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Response to Michael Merry's Citizenship, Structural Inequality and the Political Elite

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Abstract:

Michael Merry makes some insightful criticisms of Citizenship Education (CE) and its claims to promote deliberative reasoning and critical thinking which are associated with liberal democracies. However, he extends the scope of his criticism to include schooling and education in general. While I agree with his criticisms of CE specifically, I disagree with his more generalised criticisms of education.

Keywords:

reply

Michael Merry makes some insightful criticisms of Citizenship Education (CE) and its claims to promote deliberative reasoning and critical thinking which are associated with liberal democracies. However, he extends the scope of his criticism to include schooling and education in general. While I agree with his criticisms of CE specifically, I disagree with his more generalised criticisms of education.

The central point in Merry's essay is compelling: Citizenship Education (CE) initiatives are generally turned to at precisely those moments when political and academic élites sense their own weakening moral as well as political legitimacy. As such, Merry concludes, the function of CE is essentially one of stabilization and integration rather than one of dissent and criticality. Merry is drawing on the Dutch context, but his description also applies to the development of CE as a compulsory strand in Britain's secondary education curriculum from the late 1990s, and its introduction in 2002. In the face of declining electoral roles, especially among the younger end of the electorate, the government established a committee, led by Sir Bernard Crick to see how education could address the democratic deficit:

A new consensus that citizenship should be taught and learnt has come about as part of a general questioning whether our old institutions serve the purpose of our citizens...and worries about the alienation of young people from public values (Crick, 2000, p. 49).

An important educational problem of whether CE should be based on substantive knowledge of British politics and the parliamentary system, or whether it should

be modelled on American service education with its more practical volunteering emphasis, was effectively side-stepped by forgoing the option of introducing CE as a discrete subject. Instead CE was presented to schools as the promotion of certain values and principles, such as respect for diversity and tolerance, which were to filter through the curriculum. Statements of values at such a general level might have been aimed to secure the largest consensus among the profession, but there were two unintended, and in my view, negative, effects of the introduction of CE. Firstly, it further consolidated a pre-existing tendency on the part of politicians to turn to education for solutions to essentially *political* problems. Secondly, it intervened more directly into the curriculum itself: in short it exacerbated the political instrumentalism of *school knowledge*.

One example which illustrates the intellectual distortion that can arise when the disciplinary subject content of the curriculum is made to serve externally imposed ends, can be seen in the advice given to history teachers by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in 2003 (QCA, 2003). In its published exemplar schemes of work, the authors suggested that a unit on the French Revolution could also be used to teach workers' rights. In a similar vein, they suggested that work on the Second World War could include the contribution of other nations such as India, to the British war effort, and culture more generally. But if one remembers that France was not primarily an industrial nation at the time of the Revolution (the Confédération Générale du Travail was only established in 1895), and that at the time of the Second World War many Indians were involved in bitter anti-British struggles, or that India was yet to acquire

independence as a nation state, it is clear that the interpretative complexity and nuance intrinsic to disciplinary knowledge in history is being dramatically reduced.

It could be argued that the QCA's advisory syllabus was just that – advisory and not compulsory; and that as there was no stipulated content for CE, schools and teachers would have been free to select and reject content as they saw fit. Some saw CE as a much-needed attempt to rejuvenate an outdated curriculum in order to take better account of recent socio-cultural changes. But in this process the epistemological substance and coherence of the curriculum became less important than ensuring more pressing *political* aims whether from left (social mobility) or from the right (cultural restoration), were met.

The introduction of CE in Britain did not only affect the intellectual content of the curriculum: it also helped open the door to new actors in the educational landscape. The expanding role of publishers, charities and NGOs in producing materials and pedagogic guides for pupils and teachers contributed to further marginalizing traditional sources of epistemic authority – the disciplinary communities within universities. New quasi-educational organizations such as the Citizenship Foundation produce materials which vary in quality and can be adopted and adapted by schools at a local level. But when located in broader changes at the politico-cultural level, the very concept of citizenship is redefined. Public understanding of citizenship has become more closely associated with the dispositions and attitudes favoured by the current government, whether that be recycling, healthy eating, having a prescribed attitude to refugees, or being vigilant for signs of religious or political extremism, than a concept connected with politics. Taken together, these changes have contributed to a profound intellectual as well as institutional destabilisation of the education system; from inspection to the intellectual and imaginative content of what teachers were expected to teach. The model of liberal citizenship proposed by some in academia, and criticised by Merry, does not, I would argue, have much bearing on CE as found in schools for all the reasons discussed so far.

Merry's objection to CE is based on a broader more general criticism than the delimited, curriculum-based criticisms I make above. He argues that as social institutions, schools are inevitably bound to reproduce the ideas and values of the ruling élites. The liberal promise of inculcating deliberative reasoned criticality, alleged to be conducive to political dissent is, he argues, an alluring but false promise. The function of CE, thus conceived, is to engender quietude and civil obedience to the law, and thus reduce the possibility of fundamental political opposition. In keeping with a Freirean ideal of schools as sites for engendering radical politics, Merry proposes that we should give up on the empirically unrealizable liberal ideal of rational deliberation. Instead we should be explicit about

the political nature of judgments about education and schooling, which he implies, is masked by the discourse of deliberative reasoning.

For anyone yearning for a new, and better politics, Merry's criticisms have an appeal, but it is, I argue, an appeal based on political desperation and confusion between the different levels of education and how they intersect with broader political and cultural trends. It is true there are dangers in cognitive based theories of citizenship: they risk unwittingly endorsing certain undemocratic ideas, such as the idea that you need to be formally educated to have a legitimate political voice in order to participate in democratic societies (so formal rights of citizenship might remain intact while a process of cultural stigmatization weakens its salience, which can, of course, make it easier to dismantle/limit formal rights later on).

Not only does this over-cognitive view of citizenship ignore historical evidence, where we find peasants and workers, unlikely to have been highly educated, have contributed to important democratic gains, but, in today's context, it also diverts attention from both a political class bereft of persuasive ideas and legitimacy. It also lets us, as members of the demos, as well as educators, off the hook. Instead of trying to understand what is new and what isn't; instead of working out political positions in relation to new types of problems (which are likely to be cultural or moral as much a political); instead of working out principles which speak to today's rather than yesterday's conditions; instead of seeking points of contact with potential allies in the task of re-building what are surely very weak bonds of solidarity; instead of engaging with these difficult tasks, Merry's view ends up demanding teachers do this work for us.

The legitimate task of educating, especially at the ages of compulsory education, requires a relatively high level of insulation from wider socio-political pressures, not least because we are not dealing with relationships between citizens, but between adult educators, who are also adult citizens, and the younger generation *who are not yet citizens* in the political sense of the word (although they can of course be good at checking litter in the playground, which is citizenship as understood by some advocates of CE).

Perhaps it is time that educators stop playing out political battles which belong in the adult sphere on the terrain of education. Neither politics nor education are likely to benefit from such a situation. Perhaps we should be more modest in what we expect of education in terms of its contribution to adult public life and citizenship. Perhaps by re-visiting and thinking afresh a foundational commitment to pursuing epistemic virtues of truth and the freedom of thought and speech needed to pursue it, we might be in a better position to give concrete form to these ideals.

It may seem paradoxical, but it could be that insisting all schools provide *all* children in compulsory education with access to a curriculum based primarily on academic subjects derived from disciplinary knowledge might be more radical than calling for schools to teach civil disobedience. Just to raise this possibility provides an immediate challenge to instrumental educational discourses which posit both knowledge and pupils in deficit terms (the former is said to be irrelevant compared to various skills, and the latter usually too vulnerable to cope with the demands of such a curriculum).

The problem I have is not with Merry's political aims and criticisms, many of which I suspect I share, but with his lack of attention to questions of epistemology in education. Also, I think an over-reliance on past reproduction/Freirean models of education is problematic because it risks missing what could be an important opportunity to reframe the educational debate in fresh ways. Current work within social realist theory of knowledge suggests a way forward for thinking about the curriculum and its potentially progressive role in education. Its key presuppositions are:

- that there is a difference between social reality as presented in everyday life, and reality in its fullest expression
- that our knowledge of social reality is also differentiated accordingly
- that formal or academic knowledge has been developed by many people, over time, usually, but not exclusively, in university-based communities of experts
- One foundational interest has been the pursuit of truth, which does not exclude the co-existence of other less admirable interests
- that it is possible to make, and uphold, a distinction between people and their ideas (e.g. Kant's erroneous ideas about black people does not, *logically*, invalidate his *Critiques*)
- in as much as a notion of truth is required for most concepts of knowledge and where truth is understood as possible in its subjective as well as objective aspect, a social realist concept of knowledge upholds truth
- statements of truth within all disciplines are understood as being revisable according to established

conceptual and procedural criteria. The procedural knowledge through which claims are verified and attributed as being true varies and are specific to each discipline

- forms of disciplinary knowledge have an important hermeneutic dimension: in acquiring understanding of its concepts and procedures, pupils are not only better able to think abstractly, *but also to take a (temporarily) more abstracted view of their own thought.*

As pupils/students become adults and encounter a wider range of experiences and relationships, they will be better equipped to apply this important faculty of self-reflexivity beyond issues of knowledge alone, *if they choose*. This may seem like a highly individualistic model of education but the pursuit of disciplinary based knowledge involves elements of conceptual and imaginative disruption which makes its acquisition something strange and often difficult, at least at first. And here the collective nature of the classroom can be a resource where individual pupils *learn together*. Under direction of a teacher, who acts more as a conductor than anything else, pupils approach a subject with a common aim – to understand it – and to show their understanding in the forms appropriate to the subject. Uniquely educational bonds can be formed according to intellectual and aesthetic interests as well as personal and social preferences. This is an indirect but important aspect of teaching academic subjects, which again, *could* carry over into, and enrich, adult public life.

At a time when nearly everybody is urging education to meet a plethora of social and economic problems, or to fulfil individualised needs of pupils/students conceived as consumers, to insist that there is an intrinsic value to education and disciplinary knowledge, might itself be a radical demand. If we aim to educate pupils so they are better able to integrate the gains of past disciplinary knowledge with insights from their contemporary experiences; draw on strengthened intellectual and imaginative resources; they can find solutions for the problems they will confront, and define, for themselves. Or, at a deeper level, they learn that there are different ways to make their lives and the world meaningful; they may even make a new politics in the process. And as educators, we will not be allowing a political class well past its sell-by date, whether led by Trump or Corbyn, to use education for its own ideological purposes.

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Alka Sehgal Cuthbert is an educator and independent researcher/writer on liberal education and social realist epistemology and its implications for the school curriculum. She works as a teacher for the educational charity Civitas, and she is a school governor at the East London Science School. She writes for public, professional and academic publications and is co-editor of, and contributor to *What Should Schools Teach? Disciplines, subjects and the pursuit of truth* (IoE UCL Press).