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Sant Obiols, E, McDonnell, J, Pashby, K, Menendez Alvarez-Hevia, D, Sellar, S and Hanley, C (2018) 'Agonistic Controversial' Issues As A Pedagogy For Global Citizenship Education. In: American Educational Research Association 2018 (AERA 2018), 13 April 2018 - 17 April 2018, New York.

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Publisher: American Educational Research Association

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Key Words

Controversial issues; Global citizenship; citizenship education; democratic education; agonistic democracy; democratic pedagogies

Introduction and objectives

The aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities of using ‘agonistic’ engagement with controversial issues as a pedagogy for global citizenship education. Educating for Global Citizenship (EfGC) has been on the educational agenda since the turn of the 21st century. Internationally, global citizenship education is specifically targeted in the new United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNESCO, 2015). Some countries have been relatively resistant to this global orientated approach to citizenship education. In USA, for instance, the dominant nationalist approach has not yet been replaced for a model that consider the changing nature of citizenship in the context of globalization (Myers, 2006). But other territories (e.g. Colombia, Hong Kong) have explicitly included EfGC in the national curriculum (see Davies et al., 2017). In England, where this research took place, EfGC is not explicitly mentioned in the national curriculum, but it has driven policy and practice (Marshall, 2009, 2011). Two key agendas are emphasized: a) preparing students with knowledge and skills to be competitive in the global market, and b) fostering students’ values, particularly empathy and an orientation towards social justice. However, these two approaches are likely to undermine the roots underlying ‘global’ inequalities (Marshall, 2011). To overcome this challenge, a significant amount of scholarship has promoted a “critical” approach to EfGC which explicitly aims to expose and challenge power relations (e.g., Andreotti, 2006; Lapayese, 2003; al. et au., 2016). Within this later framework, this project aims to engage (rather than ignore) with discussions of power and conflict. Our question is, is ‘agonistic’ controversial issues a potential pedagogical approach for critical EfGC?

The paper draws upon empirical data collected during and after a workshop conducted in an English university. The workshop involved undergraduate and postgraduate education students, primary students, researchers and practitioners interested in global citizenship (44 participants). In the workshop, participants were presented with controversial questions related to global citizenship. Participants were required to debate (but not to reach consensus) on these controversies. Data was collected during the workshop activity via field notes and afterwards via diaries and comments written by the participants. The objective was to examine the possibilities of this approach for democratic citizenship in education. In this paper, we first examine the theoretical and pedagogical grounds of our ‘agonistic’ approach to controversial issues. We then present the pedagogical and research method, followed by some preliminary findings and a discussion in scholarly significance.

Theoretical framework

Controversial issues have largely been used as a pedagogical approach within democratic education (Author et al., 2014; Bruen & Grammes, 2016; Ersoy, 2010; Hahn & Tocci, 1990; Hess, 2008). The ‘controversial issues approach’ involves the discussion of local, national or global ‘issues’ and ‘events’ within class context, particularly ‘issues’ that are part of academic discussion and are relevant to students’ lives (Hess, 2008). Thus, controversial issues have been identified as a relevant and necessary approach to discuss controversial issues within critical EfGC (Mikander, 2016).

Controversial issues often involve seminar activity -in which students will engage in understanding a particular issue through texts - or deliberative activity – where students will reach a ‘consensual’ decision and act in consequence (Parker, 2006). Thus, in controversial issues approaches there is often an understanding that

“citizens study an issue, consider alternative solutions and potential consequences, and develop some consensus on ways to address the issue. This is not to say that all participants agree with the consensus position but that through thoughtful consideration of the issue, areas of agreement are brought into relief” (Avery et al., 2013, p. 105-106).

At the basis of the ‘controversial issues’ approach lies the political theory of deliberative democracy. According to Habermas (1984), only in an ‘ideal speech situation’ governed by norms of equality in which all have the right to question and the right to initiate reflexive arguments, is democracy possible. Similarly, for Benhabib (1994), “legitimacy and rationality can be attained with regard to collective decision-making processes if (...) collective deliberation [is] conducted rationally and fairly among free and equal individuals” (p. 30). Thus, on ‘deliberative’ controversial issues, schools and other educational settings are understood as spaces in which power relations can be neutralized and where ‘ideal speech situations’ can emerge (Habermas, 1984; Gutman, 1999). This form of democratic education aims, in part, to facilitate these neutral spaces and educate students into conflict resolution practices (Ewert, 1991).

In contrast, this project draws on agonistic and conflictual theories of democracy (Mouffe, 1999, 2005; Laclau, 2007; Ranciere, 2006). Mouffe (2005) explains that “to believe that a final resolution of conflicts is eventually possible – (...) far from providing the necessary horizon of the democratic project, is something that puts it at risk” (p. 32). And she continues by arguing that consensus “is – and always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations” (2005, p. 49). Here, the same notions of ‘equality’, ‘freedom’ and ‘rationality’ are constructed through power relations because antagonism and disagreement is essential to the social fabric (Mouffe, 1999; Laclau, 2007). Thus, social totality and neutrality are understood as impossibilities and democracy as “an unstable and volatile element which deals in disruption and conflict rather than stability and consensus” (Author, 2014, p. 50).

In this project, we wanted to examine the possibilities of controversial issues based on theories of agonistic democracy as a pedagogical approach to educate a critical global citizenry. We understand that an ‘agonistic’ approach to controversial issues cannot aim for ‘deliberation’ or ‘conflict resolution’. Rather, democracy is here understood as being essentially educative in itself (Biesta, 2006) and we aim to generate educational situations in which: (1) “political channels for the expression of agonistic conflict” are created (Ruitenber, 2009, p. 274); (2) power differences “are not an accidental but rather a constitutive force” (Ruitenber, 2009, p. 278); and (3) opportunities for re-articulation of political differences and power relations are offered. Our objective is to discuss the challenges and possibilities of this approach for critical EfGC.

Method

Pedagogical strategy

The workshop on global citizenship took place in the settings of a ‘new’ (post-1992) university in England. The forty-four participants included (1) local primary students, (2) national and international students of undergraduate and postgraduate education studies, (3) invited researchers, (4) invited educators including teachers and curriculum developers and (5) researchers including the authors of this paper. The participants were invited via professional networks and, thus, we did not attempt to generate a representative sample. Rather, this was an exploratory project and further research is needed to reach more conclusive results.

The participants were organized in seven mixed tables for discussion. Each table included, at least, one representative of the groups described above. In each table, one of the researchers led the discussion. Participants were provided with an 'agree/disagree' card. The researchers presented to their groups seven statements for discussion that had been selected previously and were informed by literature on global citizenship (Author, in press). Participants selected the statements they wanted to discuss, keeping in mind time limitations (50 minutes for the entire activity).

For each statement, the procedure was as follows. The researcher read aloud the statement and participants were immediately required to demonstrate their agreement or disagreement using their card. Two sub-groups were created in each table: those who did not agree and those who did agree with the statement. Each sub-group was required to develop at least two arguments to support their views on the statement. These arguments were later presented to the other sub-group. Participants in each table did then engaged in a discussion about the statement. After an average of fifteen minutes of discussion, participants were required to move on to the next statement. No attempt to reach consensus was promoted and the researchers were as actively involved in the discussion as the other participants.

The discussion on the tables was followed by a plenary discussion. This involved representatives from each table (normally the primary school children) coming up to the front of the room to share one of the collective statements that had been prepared to reflect participants' thinking about one or more of the statements. The whole group was then asked to hold up their cards to express agreement or disagreement with the statement.

Data collection and analysis strategies

Data was collected during and after the workshop. During the activity, two research assistants made field notes and took still photographs. At the end of the activity, all participants (including the researchers themselves) were required to provide an account of their experience in either written or oral format. Six months later, participants were required to provide an additional written account of their recollections of the event. Data was discursively analysed following the guidance of Jørgensen and Phillips (2002) for a discourse analysis based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe.

Provisional findings

Our results suggest multiple dynamics within the different discussions. When the older participants (researchers, educators and HE students) took a consensual approach, the younger participants (primary students) were more likely to take partisan positions. The adults, rather than the children, drove consensus. In the other tables, consensus was not reached, but older participants reported having to make efforts to avoid consensus. One of us explained, "I had to make an effort to counter-argue one of the kid's ideas".

Our results suggest the inherently agonistic nature of global citizenship. On the tables in which participants did not attempt to reach agreement, the debate ended with participants demonstrating competing understandings about the notions of 'citizenship' and 'globalization'. Participants, however, did fail in different sub-groups of discussion showing a constant re-articulation of political differences.

In contrast, on those consensual-orientated tables, the debate moved towards other 'more consensual' controversies. For instance, an initial debate on the statement 'In a better world, everybody would have the same resources' led to agreement on the issue of tax evasion. Rather than focusing on discussing issues about global citizenship that had initially generated opposing views, participants felt more comfortable moving towards common ground.

Scholarly significance

Our exploratory results have multiple implications for (global) democratic citizenship education practice and research. We feel that 'controversial issues' drawing upon deliberative forms of democracy have largely been tested and we are now aware of the challenges and possibilities of this approach (see e.g. Bruen & Grammes, 2016; Hess, 2004). In contrast, we feel we are only starting to recognize the educational challenges of engaging (rather than ignoring or overcoming) conflict. We believe more research is necessary to experiment with how different participants (teachers, students in various levels, researchers) experiment with 'conflict'.

In practice, we understand that whilst 'deliberative' controversial issues might be an appropriate approach to economic or moral approaches to EfGC, as Marshall (2009, 2011) has indicated in English contexts, 'agonistic controversial issues' might be a more appropriate way to work towards critical forms of EfGC. In our data, discussions about 'global controversial issues' were inherently conflictive, leading participants to reach agreement in other areas of discussion. Through 'agonistic' controversial issues, we argue, neutrality is not assumed and conflict is not only ignored by explicitly generated. Further, our results suggest that this approach might generate opportunities for basic power relations (including between, but not limited to, age groups, students and educators relations, researchers and practitioners) to be re-articulated .

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