# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE AN 'ACTIVE CITIZEN'? THE LIMITATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES POSED BY DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDINGS AND DEPLOYMENTS OF 'CITIZENSHIP'

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**Abstract:** Over the last fifteen years, policy and debate on development education have become increasingly framed in terms of citizenship. Yet, despite its ubiquity, citizenship is rarely defined. It remains unclear what exactly it means to be an 'active citizen', much less a globally engaged one. Drawing from the rich body of theory and debate within the social sciences in this field, in this article I highlight both the limitations and the opportunities posed by different understandings and deployments of 'citizenship' by a range of actors and interests. Exploring the multiple exclusions and inequalities experienced by particular groups which limit and/or inhibit their agency as active citizens, I argue that citizenship, within development education and more broadly, is not something which just exists; it must be claimed. Such claims involve struggles and tensions. In short, they involve activism.

**Key words**: Citizenship; Activism; Global Citizenship Education; Neoliberalism; Exclusion; Erasures, Denial.

## Introduction

Over the last fifteen years, reflecting global trends and institutions such as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), policy and debate on development education (DE) have become increasingly framed in terms of citizenship. Be it 'active', 'engaged', 'responsible', 'global' or different combinations thereof, concepts of citizenship are now to the fore in policy and practice across the sector, both in Ireland and more broadly. For example, the Irish secondary senior cycle subject 'Politics and Society' includes 'Active Citizenship' as one of its four strands and a citizenship project as one of its two forms of assessment. International non-governmental organisation (INGO) Concern Worldwide's 'Online Classroom' resources use the terms 'Global Citizenship Education' (GCE) and 'Development Education' interchangeably. Trócaire's online resources now appear under the banner of 'Citizenship Education', and the most recent Irish Aid development education strategy is entitled a 'Global Citizenship Education Strategy' (Irish Aid, 2021), in contrast to the previous three iterations. Yet, despite its ubiquity across the sector, citizenship is rarely defined. For all the talk of citizenship, it remains unclear what exactly it means to be an 'active citizen', much less a globally active one.

This is the focus of this article. Drawing from the rich body of theory and debate within the social sciences on ever-evolving concepts and understandings, I highlight both the limitations and the opportunities posed by different understandings and different deployments of 'citizenship' by different actors and interests. I note that while, in theory, citizenship implies universal rights and equality, in practice this is not universally or globally manifest. In this context, I explore the multiple exclusions and inequalities experienced by particular groups which limit and/or inhibit their agency as active citizens, and I demonstrate how these exclusions are compounded by the rise of neoliberal influences on the institutions, discourses and practices of citizenship which severely limit its promise and ambition. I conclude by arguing that citizenship, within development education and more broadly, is not something which just exists; it must be claimed. Confronting multiple inequalities and exclusions embedded in deep-seated structures and relations of power and privilege, such claims necessarily involve struggles and tensions. In short, they involve activism.

## Classic traditions of citizenship

Academic literature on citizenship often distinguishes between liberal, communitarian, and civic republican traditions (see, for example, Isin and Turner, 2002: 3-4). Classical liberal theories promote the idea of universal rights, viewing the role of the state as being the protection of individual citizens in the exercise of their rights. Communitarians, however, take issue with the concept of the 'independent' or 'self-interested' citizen and argue that an individual's sense of identity is produced through relations with others. Community belonging and social-embeddedness are, therefore, at the heart of communitarian theory. Civic republicanism emphasises citizens' obligations to participate in public affairs and points to a more active notion of citizenship – one that recognises the political agency of people and groups. While there are differences in emphases across these three traditions, two factors are common to all. The first, conforming to the principle of equality, is the universality of rights. Equality and justice are based on rights and not on needs. The second is the political agency of individuals (following liberal traditions) and groups (following communitarian and civic republican traditions) – the right to have rights, and the right to seek those rights from the state and associated institutions, individually and collectively. Taking these different theories together and applying them to development education, therefore, citizenship is about political activism and voice aimed at securing equality and justice for all. However, as the inequalities and exclusions discussed below illustrate, achieving this is no easy task.

## The inequalities and exclusions of citizenship

While, in theory, citizenship appears to offer a universal rights-based approach, in practice this is not necessarily always the case. This is because the universalism inherent in theories of citizenship can serve to hide the practical realities of inequalities and exclusions under a veil of formal equality. A wide body of literature highlights the many limitations of universalised, unproblematised concepts of citizenship in this context. Four issues are particularly pertinent to our thinking and action in relation to development education policy and practice. These may be characterised as the 'who', the 'how', and the 'what' of citizenship, together with the rise of neoliberal influences on its institutions, discourses and practices more broadly.

### *The 'who'*

A key concern for many citizenship scholars and analysts is the diversity of inclusions and exclusions of citizenship for particular groups and individuals. Not only do people have vastly different abilities and opportunities to engage as citizens, but the policies and structures of globalised states and institutions often exclude their perspectives, analyses and experiences, thereby impeding their participation. Feminist, race, migrant and disability writers and movements are at the forefront of debates in this area (see, for example, Mamdani, 1996; Lister 1997; Young, 1997; Benhabib, 2004). Highlighting the ongoing privileging of ‘male-white-cis-able-bodied’ citizens in contemporary globalised societies, their aim is to ensure that minority groups can equally participate in social, political and civic life. Intersectional feminist approaches to citizenship, for example, consider how gender, sexuality, race, class, caste, religion, migrant status, and disability shape the degree to which an individual can be an ‘active citizen’ and participate in political and civic life (Sweetman et al., 2011).

Such concerns are highly pertinent to development education in a context where, despite a stated commitment to GCE as a lifelong process (see Irish Aid, 2021: 4), policy and practice often focuses on primary and/or second level students / ‘young learners’. The specific barriers to citizenship participation (global or local) experienced by other groups and individuals are rarely acknowledged or highlighted, with much policy and practice saying or doing little to facilitate the participation of such groups. For example, in Ireland, Irish Aid’s GCE strategy, while aiming to ‘broaden and deepen the conversation’ to include more marginalised groups (Irish Aid, 2021: 3), says nothing about the specific barriers faced by these different groups or how these might be tackled. The lack of a gendered perspective in development education policy and practice in Ireland has similarly been noted (Madden, 2019). It is no small irony that those with some of the most egregious experiences of globalised inequalities and marginalisation are effectively excluded from acts of global citizenship engagement.

### *The ‘how’*

A related consideration concerns the ‘how’ of citizenship actions. For scholars concerned with the diversity of social and economic conditions within which people survive and/or thrive, as well as the diversity of identities and groups, active citizenship is at its most effective when organised collectively. As Held (2006: 162) notes: ‘The existence of active groups of various types and sizes is crucial if the democratic process is to be sustained and if citizens are to advance their goals’. Yet, as discussed in further detail below, citizenship within development education in an Irish context is often framed purely in individualist terms, while approaches to human rights education often focus on civil and political rights and, to a lesser extent, economic and social rights, rather than on collective rights and the right to collective modes of action (see, for example, research by Bryan and Bracken, 2011; Waldron and Oberman, 2016; and Cannon, 2022 discussed later).

## *The 'what'*

A third related issue concerns the question of what exactly it means to 'take action' and to what end. While a redistribution of resources and wealth is, of course, imperative for development education advocates, inequality is relational as well as material. Challenging and tackling it therefore involves confronting and addressing the unequal and often exploitative relations that exist between people and institutions, and indeed with our environment more broadly. Iris Marion Young (2011) has argued that social justice should be understood in terms of discrimination and oppression (institutional constraints on self-development) and domination (institutional constraints on self-determination) since this enables a conceptualisation of justice which refers not only to redistribution but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and group rights. For development this means challenging the structural and institutional roots of marginalisation, oppression and domination, together with discourses and framings which support these.

Two points are important here. The first concerns the substance or target of development education. Addressing the structural and institutional roots of inequality and oppression means moving beyond a 'business as usual' approach to development education which, ignoring the failures of modernity, persists in advocating increased aid flows and the (sometimes conflicting) SDGs as a solution to global inequality. And the second concerns one of the fundamental principles of citizenship – relations with the nation state. Classically, citizenship has been conceived as membership of the nation state. Yet, in our contemporary globalised world, the notion of the nation-state can appear exclusionary and out-moded. Despite the persistence of the nation state as one of the key drivers of global capitalism (Harris and Hrubec, 2020), citizenship itself has become both globalised and exclusionary. People now hold multiple citizenships and belong to multiple polities – local, regional and global, while, as noted previously, others exist in limbo, excluded from citizenship by particular states. In this context, the Eurocentricity of the concept of citizenship as employed and deployed within global citizenship education (Parmenter, 2011), together with the erasures and foreclosures which underpin the exclusionary politics of knowledge (Stein et al., 2022) which underpin it need to be confronted and challenged.

Within this globalised context, a number of scholars (for example, Cerny, 1997; Harvey, 2005; Robison, 2006) argue that traditional welfare states, as conceived by classicists and civic republicans alike, have given way to 'market' or 'competition states' which, embedded in local and global institutions, prioritise market priorities and imperatives over those of their citizens. This problematises the role of states vis-à-vis citizens, notably given state claims to (and practices of) a monopoly of authority and force which can, at times, actually prevent citizens from exercising their rights and duties as citizens' time, attention and energy is sapped through welfare cuts and retrenchments. For development education scholars and practitioners, this means critically engaging with state discourses and framings of global citizenship and of global citizenship education within the context of states' broader marketised imperatives.

## *Neoliberal influences*

A final issue raised by scholars and theorists of citizenship concerns the influence of the New Right or the neoliberal project on framings and practices of citizenship from the 1980s forward. Although seeming to signal a return to classic liberalism with their focus on individualism, such influences actually represent an even narrower conception of citizenship than this. In the neoliberal tradition, as Hoffman and Graham (2009: 125) note, 'although neo-liberals appear to return to the classical liberal position, gone is the [implicit] assumption that humans are free and equal individuals. Free yes, but equal no!' This is because neoliberals argue that any attempt to implement distributive or social justice will undermine the unfettered operation of the free market. As David Held (2006: 171) contends:

> "Democracy is embedded in a socioeconomic system that systematically grants a 'privileged position' to business interests… this ought to be a concern to all those interested in the relation between liberties that exist in principle for all citizens in a democracy and those that exist in practice".

Indeed, many scholars demonstrate deep and ongoing contradictions between citizenship and capitalism (see, for example, Turner, 1986; Dean, 2003; Harvey, 2005; Kuttner, 2018). For development education, this means that global citizenship activism needs to be critical, radical and disruptive of global capitalism where it impinges on citizenship rights. Another important consideration concerns the associated neoliberal view that people 'fail' in society because of their own individual shortcomings and 'irresponsible' behaviours. Former British prime minister Margaret Thatcher's distinction between 'active' and 'passive' citizens in this regard, as recalled by Faulks (1998: 86), is noteworthy given the trend in current global citizenship education discourse and framing. As I have noted above, in the neoliberal tradition, active citizenship is increasingly framed in individualist, behavioural, attitudinal terms, stripping it of its structuralist, relational and political facets.

It is clear, therefore, that theories and practices of citizenship are highly complex and contested. While, in theory, citizenship implies universal rights and equality, this is not universally manifest in practice. The multiple exclusions and inequalities experienced by particular groups have material, structural and institutional roots. These are compounded by the rise of neoliberal influences on both state and state-associated institutions and on their related framings, discourses and practices. As a result, now, more than ever, citizenship, as both a status and a practice, is not something that exists on its own; it must be claimed. As Isin and Nyers (2014: 8) assert:

> "…the rights of citizenship have always involved social struggle. This includes the struggle for a right to be recognized as a right in the first place, and then the struggle for the breadth and depth of these rights".

Such claims and struggles and the inevitable tensions, dislocations and ruptures they give rise to lie at the heart of acts of 'active citizenship' within development education. They lie at the heart of citizenship activism.

## The implications of theories and critiques of citizenship for policy and practice

So what does all this mean for development education policy and practice? While, on the one hand, citizenship theories and concepts offer considerable potential and scope for political activism, on the other, their exclusions and selective framings mitigate against this. The right to have rights, and the right to be in a position to seek and claim those rights from state and state-associated institutions – the right to activism – is a powerful political tool. However, failures to acknowledge and address the multiple, overlapping inequalities and exclusions of citizenship practice, coupled with selective and increasingly narrow framings, notably the influence of neoliberalism and related conflictual relations with marketised nation states, very much mitigate against these rights. The degree to which these exclusions and selective framings are acknowledged and challenged ultimately determines the scope and potential for global citizenship activism within development education.

Research across the sector in Ireland provides some sobering food for thought in this regard. Overall, it points to an inattention to inequalities and exclusions and a dominance of selective, neoliberal framings. Collectively, these mitigate against and severely limit the scope and potential for global citizenship activism. More specifically, in relation to the 'who' of citizenship, much research and policy remains focused on students (for example Bryan and Bracken's (2011) extensive research in the field of formal education). While the important role development education can play in challenging damaging anti-immigrant discourses and narratives and fostering global solidarity has been highlighted (see for example Devereux, 2017), the complex question of how migrants and asylum seekers can be actively involved in development education activism themselves, notably in the context of the significant personal and socio-psychological impacts they face (Tarusarira, 2017), has received far less attention. In relation to 'how' citizenship is promoted and enacted, research by both Bryan and Bracken (2011 – in schools) and Cannon (2022 – with development NGOs) highlight a dominance of individualised approaches with the 'what' of citizenship actions limited to light-touch and feel-good actions. Bryan and Bracken (2011) refer to these as the 'three F's' approach – fundraising, fasting, and having fun, while Cannon (2022: 13) characterises these as 'performance rather than status… taken to simply mean doing “good things” to improve your community’. Within the related field of Human Rights Education, Waldron and Oberman’s (2016) research among primary education level teachers reveals an emphasis on individual conformity and responsibility, rather than on rights. Within the field of higher education, elsewhere I have highlighted the limitations of an individualised, vocational, skills-based approach to global education (Gaynor, 2016). Across the education field more broadly, Bryan and Mochuziki have also highlighted this dominance of a ‘skillification agenda’ which, they argue, ‘seeks to yield a productive (i.e., mentally healthy, resilient and skilled) workforce and a pliable, politically docile citizenry’ (2023: 48).

Reinforcing this analysis and highlighting the dominance of neoliberal approaches across the sector is McCloskey’s work (2019) where he has berated NGOs for failing to move beyond the SDGs and engage with the deeper structural roots of global inequality. In a similar vein, Fricke’s (2022) analysis of development NGO websites has found a lack of structural analysis of neoliberalism as the root cause of global poverty and inequality. My own content and discourse analyses of Irish Aid strategies and Irish Development Education Association (IDEA) submissions reveals an increase in neoliberal framings over time (Gaynor, forthcoming). With respect to the relational dimensions of development education activism, Dillon’s (2017) research among development education facilitators across the sector has revealed evidence of relational tensions with the state with Irish Aid, as principal funder of development education in Ireland, negatively impacting on the criticality of development education actors’ public engagement. Indeed, as Fiedler et al (2011: 18, 36) have noted, such relational tensions have existed since the advent of development education in Ireland in the 1960s. Taken together, this body of research and analysis highlights the dangers of uncritically adopting dominant framings of development / global citizenship education while ignoring their multiple and overlapping exclusions, inequalities and limitations.

## Conclusion

In an increasingly divided, unequal world where, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, more than six in seven people felt insecure (UNDP, 2022), the failures of mainstream development and the ‘modern-colonial global imaginary’ on which it rests (Stein et al, 2019) can no longer be denied.  The range, depth and scope of the multiple overlapping challenges we collectively face – be they ecological, social, political or economic – can sometimes seem overwhelming.  And it can be difficult to know how to respond.

The citizenship turn within development education, when considered and mobilised within the context of broader citizenship theories and critiques, offers one important avenue for a response.  Yet, to be effective, this means moving beyond politically neutral, inoffensive awareness raising activities to challenge and confront the multiple and overlapping inequalities and exclusions which characterise dominant neoliberal framings and practices of global citizenship education.  It means facilitating the active engagement of those most marginalised and excluded from political participation.  And it means confronting the multiple erasures and denials which characterise much of the substance of contemporary development education where, evidence and testimony to the contrary, modernist conceptions continue to dominate.  The SDGs retain a central place in framing development education policy and practice even though, for many, sustainable development is not a possibility within this modernist-colonial complex.  Indeed, it is oxymoronic.  As Stein et al (2022: 275) note:

> "…[Our ongoing] predicament is not primarily rooted in ignorance or immorality, and thus it cannot be addressed with more knowledge or more normative values… this predicament is instead rooted in foreclosures…  or socially sanctioned disavowals".

Now, more than ever, we need to consider how we can reorient and reclaim global citizenship education in a way which acknowledges and addresses these disavowals and denials.  Confronting historical and systemic erasures and exclusions as well as deep-seated relations of power and privilege – with the state, with our environment, and with each other -is uncomfortable and difficult.  It involves struggles and tensions.  It involves activism.  This lies at the heart of what it means to be an 'active citizen'.

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