "devoid of social bonds, out of some socio-cultural black box, ready to play his or her role in democracy."

From the above argument, it would be right to note that Citizenship Education is not a level playing field in which everyone understands its meaning and nature. According to Levinson (2012 as cited in Dadvand, 2018), both at a conceptual and practical level, it is reductionist to view Civic Education and what is referred to as civic identity as a homogenous construct. In fact in reviewing the work of Feminist and anti-racist scholars in the field of Citizenship Studies, Yuval-Davis (2007, p. 261) contended that in contemporary political contexts, we need to dehomogenize the notion of Citizenship Education by situating it in "the wider context of contemporary politics of belonging which encompass citizenships, identities and the emotions attached to them." As such it can be argued that the question of Citizenship Education is being increasingly re-framed through different

points that have emerged as key arenas in which the formal rights and duties of citizens are understood, expressed, and enacted. It is undoubtedly clear that there is now recognition that Citizenship Education is a "multidimensional" construct in which formal status and entitlements are tightly entangled with lived experiences and identities (Joppke 2007 as cited in Dadvand, 2018). As such, any attempt to conceptualize Citizenship Education should not only take into consideration the formal rights and obligations associated with membership of particular groups, but also acknowledge the sense of belonging, inclusion, and recognition that follow from such memberships. The premise of this article is to show that there is need to analytically, theoretically and even empirically recast Civic Education to some considerable degree of understanding which is devoid of multiple confusions and inconsistent positions that people tend to take when viewing Civic Education. Therefore, this article attempts to define the concept of Civic Education, a discussion on the evolving debate about Civic Education as well as a discussion on the re-thinking of Civic Education. The article ends with a conclusion.

Defining the concept of Civic Education

The question of defining Civic Education remains a contentious one in the Civic Education debate. This is because of the broad-ranging definitions and yet beyond these very broad definitions remains a huge range of competing and even contested definitions in the existing and new literature. The other reason that could be attributed to the debate is mainly due to the background of the scholars that are in the field of Civic Education as well as the real life experiences. For the sake of this article an attempt will be made to bring in some of the definitions as conceived by scholars in Civic Education.

Firstly, it is important to note that there are now emerging issues of epistemological difference that seem to be shaping the

thinkers' definitions of Civic Education. By epistemology we refer to the framework of assumptions in which the concepts and knowledge about Civic Education are constructed. For example Ogunyemi (2011: 378-385) notes from the works of McCowan (2006) and Winston (2007) that there are two broad orientations regarding Citizenship Education. These are traditional/elitist/ minimal and progressive/activist/maximal. The approach here to the concept of Civic Education is described as one such kind which represents an element of epistemology. The epistemological issue relates to the contrast between the traditional/elitist/ minimal conceptions and the progressive/activist/maximal conceptions of Civic Education. The former considers itself as a tool for reproducing the existing systems, processes, structures, institutions and socio-economic order of society. The latter on the other hand is based on the understanding of reconstructing systems, processes, institutions, cultures, structures and existing socio-economic systems of society. In other words, it is based on the process of social reformation.

Secondly, Seroto (2012: 63-84) contends that the concept of Citizenship Education is complex and ambiguous due to the context within which citizenship notions are defined. He contends that this has also been compounded by the fact that the term, "Citizenship Education" is habitually characterised by the use of various terminologies used to describe social and political education. For Kerr as cited in Soreto (2012) he uses the minimal/maximal model to distinguish between Civic Education (education for the minimal citizen) and Citizenship Education (education for the maximal citizen). This kind of approach to Civic Education is a further confirmation to the argument that the concept of Civic Education is complex and ambiguous. As such one can argue that in trying to have a clear understanding of Civic Education; caution must be exercised so that the concept is examined from all angles before coming up with the actual position with regard to the meaning of Civic Education.

Thirdly, Hahn as cited in Hedtke and Zimenkova (2013: 104)

asserts that the meaning of Civic Education is deeply embedded in the historical and political context of different countries. This means that the we way Civic Education is conceptualised in Zambia might not necessarily be the way it would be conceptualised in another country like South Africa. However, this does not ignore the fact that broadening the parameters of Citizenship Education beyond its legal and political accounts still offers an opportunity to appreciate its complex nature in academic and educational debates.

Fourthly, Davies and Issit (2005:389), simply contend that Civic Education has to do with the provision of information about formal public institutions. It is seen as a subject that supplies information and possibly knowledge to the learners on the structures and institutions of government and also how they these structures and institutions operate. While this may be the case, it is also important to note that school educators, academics, policy and curriculum officials, and civil society organization representatives concerned with Civic Education should be involved in reconceptualising the concept and highlighting weaknesses in the existing notions about the concept.

Finally, there seems to be an on- going tension within the field as to whether or not Civic Education is indeed an all inclusive concept or it is simply a concept that focuses on the dissemination of knowledge and information about rights and responsibilities. It is clear to note that the meta-discipline nature and differences seen in the definitions about Civic Education produce a wide range of different theoretical positions. Nevertheless, one may wish to know that Civic Education needs to encourage a democratic sensibility that cultivates a degree of uncertainty in its citizens; awareness that there are rarely easy answers and that one's own principles and even dearly held prejudices – are subject to revision and examination (Hinchliffe, 2018).

The Evolving Debate about Civic Education

There is as much controversy about what constitutes Citizenship Education as there is about citizenship itself (Sigauke, 2019). Arthur and Wright (2001 as cited in Sigauke, 2019) identify three different views often presented in discussions concerning Citizenship Education, that is, "education about citizenship; education for citizenship and education through citizenship," what Kerr (2003) calls the "tripartite division of about-for-through" citizenship. A distinction is also often made between a Citizenship Education that empowers the learner and that which is tantamount to indoctrination, that is, involving teaching someone to accept that something is true in spite of evidence to the contrary (Sears and Hughes, 2006). Indoctrination is used as a useful means to an end for people in positions of political power.

Citizenship Education thus can be used to control young people so that they do not question the status quo and to mould, manage, and reform young people for the benefit of people in positions of power. In such cases, Citizenship Education does not develop active citizens who are capable of thinking critically, questioning and making decisions about issues that concern them. At the political level, this narrow sense of Citizenship Education neither raises nor offers political empowerment to young people, keeping them passive and ignorant of political, economic, and other social issues that benefit the powerful ones. The other point that could be made here is that in many cases the nature of Citizenship Education a country adopts is greatly influenced by the political context and ideology of the state. Osler and Starkey (2005) and Magudu (2012) add that if citizenship is as controversial and as contested a concept as noted above then being a "good citizen" is therefore similarly controversial and contestable. In this sense, and as defined by any government, a good citizen could mean someone who unquestioningly accepts and conforms to values, norms, and beliefs as defined by authority.

Another concept that comes into focus with regard to the debate on Civic Education is what has been described by Runhare

and Muvirimi (2017) as authentic Citizenship Education. By Authentic Citizenship Education or education for democracy the aim is to predispose and develop students' skills, attitudes, beliefs and values that will empower them to participate and remain engaged and involved in their society's culture, politics, governance and general democracy.

Heggart and Flower (2019) state that it is one thing to critique the state of Citizenship Education as being too constrained and narrowly focused only on information-giving and raising awareness but is another to then argue that there should be bolder approaches to Citizenship Education which not only raise awareness but also foster active citizenship. The above argument is a clear testimony of the evolving debate on the subject of Civic Education. For instance, they further argue that it is important and necessary starting point to consider and focus on examining various approaches about the main features of Civic Education.

According to the following scholars: Cogan and Morris (2001); Kennedy (2007); Macintyre and Simpson (2009); Peterson and Tudball (2017) as cited in Heggart and Flower (2019), they argue that Civic Education could be described as having thick and thin approaches. The term, 'thick' approaches is said to have a lengthy etymology in relation to notions of citizenship and Citizenship Education and could describe the ways in which these approaches provide a conceptual base for Citizenship Education in places where such approaches have been applied (Isin and Turner, 2002, as cited in Heggart and Flower ,2019). Additionally, other scholars such as Mclaughlin (1992); Wetheimer and Kahne (2004); Zyngier (2011a) describe thick related approaches to describe Citizenship Education which promotes or encourages student-led, activist and participatory approaches.

The 'thin' approaches on the other hand could describe Citizenship Education which emphasises less involvement

required of individuals within society. Put another way, 'thin' approaches to citizenship; by contrast, emphasize didactic and teacher-led approaches underpinned by an assumption that strong democracy relies on citizens having instrumental knowledge about how political structures work. The tension between 'thick' and 'thin' approaches to civics and Citizenship Education has informed much of the development of civics and Citizenship Education materials. In other words, the key difference between the two approaches to citizenship and Citizenship Education is at the level of civic involvement which could be advocacy, activism and /or voluntary community service required in the community.

Cohen (2019) notes that reviewing literature in the field of Civic Education displays some sort of a discrepancy between the widely agreed upon importance of this field and the lack of consensus regarding the different conceptions practised. This confusing state of affairs may be seen as what John Dewey (1927) referred to as "the great bad." Dewey warned of "the mixing of things which need to be kept distinct" (Cohen, 2019). Going by what Cohen has pointed out, it is important to note that indeed Civic Education ought to be clearly established least one may create the   "great bad" which may occur due to the different conceptions that are translated into different educational practices, incompatible with one another at best and contradictory at worst?

This unclear situation, in which numerous conceptions of Civic Education tend to influence classroom practice and might actually be similar to what Barr et al. (1977 as cited in Cohen, 2019) identified regarding the general field of social studies in the USA, viewed by them as a "seamless web of confusion" that suffered from an "identity crisis". As a result of such arguments with regard to the conceptions of Civic Education, the debate concerning what really makes up Civic Education continues to rage on. No wonder other scholars have argued that Civic Education continues to raise questions and pose challenges in countries across the globe (Hahn and Alviar-Martin 2008; Lee and Fouts 2005; Torney-Purta et al. 2001 as cited in Cohen, 2019).

Re-thinking of Civic Education

As observed from the previous discussion, the question of defining Civic Education remains a contentious one. In this article an attempt is made to suggest some of the ways in which Civic Education could be re-looked.

Civic Education should be based on progressive/activist/ maximal conception and which according to Winston (2007), is a process aimed at empowering the learners and individuals in general to learn to struggle for societal transformation and social justice. In order to achieve societal transformation and social justice learners must therefore strive to nurture cosmopolitanism, critical analysis, political engagement and cross-cultural respect as well as have a holistic understanding of their responsibilities in society. In other words, learners must open up to different cultures in order to learn and appreciate that their empowerment as learners is not one direction but that they could learn as well from people with different life experiences.

In fact this type of Civic Education is one that could help the learners become active, informed and critical citizens who can participate effectively in civic life and in the affairs of the state. This point is supported by Duffy and Cunningham 1996, p. 171 as cited in Davies, (2018) who contend that generally, education occurs when the two tenets of constructivism are met: "learning as an active process of constructing knowledge rather than [only] acquiring it; and instruction is a process that involves supporting that construction rather than of [only] communicating knowledge"

Civic Education should not be seen as a tool of merely reproducing the existing social, cultural, political and economic positions over and over. To the contrary, Civic Education should be seen to be providing a more robust conceptual basis for understanding the deep inter-connections between issues of access, equity, and participation. Bridging the conceptual

boundaries of citizenship and social justice also brings attention to what Citizenship Education actually means to young people; it shows the dynamic interplay of knowledge, skills, and attitudes with everyday practices and lived experiences in the formation of political subjectivities (Dadvand, 2018).

Secondly, Civic Education should be able to bring out in the learners certain qualities or competences that are required in their personal, national or international development. It would be wrong at this stage to teach Civic Education which does not entrench competences in learners required for development at various levels. As a matter of fact, Gopinathan (2018) contends that meaningful sustainable Citizenship Education requires a "whole-school," "total curriculum" approach (Lee, 2013) where attitudes and values are "caught" rather than "taught" (Sim , 2013). This whole-school approach to Citizenship Education is the intended approach of the Revised Zambian Curriculum of 2015, the most recent curriculum reform. In the Revised Zambian Curriculum 2015, there is recognition that, in light of the challenges of globalization, schools should avoid compartmentalizing citizenship education and take seriously the urgency of developing genuine, rich, relatable Citizenship Education programs.

WeiBeno and Eck (in Brunold & Ohlmeier, 2013: 63) contend that the development of political competence is an important task of [Civic Education] in school. It requires volition and motivation to solve tasks that are presented in [Civic Education] lessons or in daily life.

While there is an emphasis on political competence, it is without doubt that competences are vitally important and it is in this context that Civic Education ought to be conceptualized in the light of providing appropriate competences to the learners so that there are able to address various challenges affecting them at school as well as at home. Having been exposed to the principles and practices of Civic Education they should be able to demonstrate good competences or qualities reflective of Civic

Education. It is not enough to have Civic Education but there is need to go beyond and demonstrate correct competences in the community.

Thirdly, Civic Education is important because it allows the learners to participate in the process of learning and not just being mere actions of the teachers. Learners need to think and for them to think they will need to participate along the way within the process of learning. In other words, it can be argued that Civic Education should be conceived in such way that it allows the learners to participate and have the interface with the subject being discussed. This should be in the spirit of participation and not at the mercy of teachers. In fact the argument would also be that the task of the teachers in schools and especially those teaching Civic Education should be able to delineate new forms of pedagogy that are responsive to the new environment in schools which allow learners to engage with the subject matter. Deth (in Print & Lange, 2013: 12) has observed that democracy does not deserve its name without citizens' participation. This could as well be translated from the point of view of Civic Education that it does not deserve its name without learners' participation in schools.

Fourthly,   true Civic Education should be based on what Zimenkova (as cited in Hedtke & Zimenkova, 2013: 38) discusses as a school subject which is supposed to provide young citizens with conceptions of citizenship, its rights and duties, governance, politics and participation opportunities in a broad sense thus from political participation in representative democracy. This position is in line with what authentic Citizenship Education ought to be. It thus enables learners to engage in critical discussions of issues, using evidence, exploring alternatives and developing dispositions and skills that allow them to act on other possibilities.

It is a citizenship education that sharpens critical thinking capacities important in the analysis of political, social, and other issues, a preparation of young people for their roles and responsibilities and for the challenges and uncertainties of life

through provision of relevant education (Kerr 1999). Therefore, it is important to note here that Civic Education going by its nature cannot be reduced to some narrow conceptions but rather it has to be anchored on critical and broad based forms of citizenship, where learners understand rights and duties, governance, politics and participation opportunities. This should be the kind of Civic Education to be promoted in the school system and not one that merely deposits knowledge and information to the learners.

Conclusion

In this article, some of the definitions about Civic Education have been discussed bearing in mind that there are many definitions constituting Civic Education. The evolving debate about Civic Education has equally been discussed and such debates point to how existing research in the field of Civic Education encompasses different foundational conceptions of the term. The last part of the article discusses the re-thinking of Civic Education. While an attempt to entangle the web of confusion on the concept of Civic Education is being made and adopted by several scholars, this article has not delved into bringing out what is being adopted but has merely suggested how Civic Education could be looked at or what is being referred to as the re-thinking of Civic Education. As such, future articles or chapters may examine how Civic Education needs to be understood or explored through the much needed connections between theory and practice.

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