



Examining the Significance of Social Studies in the Development of Citizens in a Democracy

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Abstract

Social studies is referred to in some countries as social education and in other countries, it is taught as citizenship education (Ross, 2006). According to Hahn (1999), not all countries have policies requiring students to have an instruction that prepares them to be citizens. Until recent debates on citizenship education, some countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, and the Netherlands did not have any programs in their education systems that were deliberately aimed at teaching political education or preparation of citizens (Hahn, 1999). The author further extols that in contrast, countries such as Denmark, Germany, and the USA have educational policies that are aimed at developing informed, participating citizens. In Great Britain, citizenship education is a contentious issue and is still at its embryonic stages as it was officially introduced in 2000 and became mandatory at secondary school level in September 2002 (Crick, 2007; Figueroa, 2004). This paper, however, attempts to examine the role of social studies in developing effective citizens and the current differing policies and practices on developing citizens among a few selected countries not only in Africa but beyond.

Keywords: citizens, citizenship, education, social studies

1.0 Introduction

Historically the notion of citizenship was not recognized by the British Government until the September 11th attacks on the United States and the riots in England in June 2001 (Figueroa, 2004). These incidents though taking place in different parts of the world (U.S and England) acted as a wakeup call and a catalyst towards the rethinking of citizen preparation in Great Britain. Denmark on the other hand has an interesting program on preparing citizens in a democracy (Hahn, 1999). They have what is called the 'folkskole' law which basically requires that schools should model democracy and students have weekly meetings where they discuss and resolve class problems, plan class trips and select topics for investigation in the class titled 'contemporary studies'. Of recent 'contemporary studies' has been replaced by 'social studies' (Hahn, 1999). Numerous scholars in the field of social studies are in concert with regards to the role of social studies as being citizen preparation (Evans, 2006; Ross, 2006; Thornton, 2005; Engle, 1988; Parker 2001b; and Jarolimek and Parker, 1984). All these authors agree that the critical role of social studies is cultivating individuals who are knowledgeable, skilful, and committed to democratic values. The themes that will be addressed are as follows;

1. Knowledge acquisition and understanding
2. Development of necessary skills
3. Development of values, attitudes and beliefs
4. Creating awareness and understanding of trends in social studies

All the themes identified are discussed as outlined above and it is interesting to note that there is at least consensus on the goal of social studies; however, there is a lot of controversy stemming from the content knowledge, purposes and methods of preparing citizens (Ross, 2006; Hahn, 2001; Sears and Hughes, 1996).

2.0 Knowledge Acquisition and Understanding

Scholars in the field have asked pertinent questions with regards to knowledge that citizens need to possess within a democracy (Pace and Bixby, 2008; Ross, 2006; Engle and Ochoa, 1988). Such questions revolve around; what basic knowledge does the citizen in a democracy need? (Engle and Ochoa, 1988); what social knowledge is most important? (Ross, 2006); what kind of knowledge is required of citizens? (Pace and Bixby, 2008). In answering these questions scholars in the field provide varied responses as discussed below. The role of social studies has been articulated as being to help students acquire and understand knowledge, develop skills and values necessary in a democracy (Evans, 2006; Ross, 2006; Thornton, 2005; Engle, 1988; Parker and Jarolimek, 1984). In this section of my chapter, I want to argue that citizens need both mainstream academic knowledge and transformative academic knowledge (Banks, 2008); Democratic enlightenment (Parker, 2008) and Contrapuntal knowledge (Merryfield, 2001; Merryfield and Subedi, 2006; Said, 1978) if they are to become knowledgeable and effective citizens in a democracy who can function in the 21st century (Banks, 2008; Marri, 2008).

- **Mainstream Academic Knowledge**

Banks (2008) explains mainstream academic knowledge as that knowledge that 'reinforces traditional and established knowledge in the social and behavioural sciences, as well as the knowledge that is institutionalized in the popular culture and the nation's schools, colleges and universities' (p. 135). It is the form of knowledge that is seen to reinforce the status quo, perpetuates inequalities and the dominant power relationships in society in that it often carries with it the codes of power. Westheimer (2007) argues that this type of knowledge puts emphasis on memorizing facts about constitutions and other legal documents, learning about various branches of government and developing patriotism to the nation-state and is the dominant form of social studies knowledge found in most social studies classrooms in the United States (Banks, 2008). Parker (2001b) on the other hand alludes to the fact that citizens in a democracy should have knowledge about liberty and pluralism, citizen rights and responsibilities and the rule of law. He further asserts that students in a constitutional democracy must abhor demagoguery, discrimination, oppression and military rule. The observation made by Banks (2008) is supported by the findings of an IEA cross-national study in six western democracies that was conducted by Hahn (2001) among 14-year-old students in the US on democratic understanding. Through student and teachers' interviews and content analysis of textbooks, it was found that these students are likely to learn about: representative democracy, three branches of the government (legislative, judiciary and executive), three levels of government, the political history of the United States. The same results were found in Germany and Italy where students also study about the structure and function of government, political history of democracy, and anti-democratic elements in the country (Hahn, 2001). The study reports reflected that in all the countries that participated in the study, schools and classroom climates were more authoritarian as opposed to being democratic (Hahn, 2001).

Engle and Ochoa (1988) provide a list of ideas on basic knowledge that students need to know as democratic citizens. They argue that first of all, democratic citizens should be able to see their nation, state, and locality in relation to the physical and social relationship to the world and the universe. This is what Merryfield et. al (2008) in arguing for the development of a world minded citizen would refer to as knowledge of global interconnectedness, that citizenship in a global age revolves around interconnectedness to people, issues, world geography, earth science, art, music and world literature so that students can see the relationships across regions and time spaces. They need to understand the environment, resources and population problems that the world is faced with and such understanding must be drawn from the different fields such as geography, geology, astronomy, biology, ecology, anthropology in order to understand the earth. Secondly they need to understand the history of social institutions such as economic, governmental, legal systems, the family, religious institutions and democratic institutions and how they have come about. Thirdly, they need to understand the nature of cultural differences over time, accommodate other cultures as well. Merryfield and Wilson (2005) see the knowledge and acceptance of different cultures as pivotal to the development of world-minded citizens as it creates an appreciation and awareness of

the values and issues of other cultures and communication with people of different languages and nationalities. They see the promotion of intercultural knowledge as essential for citizenship. Fourthly, students need to appreciate the struggle of people throughout and the values of justice, fairness, equality and freedom in a democracy (Engle and Ochoa, 1988).

The ideas discussed by Engle and Ochoa (1988) of what knowledge a democratic citizen must possess are in tandem with the notion of mainstream academic knowledge as articulated by Banks (2008), as practiced, and taught in schools. In a study conducted by Evans (2006) among secondary school teachers in England and Canada on 'educating for citizenship', he found that teachers emphasized knowledge acquisition as one of the learning goals in citizenship education and this involved understanding core concepts like rights and duties, civic duties and being informed about issues related to civic life. However, they varied on which core concepts and public issues were to be given priority. All the authors (Banks, 2008; Evans, 2006; Parker, 2001; Engle and Ochoa, 1988) agree on the fact that social content knowledge, what Banks refers to as 'mainstream academic knowledge' is necessary but it is insufficient for the development of democratic citizens. Banks (2008) and Marri (2008) are critical about mainstream academic knowledge arguing that it does not help students understand their multiple and complex identities, how their lives are influenced by globalization and their roles in the global world and does not emphasize critical thinking skills, decision making, and action. The issue of national identity has also been raised by Hahn (2001) in her IEA cross-national study where she found that in Hong Kong, the issue of national identity is avoided in school. Whereas, students in focus groups in the United States recalled studying about presidents, military leaders, and civil rights leaders. They spoke with pride about their national heritage. The students showed that they were knowledgeable about past incidents of oppression and the story they had learned was one of progress and American exceptionalism as they associated being American with freedom (Hahn, 2001; p.17). This further confirms the notion of mainstream academic knowledge that characterizes social studies classrooms in the United States.

- **Transformative Academic Knowledge**

According to Banks (2008) citizenship education needs to be re-imagined and transformed to effectively educate students to be able to function in the 21st century. In order for citizenship to do this, there must be a paradigm shift from mainstream academic knowledge to transformative academic knowledge. However Marri (2008) contends that teaching for informed citizenship requires teaching that combines both transformative and mainstream academic knowledge. 'Transformative academic knowledge consists of paradigms and explanations that challenge some of the key epistemological assumptions of mainstream knowledge' (Banks, 2008, p. 135). It is said to 'challenge mainstream knowledge that expand the historical and literary canon' (Marri, 2008; p. 75). Transformative academic knowledge as content that when presented challenges the traditional interpretations that are seen as universalistic and unrelated to human interests (Marri, 2008). Transformative academic

knowledge 'enables students to acquire information, skills, and values to challenge inequality within the communities, nations and the world; to develop cosmopolitan values and perspectives; and to take actions to create just and democratic multicultural communities and societies' (Banks, 2008, p.135). In studying transformative academic knowledge one is inclined to conclude that it is similar to Said (1978) notion of contrapuntal knowledge, however, I discuss this idea separately in this paper as shall be seen later.

In conducting a study among skilled social studies teachers on their enactments of an approach called Classroom-based Multicultural Democratic Education (CMDE in some US classrooms, Marri (2008) found that some teachers incorporated transformational knowledge in their curriculum. He uses an example of a teacher who he refers to as Mr Sinclair who when teaching about Rosa Parks made students understand that segregation in the United States was not just a historical event as it is often referred to in history textbooks. By so doing he was trying to debunk and confront some of the stereotypes, misinformation and misconceptions that students hold (Merryfield and Wilson, 2005) that Rosa Parks was not just a tired seamstress who decided to just sit in the bus but that students learn that she trained at Highlander school and her actions were part of a larger plan to fight segregation. This is what Merryfield and Wilson (2005) would refer to as confronting misconceptions and misinformation as part of the decision making process those teachers make. In another study on pre-service teachers' ideas about the role of multicultural teacher education conducted by Mathews and Dilworth (2008), it was found that even though teachers accept transformative academic knowledge as content knowledge, they are reluctant to incorporate this into their thinking about their classrooms and curriculum. The findings of this study suggest that even when teacher education programs are designed around goals of multicultural citizenship education, transformative social studies pedagogy may not make it into K-12 classrooms (Mathews and Dilworth, 2008). The authors recommend that pre-service teachers be followed into their first year of teaching to see if they apply what they have learned. The two studies discussed above present two conflicting findings on the state of transformative knowledge in the US schools hence the need for further investigation to establish the current state of affairs in social studies classrooms in the US. Banks (2008) further argues that transformative citizenship education needs to be implemented in schools if students are to attain clarified and reflective cultural, national, regional and global identifications and understand how these identities are interrelated and constructed. Such knowledge is pivotal for the development of effective citizens in a democracy.

- **Democratic Enlightenment**

Parker (2008) advocates for a form of knowledge which he argues is important in the development of citizens in a democracy. Parker opens this discussion on democratic knowledge by arguing that 'democratic citizens need both to *know* democratic things and *do* democratic things' (p.65). Democratic enlightenment according to Parker (2008) refers to 'the knowledge of the ideals of democratic living, the ability to discern just from unjust laws and action, the

commitment to fight civic inequality, and the ability and commitment to deliberate public policy...’ (p.69). The author further argues that democratic enlightenment allows political engagement which is necessary in a democracy. Political engagement involves voting, contacting public officials, deliberating public problems, campaigning and engaging in political protests (Pace, 2008). Pace (2008) elaborates on democratic enlightenment that it therefore, means understanding and embracing democratic ideals such as freedom and justice for all people. In studying about what is being taught and learned in discussion-based 12th grade government classes, Pace (2008) found that there is a gap between research and practice in that all the classes observed emphasized acquisition of knowledge. The author further opines that none of the classes took a systematic approach to the discussion of controversial public issues which have been widely advocated for (Hess, 2004). The findings of this study confirm earlier studies by Hahn (2001) who found that controversial issues are infrequently discussed in classes yet teachers say that they discuss them. From this discussion, it can be argued that democratic enlightenment is a prerequisite for political engagement and both of them work in tandem to produce political enlightenment. Parker in advocating for democratic enlightenment is critical about the conservative and progressive models of citizenship. Even though he supports the progressive aim of developing intellectually able citizens who participate directly in political affairs as opposed to the conservative aim of transmitting knowledge and values to future voters, he argues that both camps are ignorant of critical issues related to social and cultural diversity and inequality (Pace, 2008).

- **Contrapuntal Knowledge**

This essay argues to a large extent that citizens in a democracy need to possess knowledge that deconstructs the existing forms of mainstream academic knowledge and in so doing. It further borrows Merryfield’s (2001) idea of pedagogy of imperialism and Said’s idea of contrapuntal criticism (1978). In discussing the theoretical ideas of application in social studies classrooms argues that there is need to examine the pedagogy of imperialism. She contends that through examining the pedagogy of imperialism students need to inquire about relationships between empire-building and knowledge construction and how the legacy of imperialism shapes mainstream academic knowledge today (Merryfield, 2001). Willinsky (1998) further emphasizes the issue of knowledge construction and how it impacts students. This view holds that students need to understand knowledge construction, the politics of mainstream academic knowledge, post-colonial efforts to rewrite or resist master narratives and the inheritance of imperial worldviews (Merryfield and Duty, 2008, p.85). It is this knowledge that is often viewed as the truth without any consideration of how it affects those who are oppressed that needs to be unpacked and debunked. The idea of deconstructing western imperialist knowledge is in concert with Said’s (1978) idea of hybridity and contrapuntal criticism. Contrapuntal criticism is associated with a musical term for literary criticism (Razvi and Lingard, 2006; Merryfield and Subedi, 2004). Said suggested that ‘the European culture needed to be read in relation to its spatial and political relations to empire, as well as in counterpoint to the works that the colonized people themselves produced in response to

colonial domination' (Razvi and Lingard, 2006:301). It further provides justification for contrapuntal knowledge that it was based on the fact that 'all cultures are involved in one another, none is single and pure; all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic' (Said's (1993: p. xxix). The discussion on what knowledge citizens in a democracy must possess has revealed that there is a plethora of knowledge that citizens need to know, however, the argument is that knowledge is usable if it is accompanied by action, and action involves decision making. The next section looks at one of the roles of social studies, developing skills among students.

3.0 Development of Necessary Skills

According to Parker and Jarolimek (1984) one of the roles of social studies is to help students develop skills that will allow them to participate such that they can sustain and fulfil the democratic experiment. Parker (2001a) states that skills denote what students should be able to do and contend that doing involves knowing; "skilful behaviour is skilful to a great extent because of the knowledge that supports it" (p.7). Therefore, there is a relationship between knowledge and skills. In discussing the attributes of a democratic citizen it is emphasized that; "A democratic citizen's effectiveness is buttressed by the skills needed for civic engagement such as the ability to work in a group, speak in public, forge coalitions among varied interests and protest or petition for change" (Kahne and Westheimer, 2006, p.303). Skills that citizens should learn are divided into three categories mainly; Democratic participation skills, Study and inquiry skills and intellectual skills (Parker, 2001a).

- **Democratic Participation Skills**

Democratic participation skills include the ability to: listen, express and challenge opinions and reasons; participate in classroom, school and community decision making; participate in group discussions of public issues within the community, nationally and internationally with people with views different from yours; engaging in discussions leading to mediating, negotiating and compromising; working cooperatively to clarify tasks; and accessing, using, and planning community resources (Parker, 2001; Sears and Hughes, 1996). These skills as outlined by Parker (2001) and Sears and Hughes (1996) are similar to what Hahn (2001) refers to as democratic discourse and decision making. She further argues "that democracy rests on the notion that citizens should participate either directly or indirectly in making decisions that affect their lives" (p.18). To adequately prepare youth for future citizens, it is argued, that civic action needs to be connected to deliberation, discussion and decision making (Hahn, 2001). This idea of participation is further reinforced by Kahne and Westheimer (2006) that democratic citizens should be able to examine structural causes of social problems, seek solution thereby using the knowledge they have acquired to make informed decisions. Hahn (2001) further elaborates on the importance of deliberation by citizens as it affords the students the opportunity to learn how to explore, debate, and makes decisions about public policy issues and argues this is best done through discussing controversial issues. Another study conducted

among primary and secondary students in England on 'hearing students perspectives on the need for citizenship education'. The study was grounded on literature on 'pupil voice' which provides a rationale for a consultative approach to encouraging young people and children to participate in decision making within the school. The students voiced their joy in taking part in this study and twelve out of fifteen participants scored high (10 out of 10) on enjoyment and the reasons they gave for the scores were as follows:

- ❖ 'I got to have my voice heard'
- ❖ 'We got to give our opinions about what we think about things'
- ❖ 'We got different ideas from different students' (Warwick, 2007, p.269)

The findings of this study revealed that the adoption of a participatory pedagogy can help students to enjoy school by providing them with spaces to explore their different perspectives. This also augments the role and importance of students' voice within citizenship education and decision making. The ideas of students' voice as discussed in Warwick (2007) tend to reinforce the position that; at the heart of democratic education are students' voice and choice. Democratic classrooms provide frequent opportunities for students to voice their opinions and ideas about subjects under study, student talk' is not seen as an interruption to or distraction but rather as an integral aspect of students' development of knowledge and skills (Wade, 2001, p. 25). In this sense students' choice is seen to be a central feature as it allows students to make decisions about topics to study, due dates for assignments hence creating an open learning environment as shown in classrooms in Denmark through the 'folkeskole' law where students are required to model democracy, select topics to study, make decisions about issues that matter and plan educational trips (Hahn, 2001).

• **Study and Inquiry Skills**

Parker (2001a) provides a list of study and inquiry skills that social studies should develop among democratic citizens. Such skills will enable students to process information available to them in this complex information era (Parker and Jarolimek, 1984). These skills involve the ability to; use and make time lines, maps, globes and charts; locate, gather, organize and analyze information from various resources such as books, electronic media, newspaper and library; write reports and give oral reports; and distinguishing between primary sources and secondary sources; reading social studies materials for a variety of purposes such as to get the main idea, to get information, to research all sides of a controversial issue, to detect the author bias; and to formulate and test hypothesis. The skills are important in the preparation of effective citizen because knowledge and skills go together and none can operate on its own (Parker and Jarolimek, 1984). A study was conducted among teachers in Canada and England on their characterizations of citizenship education pedagogy. It was found that the teachers identified and exhibited a number of instructional practices that encouraged the development of thinking and enquiry skills (Evans, 2006). Teachers tended to use small group activities that appeared

to focus on knowledge acquisition and sharing information rather than the development of particular collaborative skills. In a few instances teachers used cooperative learning structures to nurture social skills and support community building. Canadian teachers in particular tended to put more emphasis on the use of cooperative learning structures to promote social skills while the English teachers tended to focus on developing the students' thinking skills perhaps suggesting a more academic emphasis. Evans (2006) further argues that the findings of this study suggest that the teachers' pedagogical practices tended to support the recent findings of a longitudinal study that reported a gap between policy, theory and practice leading to the conclusion that 'teacher-led approaches to citizenship-related topics were predominant in the classroom, with more participatory, active approaches less commonly used'.

- **Intellectual Skills**

According to Sears and Hughes (1996) citizenship education emphasizes skills that enable students to become effective decision makers, who can participate in society. He argues that the concept of learners as receivers of information should be replaced with a view of learners as self-motivated, self-directed problem solvers and decision makers who are developing skills necessary for learning (p.130). Some of the skills identified in Alberta Education Documents (Canada) include; skills that acquire, evaluate and use information; good communication and decision making skills; skills to resolve difference and conflicts constructively (Sears and Hughes, 1996). Skills that fall under the intellectual skills as; identifying and clarifying problems and issues; drawing analogies from other times and places and inferring cause and effect relationships; drawing conclusions based on evidence; determining; distinguishing between fact and opinion, critical thinking; detecting bias; reasoning dialogically (Parker, 2001a, p.8). In Canada citizenship education has found expression in the growth of community service programs where students develop participation skills from the primary grades by identifying and performing a service in the school and community or at home and evaluate the experience (Sears and Hughes, 1996). Sometimes they are required to develop and participate in an activity related to global or environmental issues and evaluate its impact. Community service is seen as a way to promote intellectual skills as students can move from volunteering to solving community problems, critiquing the society, and participating in political campaigns of their own choice (Sears and Hughes, 1996). To be able to do all this community service students need knowledge, and skills necessary to undertake such a task. Social studies has a mammoth task to equip students with such intellectual skills in order to develop effective citizens in a democracy.

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