Citizenship Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa

PENNY ENSLIN

a University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa

Published online: 01 Jul 2010.

To cite this article: PENNY ENSLIN (2003) Citizenship Education in Post-Apartheid South Africa, Cambridge Journal of Education, 33:1, 73-83, DOI: 10.1080/0305764032000047513

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0305764032000047513

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
ABSTRACT  How is citizenship understood in South Africa, a new democracy with a deeply divided past? This paper describes the approach to citizenship education in recent educational policy, and in curriculum developments. It does so against the background of a conceptualisation of citizenship based on both the participatory vision of the anti-apartheid struggle and on the citizen as presented in the new Constitution. The shifting nature of the divisions that still deeply divide this society is explored, together with tensions between what can be called the official conceptualisation of citizenship and a more popular interpretation of citizenship as access to socio economic rights. This tension poses potential problems in the democratic polity, as well as a challenge for citizenship education.

A DIVIDED SOCIETY

Conceptions of citizenship are best understood in context, especially in divided societies. In their approach to the complex concept of citizenship, Kymlicka and Norman (1994) pose the question: what is it to belong to a particular society, and what kind of life is it possible to live in this form of society? South Africa’s emergent conception of citizenship has to be understood in the context of the negotiated transition to democracy that was marked by the election of 1994, as well as the period of struggle against apartheid that preceded it. This still recent transition and the radical break with the past that it is supposed to represent means that South Africans do not yet have a settled conception of citizenship to draw on. While a formal and dramatic shift from the past has taken place in many respects, much of our notion of citizenship is still constituted by apartheid and informed by the project of overcoming its lingering effects. Thus citizenship education too is still in a formative stage.

It is difficult to find an example of a more divided society than South Africa was in 1994, when its first democratic elections marked the transition from apartheid to democracy. The new government of national unity assumed responsibility for a society systematically fractured across a range of divisions: not only by race, class and gender, but also by ethnicity and language, and between rural and urban dwellers as well as between those with land and the landless. The divisions were a consequence not only of apartheid but also of the exigencies of the struggle against it. As Ramphele observes: ‘Apartheid divided
the country; communities were polarised in the struggle against it. Emphasising
the differences between black and white people, workers and managers, young
and old, poor and rich, was essential to the whole project of mobilising support
for the cause one was espousing’ (2001, p. 7).

The historical divisions and inequalities produced by colonialism and
apartheid policies were stark. Inequalities have been particularly marked in
education. Most tellingly, even after the shift in policy in the eighties towards
narrowing the gap in expenditure between black and white schools, by 1990–91
annual per capita expenditure was R930 per African pupil as against R3,561 per
white pupil (South African Institute of Race Relations, 1992, p. 195). Divisions
of the kind that existed at the moment of transition from apartheid to democ-

Since the transition to democracy in 1994 a plethora of policies have been
formulated to address every form of division. Legislation that underpinned
apartheid, such as classification of the population by racial groups and residential
and educational segregation, has been dismantled. New provinces have
replaced the old division of the country into ‘white’ provinces and ‘homelands’
for blacks, a hopelessly unrealistic dream that ignored the tide of black migrants
who moved to the urban areas in search of work. A programme of land
redistribution now aims to have 30% of all agricultural land in black hands by
2015, and a variety of programmes aim to provide low-cost housing, water and
electricity to the poor. As a result of such developments, the nature and
significance for citizenship of the historical inequalities nearly a decade after the
transition is now less clear than it was in 1994. Also of crucial significance in
addressing the divisions caused by South Africa’s history of oppression, the
Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), which issued its findings in
1998, set out to deal with a violent and painful past by investigating gross
human rights violations between 1960 and 1994. While there has been debate
about the extent to which the TRC has revealed the truth and fostered
reconciliation, there is a consensus that it did succeed in addressing some of the
divisions that mark South African society.

The divisions are now less stark but still considerable. So much so that
President Thabo Mbeki has argued that South African society comprises two
nations. In a well-known speech in 1998, then Deputy President Mbeki de-
scribed South Africa as divided into ‘two nations, the one black and the other
white’ (quoted in Nattrass & Seekings, 2001, p. 45). While the Interim Consti-
tution of 1993 committed the country to equal opportunity and development,
Mbeki described the white nation as relatively wealthy and the larger black
nation as poor. As a result, while the former is able to exercise the right to
equality of opportunity, the latter lives in underdeveloped conditions and with
little possibility of exercising the right to equality of opportunity. As Nattrass
and Seekings point out, the view expressed in this speech is regularly stated, in
conjunction with data about inequalities between black and white (p. 45).

Yet Nattrass and Seekings question the argument that reduces inequality to
race, that ‘black equals poor and white equals rich’ (p. 47). As far as economic
inequality goes, as against social and cultural gaps between black and white, they argue that Mbeki misunderstands changes in the nature of inequality in this country. Instead, they claim that it is inaccurate to assert that black and white are synonymous with poor and rich. As policies were deracialised during the last decades of apartheid, black workers’ upward mobility and access to jobs previously reserved for whites, together with rising unemployment, led to a decline in interracial inequality, which was particularly marked in the black population.

Whether citizens of the new democracy see themselves as belonging to two nations is debatable. Mattes (2002) challenges the common view that in divided societies like South Africa people identify more readily with one of its ethnic, racial or religious components rather than with the society as a whole. While Mattes thinks that Mbeki’s economic diagnosis is fairly accurate, he questions the application of ‘nation’ to the economic divisions, on the basis of surveys since 1995 which reflect a popular consensus on the existence of a political community transcending economic as well as racial divisions. But while one might question the two nations thesis, there is no doubt that this is still a very divided society. The issue is rather how to define those shifting divisions. They are undoubtedly complex, still markedly present between ethnic and language groups, and of increasing significance between HIV positive and HIV negative, as a bitter debate rages between the government and activist groups about the obligations of the state to provide treatment for AIDS and to prevent HIV transmission, particularly between mother and child. Political life remains bedeviled by the solidarity politics created by apartheid and the struggle against it (Ramphele, 2001, p. 7), and the effects of traditional gender practices on girls and women limit their rights and their opportunities (Enslin, 2000).

Against this background, this paper has two aims. One is to develop an account of the emerging, official concept of citizenship in South Africa, while suggesting that it is in tension with some popular expectations. My other aim is to sketch the approach to citizenship education in the new policy context. A tension will be identified between a vision of active citizenship on the one hand and a conception of citizenship as access to opportunities and socio economic goods on the other. Although South Africa’s emergent notion of citizenship can only be adequately understood in context, international debates about the meaning of this particularly complex concept can help to frame citizenship in South Africa and to pinpoint emerging challenges to citizenship education.

EMERGING CONCEPTS OF CITIZENSHIP

The emerging conception of citizenship draws on recent developments rather than a long-standing tradition. South Africa’s developing conception of citizenship draws mainly on two ingredients: the anti-apartheid struggle and the new Constitution. The struggle against apartheid forged a highly participatory notion of democratic citizenship. Popular organisations such as trade unions and civic organisations established models of debate, consultation and accountability that
remain influential. A vision of active citizenship, reflected especially in the 1980s in mass mobilisation against the old order, was later extended in the early nineties to the consultation process which the Constitutional Assembly tried to follow in the writing of the 1996 Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996). Drawing on this idea of the active citizen, the Constitution provides a framework for a transformed citizen who will strive to overcome the past. Active citizenship will be promoted by public participation projects whose task is to provide the public with access to central and provincial government (sections 59, 72, 118).

The Constitution’s Preamble acknowledges the suffering of those who struggled against the injustices of the past. It declares the intention to ‘Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights’ (section 1), which will create an open and democratic society whose citizens will be protected by law and will enjoy a better quality of life. Unsurprisingly, equal citizenship is emphasised, in contrast to the deprivation of the majority of South Africans’ rights as citizens under apartheid, which gave to whites the status of full citizens while providing restricted, ethnically ascribed, second class citizenship for blacks in separate and ostensibly independent states. So one of the Founding Principles of the Constitution is common citizenship and the equal enjoyment of an array of citizen rights including security of the person, freedom of belief, religion and opinion, expression, assembly and association.

A range of rights are recognised including, significantly, a number of socio-economic rights. The rights of children are emphasised, including the right to education. So are the rights to access to adequate housing, to health care, and to food and water. Discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, marital status and ethnic origin is prohibited. Provided it is not inconsistent with the Bill of Rights, everyone has the right to participate in their chosen cultural life. This extensive range of rights, with socio-economic rights prominent among them, leads Sunstein (2001) to describe the Constitution as transformative rather than preservative.

Reflecting now on the place of rights in the Constitution, it can be observed that Marshall’s classic typology of citizenship into civil rights (freedom of speech and belief, access to justice and the ownership of property), political rights (political participation) and social rights (to socio-economic goods and the free exercise of one’s heritage) (1950) takes on a special aspect in South Africa. Here, formally at least, the rights of citizenship were acquired by all when power was transferred from the old exclusive order to a new democratic one. While Marshall’s analysis tells a story of the achievement of these different types of rights in England over the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively, his account throws considerable light on our context in which, supposedly, all three parts of citizenship were extended to all at once.

One of the central insights of Marshall’s account of citizenship is the attention he pays to education and its significance. He connects the education system, along with social services, closely with the social effects of citizenship.
Civil rights, in turn, ‘are designed for use by reasonable and intelligent persons, who have learned to read and write’ (p. 174). And political democracy requires an educated electorate. So education is a right not only for children and for Marshall, adults also have the right to have been educated. And members of society have a personal and a social duty to exercise their right to education, as well as to the welfare of the community.

In spite of criticisms of President Mbeki’s ‘two nations’ argument, it embraces Marshall’s perception of the connection between education and the exercise of rights. The President’s concerns about socio-economic disadvantage, especially in education, point to both serious impediments to citizenship and to the vital role of education in their removal.

So much for the conception of citizenship which the new democracy inherited from the anti-apartheid struggle and which is so admirably articulated in the new Constitution. But citizenship in a democracy is affected by the political health of the polity. It is also enacted in the day-to-day activities of a society, not least in the ways in which its constitution is lived—or not—by its members. Here the current evidence is, at least in some respects, not encouraging. In his analysis of the achievements and prospects for South Africa’s new democracy, Mattes (2002) notes the achievement of a transition from apartheid institutions, from conflict to common nationhood, successful elections at national, provincial and local government levels, sound management of the economy, and improved opportunities for many black South Africans. But Mattes’ observations on declining levels of political and community participation, as well as lukewarm support for democratic rule, lead him to comment that the constitutional commitment to a multi-party system and to inclusive rights is threatened by the dominance of one single political party and by limited executive accountability.

In spite of being internationally admired, the Constitution provides a framework that is flawed in the interaction it allows between political parties and voters. Most crucially, the system of proportional representation based on party lists, while achieving representation of all the diverse groups in the electorate, provides no direct means for the voters to communicate with, let alone exert ultimate control over their elected representatives. Mattes refers to a set of public opinion indicators that suggest that the present political culture is insufficiently mature to ensure the consolidation of democratic practices.

South Africans’ support for democracy is lukewarm and has not grown in any substantial way over the past five years. With increasingly tenuous connections between the voters and the government and increasing policy disaffection, trust in government and satisfaction with economic policy and political performance are declining sharply. Perhaps most importantly, the web of organisations and the impressive tradition of popular participation that emerged to challenge the apartheid system has withered. Indeed, across almost all the key indicators of democratic political culture, South Africans compare quite poorly to
their neighbours throughout southern Africa and elsewhere on the continent. (p. 31)

Moreover, Mattes points to two further indications that do not bode well for the future of democratic citizenship. The first is that his survey data on interactions with government and on levels of citizen participation suggest a passive citizenry in which levels of interest in politics are low. The second disturbing trend is that South Africans are inclined to rate socio-economic goods more highly as constitutive features of democracy than procedural issues like the holding of regular elections, free speech and competition between parties. Mattes suggests that this is probably a reaction to South Africa’s economic problems and to weak institutions. Declining support for democracy can be attributed to slow progress in the delivery of the socio economic goods in terms of which many understand democracy. Mattes indicates two key requirements needed to address these problems. First, problems of representation and participation must be addressed by improving the design of the parliamentary system, allowing more effective representation and better contact between citizens and those they elect to represent them. A national survey by the Electoral Task Team, recently asked to review the electoral system ahead of the next general election in 2004, has found that ‘most South Africans were unhappy with levels of accountability experienced at present with elected public officials, particularly MPs’ (Business Day, 2002, p. 14) and would prefer to elect MPs from their areas. The survey also reports on the need to increase public participation rates and contact between citizens and formal political institutions. Secondly, Mattes suggests that civic education in schools and by organisations in civil society should build a culture of citizenship that teaches the value of democracy and the capacities needed for political participation.

If Mattes is right, indications of a weak democratic culture accompanied by an assumption that citizenship is a matter of access to socio-economic goods suggests that this popular conception is in tension with the official interpretation of active citizenship. What are the implications of this tension? McLaughlin (1992) addresses the complexity of democratic citizenship by mapping the concept in terms of minimal and maximal interpretations, located on a continuum. This he does with reference to four features of the concept of citizenship: the identity it confers, the virtues that citizenship requires, the degree of political involvement the individual is expected to engage in, and the social prerequisites necessary for citizenship to be effective.

The official version of democratic citizenship in the new South Africa is clearly a maximal one. It posits a citizen who is expected to hold an identity, as a member of a democratic country, which entails not only rights but also duties. The vision of citizenship reflected in the Constitution is also maximal in terms of the virtues it expects; citizens are assumed to be committed to the common good, to contributing to debates and decision-making at national level, as well as to the local, immediate concerns that are the focus of a more minimal conception of the citizen. This commitment is expected to be exercised in a
participatory engagement with democratic institutions. The social prerequisites for citizenship, the fourth feature of McLaughlin’s contrasting conceptions of minimal and maximal citizenship, are not explicitly alluded to in the Constitution. But they are strongly present in educational policy and its assumptions, to which I will turn in the next section. They are also partially alluded to in Mbeki’s two nations speech, where the President talks about the prerequisites for the exercise of citizenship as rights.

Admirable as it is, the official, maximal version of citizenship does not, if Mattes is right, coincide with more popular and possibly minimal conceptions of what it is to be a citizen of this society at this time. The elite accommodation of the negotiated transition and of the process of framing the Constitution may be remote from the concerns of the poor. It is possible that their understanding of citizenship may be in serious tension with the official version, and that the two may lie at the further extremes of the maximal–minimal continuum. This should be a cause for concern, especially if a popular preoccupation with entitlement to goods erodes willingness to engage in active participation for the common good. Those involved in promoting citizenship would do well to heed Ramphele’s warning that: ‘For the majority of black South Africans the social rights of all citizens as entrenched in the new National Constitution remain a far-off dream. The egalitarian and integrative potential of modern citizenship as Marshall defends it remains unrealised’ (2001, p. 4). This danger presents special challenges for citizenship education.

EDUCATION AND CITIZENSHIP

The New Order inherited a situation in which an entire population needed to adjust to democracy. Citizenship education since 1994 has not just been a matter of educating the youth but also about helping adult citizens to acquire a new sense of citizenship and its implications. Hence the flurry of voter education programmes for adults before elections, especially the transitional one of 1994. In the schooling system education is viewed as both a prerequisite for the full exercise of citizenship and as a site for citizenship education for the community.

One of the most marked features of unequal citizenship under apartheid, particularly if viewed in Marshall’s terms, was the education system. Unequal citizenship was not only implicit in the provision of schooling; for white pupils in particular a differentiated understanding of citizenship was taught as part of Youth Preparedness, which cast whites as threatened from without and propagated an authoritarian acceptance of authority. Equity has been a central theme in educational policy since 1994, and equal citizenship has emerged as a strong thread in that policy.

tution are acknowledged as a moral framework for policy and legislation (p. 17), as are educational rights as a feature of equal citizenship (p. 19).

The White Paper promised the overhaul of curricula, and there is now a common curriculum for all state schools. The outcomes-based national curriculum for Grades 1 to 9 subsequently declared that, in contrast with the divisions fostered by past curricula, the new curriculum gives emphasis to common citizenship (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 5). At the launch of the curriculum the then Minister of Education Sibusiso Bengu described it as aiming to produce ‘thinking, competent citizens’. Among the eight learning areas introduced as part of Curriculum 2005, the Human and Social Sciences aim to produce ‘responsible citizens in a culturally diverse, democratic society’ (Ministry of Education, 1997, p. 49). One of the specific outcomes of this learning area is active participation in the promotion of a democratic, equitable and just society. Another is that learners will be helped to exercise their responsibilities and rights as citizens.

Schools are to contribute to citizenship and democracy education through more than the formal curriculum. The South African Schools Act (Department of Education, 1996) provides for democratic governance of schools with educators, learners and primarily parents working in partnership with the state in deciding the policies and rules that govern their schools. With representatives of these constituencies in schools exercising control over issues like the administration and use of the school grounds and buildings, the extra-mural curriculum, the school’s mission statement and code of conduct, as well as the purchase of books and other learning materials, a participatory model of governance offers opportunities for members of school communities to learn and exercise citizens’ capacities. As vehicles for citizenship education, school governing bodies may be provided with training in the capacities needed to carry out their functions. Within schools, Representative Councils of Learners have been introduced as part of the policy of further promoting democratic participation in school governance as well as an opportunity to learn skills for later exercise of citizenship.

The state’s ambitious commitment to equity in education, together with its constitutional obligations to socio-economic rights, have opened it to criticism for tardiness in implementing its own policy goals. While some progress has been made towards equity: ‘About 45% of schools have no electricity, 27% lack clean water, 66% have inadequate sanitation and 12% no sanitation at all and 34% do not have telephones’ (Mail & Guardian, 2002b, p. 9). It is alleged that huge amounts of money allocated for improving facilities for the most disadvantaged were unspent in 2001 (ibid.). Areas of neglect, affecting the most vulnerable or marginalised, include rural and farm schools, refugees, the growing number of AIDS orphans left without means of support after the deaths of their parents, illiterate adults, those with disabilities, and girls because of the prevalence of sexual harassment and violence in some schools. Given the consequent likelihood that some historical inequalities may widen, the government is likely soon to face mobilisation and even litigation from organisations like the Equal
Rights Project challenging it to meet its entrenched Constitutional obligations to rights to education (Mail & Guardian, 2002b, p. 9). The state has also battled to make schools functional again following their involvement in resistance to apartheid education, which rendered many of them unable to deliver learning opportunities to their communities.

But although progress towards the equalisation of citizens’ rights to education may be patchy, the record in developing a clear and appropriate conception of preparation for citizenship is better. The Minister of Education set up a working group on Values in Education in February 2000, in the context of a widespread sense of unease among South Africans that the democratic ideals that marked the negotiated transition of 1994 had been displaced by continuing violence and social disintegration. After public debate in response to an initial report, the Manifesto on Values, Education and Democracy was issued (Department of Education, 2001). The Manifesto articulates a framework for values education which is both attentive to citizenship and strongly focused on the Constitution.

Working explicitly with the values enshrined in the Constitution, the Manifesto aims to show how ‘the Constitution can be taught, as part of the curriculum, and brought to life in the classroom, as well as applied practically in programmes and policy making by educators, administrators, governing bodies and officials’ (Department of Education, 2001, p. 1). Among the critical outcomes of the National Qualifications Framework to which it refers, the Manifesto highlights ‘responsible citizenship’. Ten values are identified: democracy; social justice and equity; equality; non-racism and non-sexism; ubuntu (human dignity); sustaining an open society; accountability (responsibility); rule of law; respect; and reconciliation. Each of these values is described with reference to the Constitution. The Manifesto is cast as ‘a practical framework for instilling and reinforcing the culture of communication and participation … [which are] a crucial step in nurturing a sense of the democratic values of the Constitution in young South Africans’ (p. 2). Sixteen strategies for fostering constitutional values in the education system are discussed in detail. A number of these strategies either mention citizenship or are of obvious relevance to its promotion. One of them, ‘Nurturing a culture of communication and participation in schools’, is intended to enable learners ‘to become open, curious and empowered citizens’ (p. 6). By emphasising that education for ‘meaningful participation in society’ means educating for citizenship as well as for the workplace, the Manifesto also reaffirms the participatory conception of democratic citizenship inherited from the struggle tradition and affirmed in the Constitution.

Although citizenship as such is mentioned several times in the Manifesto, the document is primarily aimed at identifying a set of values to be fostered in schools and strategies for their pursuit. Yet, oddly, the Manifesto could be described as more successful in its articulation of values for democratic citizenship than values in general. For a preoccupation with the values of the public, democratic sphere, admirably drawing as the Manifesto does on the Consti-
tution, leads to some neglect of the personal and the private (Pendlebury & Enslin, 2002). The Manifesto could, indeed, in the way it draws on constitutional values, be interpreted as an articulation of ‘constitutional patriotism’ (Habermas, 1992; Booth, 1999). Apart, that is, from its disappointing inclusion of ‘Nurturing the new patriotism’ among its sixteen proposed strategies. Not only is patriotism cast inappropriately as a strategy rather than a value. While part of the account of this strategy insists on constitutional patriotism rather than jingoism, the activities that are proposed for encouraging patriotism lapse into the rituals and reverence for national symbols that characterised apartheid education. Reverence for anthems, flags, mottoes, sports insignia and national symbols are less likely to promote the critical citizenship and deliberative capacities which constitutional patriotism requires. To address these, the Manifesto could have included the development of political literacy among its strategies. This problem aside, the Manifesto achieves a balance between education for rights and for responsibilities. It must also be commended for the place it accords to history among the strategies proposed, for acknowledging the socio-economic rights of children and the role of schools in their promotion, and for its attention to the needs of girls for safe schools and promotion of genuine equity.

CONCLUSION

What challenges face citizenship education after nearly a decade of democracy in South Africa? This paper has shown how, at the heart of policy, a coherent and mostly commendable approach has been taken, drawing on a coherent official articulation of the idea of citizenship. It is too early to gauge accurately whether policy uptake in the schools will succeed in the ambitious task of creating transformed citizens—and far too much has already been demanded of schools and their teachers. The challenges to the official, participatory conception of the citizen from popular expectations may undermine citizenship education and could have serious consequences. The state’s success in delivering on its ambitious constitutional goals may determine the future viability of the very idea of democratic citizenship.

Correspondence: Penny Enslin, School of Education, Education Campus, University of the Witwatersrand, PO Wits, 2050, South Africa.

REFERENCES


MAIL & GUARDIAN (2002a) Education’s marginalized millions, April 19–April 25.

MAIL & GUARDIAN (2002b) Now it’s Asmal’s turn in court, May 3–May 9.


