Citizenship Education: Toward a Relationality and Care Approach

Shaima Shehneh[1]
Independent Scholar, Turkey

Abstract: Responding to public rhetoric and policy documents advocating for citizenship education as the type of education that will safeguard democracy and address societal challenges, schools around the world have been including citizenship education as a discrete part of the curriculum. While the field remains complex and contextual, some of the major aims maintain the cultivation of a critical, active, responsible, democratic citizen. In this paper, I explore apolitical and exclusionary approaches to citizenship education by problematizing terms such as participation, human rights, autonomy, and critical thinking. Through emphasizing the citizen-in-context, I draw on Biesta's notion of subjectification to approach citizenship education in a pluralistic society. In challenging a universal neutral framework of human rights, I propose citizenship as care and relationality to defy exclusion and unjust dominant discourses and practices in the field. I also reflect on my own personal journey as a researcher from the periphery, conducting research in and on the center. I bring in some memos and journals that highlight some tensions and struggles as well as channels of emancipation and relief.
Keywords: Citizenship education, democracy, teacher education, social justice, decoloniality

Emphasizing how positionality affects both the framing of research questions and the interpretation of findings, this article draws on my experiences as a scholar from the Global South engaging in research within a Western academic context. The paper draws on insights from my doctoral research on teacher education and citizenship education in two European countries between the years 2016 and 2019. My insights arise from a fundamental understanding of the challenges scholars from the global south and diaspora regularly face in Western academic systems. This manuscript is also informed by the need to establish a space for intercultural ethical and epistemic justice between hegemonic and non-hegemonic views. Building on decoloniality research and critical pedagogy and drawing on my own experiences as an academic from the diaspora, this article aims to move beyond a dominant western, market-driven, and exclusionary approach to citizenship education and propose a critical/decolonial approach that is grounded on human interactions and reciprocity.

Educational systems around the world have been advocating for citizenship education as the type of education that will maintain democracy, safeguard human rights, promote peace, and address global and societal challenges (Caraballo & Gerwin, 2022; DeJaeghere, 2009). It has become one of the central aims of public schools generally and the social studies curriculum in particular (Fischman & Hass, 2014). These aims are integrated with social studies subjects, included through cross-curricular themes, or taught as an independent subject. According to Howe and Covell (2005), citizenship education involves the following:

> [A]ctive exercise of rights and social responsibilities; appreciation for the citizenship virtues and values of tolerance, civility, and critical democratic thinking; the recognition

---

[1] Corresponding Author: PhD graduate and a teacher. E-mail: shaima-mhd@hotmail.com

of differentiated citizenship; the identification with the global community as well as with a particular state [...] and to foster a sense of genuine belonging among citizens and to encourage their active and meaningful participation in society. (p. 57)

Knowledge, skills, and values are the three common elements associated with citizenship education. The term 'values' is sometimes substituted by 'attitudes' or 'dispositions'. A fourth element, behaviors, is also sometimes added. Although the civic aim of education is an ancient concern, recent decades have witnessed a revival with an emphasis on democratic engagement. Some researchers (Hess, 2009) differentiate between "civic education," which implies "'fitting in' to society as it currently operates," and "democratic education," which "highlights the dynamic and contested dimensions inherent in a democracy" (p. 14). While this differentiation in terms occurs in British contexts, it does not occur in other contexts, and terms are often used interchangeably.

While the field remains complex and contextual, some of the major aims maintain the cultivation of a critical, active, responsible, democratic citizen. Researchers draw attention to the gap between policy and what happens in school in relation to citizenship education (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Approaches to citizenship education in schools are described as limited and exclusionary (Banks, 2020; DeJaeghere, 2009), instrumental and outcome-oriented (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Fischman & Hass, 2014), and often nationally focused (Schulz et al., 2010).

Biesta and Lawy (2006) distinguish between *education for democracy,* which involves preparing children to participate in a democratic society by teaching about democratic institutions and the constitution and providing them with skills and attitudes such as practicing and appreciating the freedom of speech and decision-making and *teaching through democracy* which involves having children experience democracy by having them live and participate in a school environment that is based on democratic curriculum, relations, and processes. There have been recent calls for transformative approaches to how young people view "democratic" engagement. The concern is that while there is a potential increase in political life, participation, and awareness of diversity, the structures that produce and reproduce injustices and inequality remain untouched (Banks, 2017; McCowan, 2009).

In this paper, I rely on reflexivity in qualitative research (Berger, 2013) to ensure integrity and reciprocity to address some aspects of my research data as well as my own positionality. I critically examine my assumptions and positionality as an academic from the global south and highlight exclusionary practices and hierarchical dynamics between Western and non-hegemonic knowledge and ethics. In addressing the apolitical and exclusionary approaches to conceptualizing a "good" citizen, I reflect on terms such as participation, human rights, autonomy, and critical thinking and problematize the rational approaches that seem to characterize most of the citizenship education initiatives (Fischman & Hass, 2014). I suggest a decoloniality approach (Zembylas, 2018b) and propose adopting citizenship as care and relationality to defy exclusion and unjust dominant discourses and practices as well as epistemic and social injustices.

This manuscript argues for a decisive shift toward decolonial frameworks, which reject these exclusionary models and instead promote relational, culturally grounded approaches to civic education. My position as a scholar from the Global South profoundly shapes my perspectives in examining citizenship education. These experiences provide me with critical insights into the challenges marginalized voices face in European academic content, especially in areas where colonial legacies persist. I seek to illuminate the intersectionality of citizenship by exploring how my narrative aligns with decolonial themes, as well as resistance, identity, and citizenship, characterizing the experiences of diaspora scholars.

Theoretical Framework

Westheimer and Kahne (2004) discuss three typologies of the citizen that characterize citizenship education programs: the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. A personally responsible citizen is expected to obey the laws, be respectful, recycle, etc. A participatory citizen may engage in planning to address societal problems. The justice-oriented citizen, often the least practiced model, critically approaches societal problems by attempting to address their core causes, which is often avoided or superficially addressed by teachers.

Personally responsible citizens act autonomously and responsibly. For example, they "work and pay taxes, obey the laws, recycle, donate blood, volunteer in times of crisis" (Neoh, 2017, p. 27). Some researchers have related the tendency to promote a personally responsible kind of citizen at schools to the dominating neoliberal apolitical approach to education (Masschelein & Quaghebeur, 2005; Neoh, 2017). Responding to the high level of youth apathy in the 1980s, the individualistic movement appeared in Britain to prepare young people for active citizenship. However, although it aimed for the common good, active citizenship ironically illustrated "a depoliticisation and privatization of the very idea of citizenship" (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 11). Biesta and Lawy (2006) argue that citizenship education has involved a linear approach to education with predictable outcomes and has failed to consider the context that shaped individuals.

On the other hand, citizenship education based on socialization and constructing a homogenous identity has been challenged by today's pluralistic classrooms and complex diasporic identities. Biesta (2011a) argues against the socialization or "a domestication of the citizen" (p. 142) into a particular civic identity. Instead, he suggests a subjectification approach that focuses on the representation and acting of a student's agency without predefined identities and orders. This approach indicates that we cannot for sure decide what kind of learning or identity each student should engage with before we engage with the student as a unique subject. He even went on to propose the notion of the "ignorant citizen" (Biesta, 2011b) as a new conceptualization of the "good" citizen that is "more political than social, more concerned about collective than individual learning […allowing] for forms of agency that question the particular construction of the political order" (Biesta, 2011b, p. 44). Thus, the study develops within a subjectification framework that requires constant interrogating of democracy and social cohesion (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Carr, 2008; DeJaeghere, 2009). Thus, cultivating democratic citizens entails creating citizens who are both *for* and *against* the state and its institutions and who are able to engage in moral and political conflict (Verducci, 2008).

This paper aligns with Freire's critical pedagogy and is committed to social justice by urging learners to question certainties. Critical pedagogy connects education, democracy, and social justice and acknowledges the context in which educational activity takes place (Freire, 1973). It also acknowledges that cultural reproduction and dominant social ideologies are often present in educational intuitions and thus invite educators to constant self-reflection on their authority and positionality (Giroux, 2007). This paper thus calls for a decolonial approach to citizenship education and cultural ethics, which requires deep shifts in consciousness to resist hegemonic ideologies and practices. I provide a revisit of my research and experiences as an academic from the diaspora and global south with decolonial lenses to rethink post-colonial and dominant norms and relations and the way others and their knowledge are perceived. I propose a conceptualization of citizenship as care and relationality that concerns emotional and human interdependence (Zembylas & Bosalek, 2011) as a channel to salvage joy, healing, and life. Aligning with Freire's concept of critical pedagogy and Hooks' Radical Love, this analysis critiques colonial models and embodies a resistance to academic hegemony. My own journey as a Global South scholar in a European setting has underscored the challenges of sustaining

decolonial perspectives. In navigating these academic spaces, asserting my epistemic sovereignty becomes an act of radical self-love and resistance, directly informing this study's theoretical stance.

The paper employs key concepts such as decoloniality, relational citizenship, and Biesta's notion of subjectification. While these frameworks align well with the themes of the special issue, they would benefit from a tighter integration with additional theoretical perspectives, particularly Critical Pedagogy as articulated by Freire and the notion of Radical Love as a Revolutionary Act proposed by Hooks (2014). By incorporating these frameworks, the manuscript can better explore the intersections between critical pedagogy and decoloniality, particularly in terms of how they manifest in practical pedagogical approaches within citizenship education.

To enhance this discussion, it is essential to position the argument more firmly within the context of resistance against colonial education models. This involves examining how care concepts and relationality can function as acts of radical self-love in educational settings, resonating with Hooks' advocacy for love as a transformative force. Such an exploration aligns the manuscript with the call for creating "nurturing spaces of joy, love, and life" and emphasizes the potential of citizenship education to foster environments where students can thrive emotionally and intellectually. By foregrounding these theoretical connections, the manuscript can articulate a more robust and nuanced understanding of the role of education in shaping equitable citizenship practices.

Building on subaltern studies and postcolonial critiques, this framework challenges the hegemony of Western education models, which are often exported to the Global South under the guise of 'development.' Such models can undermine local knowledge systems and impose a narrow vision of citizenship that excludes non-Western cultural values (Howard & Maxwell, 2023). By applying a relational approach, this study argues for citizenship education that respects epistemic diversity and recognizes the relevance of in-context micro-level human relations that diverge from pre-defined individualistic ideals.

Case and Methodology

Inspired by "the fluid, evolving and dynamic nature" of the qualitative approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 31), I embarked on qualitative research to explore citizenship education and how it was conceptualized and delivered by teachers in schools in two countries in Europe. These countries, like the rest of the continent as well as the world, were in the process of introducing new reforms and legislations to support citizenship education following national and supranational recommendations. My position as an 'outsider' in European academic spaces shaped my methodological choices, encouraging a qualitative approach that foregrounds voices and experiences often marginalized in Eurocentric research. By conducting semi-structured interviews and engaging in participatory observations, I aimed to create space for relational narratives that reflect both the research and the researcher's lived realities.

I collected data between March 2017 and June 2019. Interviews were the main method of data collection. Thirty semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted, 26 of which were with teachers and the rest with policy experts and teacher educators. All the teachers were involved in teaching citizenship education, whether via a separate subject, an integrated subject, cross-curricular themes, or special school projects. Besides the interviews, I also relied on data collected over fourteen hours of observation at different schools in both countries. I also studied relevant documents, such as supranational (mainly EU) and national documents on citizenship education, the curricula of citizenship education in both countries, as well as class materials, school-based strategies, evaluation criteria, and activity sheets. The research data was analyzed and coded manually using the qualitative content analysis (QCA) segmentation process

(Schreier, 2012) by dividing the data into different segments relating to different preliminary/emergent categories.

Acknowledging the ways in which we as researchers "co-produce our data and our findings" (Schreier, 2012, p. 23), in the following sections, I provide an intimate conversation between some of the research aspects, the data, and my disposition and positionality. Challenging the practice of "bracketing" my own subjectivity, I "develop new models of knowledge based on subjectivity, reciprocity and process" (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 15). Using reflexivity, I probe my assumptions to question why and how I engaged in a particular research question or drew a certain conclusion. I reflect on some differences that entered my research, which need to be explored, not disavowed (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006). I bring memoirs of my positionality and presence in the research that may have influenced my direction and how my research may have changed me. As a researcher from the periphery who worked in a Western academic setting, I unpack moments of alienation, isolation, and racialization as well as moments of joy, empowerment, and relief.

Citizenship as Achievement

The attempts to track the development of a good citizen were evident in the data, and although some teachers believed it was artificial, it was still an avoidable procedure required. In the two countries studied, one of the most influential documents in the teaching of citizenship education was the *Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture*[2], which was issued in 2018 by the Council of Europe. It was meant to be a "conceptual organization of the competencies" to be adapted according to local contexts and needs (Council of Europe, 2018a, p. 12). Therefore, its implementation varied from one context to another. The first volume of the framework contains the competencies for democratic culture (CDC) model, containing twenty competencies divided into four areas: Values, attitudes, skills and knowledge, and critical understanding. The second volume, *Descriptors of Competences for Democratic Culture*, contains 135 competence descriptors. These competencies were tested "using the language of learning outcomes," and the "behaviour that is described is observable and assessable" to help teachers in their practice (Council of Europe, 2018b, pp. 12–13). The third volume, *Guidance for Implementation*, provides instruction for implementation (Council of Europe, 2018c). Going over the assessment criteria of the official documents as well as those used in schools, although complex and dependent on multiple aspects, I detected a competence approach with a learning outcome set for each competence. I wondered if it was possible to evaluate fairly and whether schools could or have the right to track the development of what a good citizen was supposed to be.

On the one hand, the proposal for evaluation places excessive emphasis on rationality, leading to an idealistic approach that is difficult to implement effectively in citizenship education (Fischman & Hass, 2014). This perspective overlooks the inherent complexity of identity formation—whether personal, national, or communal—which remains an ongoing and unresolved process that cannot be fully grasped or taught through purely rational methods (Fischman & Hass, 2014).

While I never attempt to undermine the competence approach, I believe that a linear and simplistic way of evaluating citizenship education is not possible or ethical. Rational and linear approaches to citizenship strive to make education "strong, secure and predictable" and "risk-free" (Biesta, 2014a, p. 1), which "reduces the complexity and openness of human learning" (p. 3) because "education is not an interaction between robots but an encounter between human beings. The risk is there because students are not seen as objects to be molded and disciplined but as subjects of action and responsibility" (p. 1). Moreover, the reference framework considers international human rights as the guide to the evaluation of value competencies

without acknowledging the eternal concern of indoctrination in schools. Approaching values in schooling, whether through instruction or the hidden curriculum, is the most controversial aspect of citizenship education because no matter what process is implemented, the question of 'whose values?' is unavoidable (McCowan, 2009). Sundström and Fernández (2013) argue that while liberals often resist indoctrination and insist on providing students with complete autonomy to form their own beliefs and opinions independently, other researchers (often influenced by the philosophy of Rawls, 1971) believe that "neutral schooling is both impossible and misleading" and that "particularistic norms and belief systems" are needed (Sundström & Fernández, 2013, p. 108). Below, I discuss the limitations of a human rights approach to citizenship education.

Decolonizing Ideologies: Resisting Dominant Discourses and Practices

The idea that education should bring about rational autonomous citizens has affected educational practices and the way citizenship is implemented in schools in Western democracies (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Sundström & Fernández, 2013). Both documents and teachers were in favor of students' autonomy and active participation as opposed to students' passivity or silence, which were not desired. One of the persisting findings of the research was the focus of schools and curricula on cultivating a personally responsible citizen. The dominant practices in schools emphasize the knowledge and individual skills necessary to compete successfully in the world, which aligns with the dominating rational and market-driven ideologies in education and society (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Masschelein & Quaghebeur 2005)). A good citizen is someone who is autonomous, outspoken, respects the rules, has leadership skills, and participates in political activities and voting, as well as community services. This practice was further sustained by a prevailing neoliberal approach and the dominance of an outcome-oriented and efficiency discourse in schools, which encouraged leadership and entrepreneurial skills and promoted education for citizens who are preoccupied with their individualistic development and success. As useful as these principles are, they may also suppress community engagement by presenting citizenship in terms of individualism rather than relation. Such individualism may foster the spirit of isolation whereby students act in their self-interest and not in the group's best interest. This reduced meaning of citizenship can restrain students' vision of their responsibilities within a society and fails to address the cultural and community aspects of citizenship. More importantly, such a limited apolitical view of the citizen ignores the structural injustices that make such personal traits accessible to certain groups of society and marginalize the other.

A few teachers noted how community service and volunteering were often a privilege to elite and private school students. They also noted that many students from certain backgrounds did not have access to voting or other political rights or could not afford to buy the gear needed for participating in a social activity. A critical and decolonial approach should prompt discussions about the coloniality of power, knowledge, and social injustices. Therefore, conceptualizing participation should consider the limited access of certain populations to rights and opportunities. In the recent framework on democratic culture, the Council of Europe (2018a) briefly mentions that in cases where individuals lack access to resources or information, participation competencies become irrelevant. However, in reality, this is rarely taken into consideration within educational institutions, and the data confirmed the "democracy divide" (Hess, 2009, p. 168) between those who have and those who do not. Thus, when failing to engage in issues of power and justice, civic engagement may reinforce inequality and social and ethnic hierarchies, even though it aims for the opposite. Biesta and Lawy (2006) contemplates that even the more sought-after model of 'living democracy' and civic engagement focuses on preparing the individuals by providing them with a predefined set of

knowledge, skills, and values, and thus still entails detached individualism and instrumentalization and ignores the citizen-in-context. We cannot blame individuals for "antisocial or nondemocratic behavior since individuals are always individuals-in-context" (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 142). Relying on feminist and disability perspectives, Netz et al. (2019) deconstruct the conventional idea of the citizen by highlighting "the exclusionary nature of the notion of the liberal, articulate, political subject – which by default was imagined as the productive and able-bodied worker, father or soldier" (Netz et al., 2019, p. 640). This has prompted research to call for a "decolonization" of citizenship education (DesRoches, 2016) or a decolonization of intercultural education, which necessitates "deep shifts in consciousness" (Gorski, 2008, p. 517) to engage in battling "dominant hegemony, hierarchies, and concentrations of power and control" (Gorski, 2008, p. 515), mainly represented through colonizing and neoliberal ideologies and practices.

In my own "deep shifts in consciousness," I found myself battling both dominant hegemonic ideologies and practices as well as my own conceptions, biases, and knowledge. I want to stress that diversity, which entails just bringing in marginalized researchers without preparing the structures to include them and validate their knowledge and voices, is doomed to be superficial. During the course of my research, I encountered subtle as well as direct messages that I did not fit the predefined expectations of a successful and competitive academic. On several occasions I was told that I was not taking advantage of the tremendous opportunities available for me to become more visible in academia. At the same time, inside an academic institution heavily engaged in research on inclusive education, I witnessed how I and several other researchers from the periphery were excluded or regarded as unfit for certain roles. My voice and perspectives were neither considered nor valued like others. I witnessed a hierarchy in the way the other was constructed among different kinds of immigrants, with some researchers treated as visiting researchers or expats who had the right not to learn the host language and others as unintegrated lazy students who did not appreciate the opportunities they were offered. Although the program was supposed to be English, within the first year of the program, I was expected to learn a new language, which was the official language of the institute. After having taken two courses, I was asked to attend lectures in that language and provide summaries. When explaining my inability to reach that goal efficiently, I was told that I was not working hard enough to learn the language and integrate into the institute. My lack of language proficiency was branded as a disability that prevented me from fully taking part in institutional and research activities. I was only in that country for a temporary period of time to do the research. While I was expected to integrate and learn the language of the host institutions within a short period of time, other academics from certain backgrounds were allowed to remain "culturally and socially separated from mainstream society" (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009, p. 205). Although I explained my inability to understand the language, I still endured having to attend meetings in a language that I did not fully understand. Even when I understood, it was difficult for me to express my ideas in an intelligent and proficient way that would grant me appreciation and respect.

> I am starting to doubt my own abilities. For years, I had been an excellent student and teacher whose work had been praised and appreciated. Now, for the first time in my life, I feel that I am not good enough. Is it only the language barrier? My background and heritage may not be in line with academia. Or is it because I am the mother of a small child, which could translate as being anti-ambitious in academia? Can I really do this? (Excerpt journals, 2018).

The focus was on my disability and never on my abilities or potential or any of the experiences and expertise that I had collected after years of studying and teaching. I recall feeling upset and often in a defensive position, which resulted in branding me as emotional and

irrational. After a torturing lecture one evening, I cried while requesting one professor to understand my linguistic barrier and to please use me somewhere where I could flourish. That was a bad idea, which I regretted. It was very bad to cry and show tears in a Western academic setting. It was a sign of weakness and irrationality that would stigmatize one for life. I observed how being independent and autonomous was a desired trait that people bragged about. I, on the other hand, needed more help. I needed help with the language during my multiple visits to the visa office. My permit, which clearly stated I was a researcher, did not exonerate me at airports from being interrogated and 'randomly selected.' I also needed to obtain a reference from the university to succeed in my house-hunting endeavors. That made me feel I was more of a burden than an asset to the institute.

Being an outsider from the periphery (Tikly, 2004), whose values were not in line with Western democracy, I was made to feel unfit to investigate the center regarding one of its most sacred inventions and idols, democracy. Issues of entitlement and privilege were provoked since my connection with Western enlightenment was perceived to be weak. Being from a non-Western background also made me prone to being considered a nonrational, compulsive researcher who would let her emotions and personal details interfere with her work. Biesta (2019) discusses how democracy excludes those who are not "fit' for democracy because they lack certain qualities that are considered to be fundamental for democratic participation – such as rationality or reasonableness.

> Today, one professor who attended my presentation suggested that I consult with a speech therapist. She thinks I have a very soft voice. The therapist, she said, could help 'fix' my voice to sound louder and thus stronger, assertive, and more confident. As always, I tried to assume good intentions from the others. I politely declined her offer, explaining how I had never had issues with my voice, even when teaching crowded classrooms back in my home country. But deep inside, there was an angry voice that wanted to say the following: "would you suggest the same advice to the other-soft spoken female colleagues at the department including […]. This is not the first time I feel the pressure to be louder and more visible here and to fit the mold of a brilliant academic. I knew that it was not just because being loud, confident, and outspoken was valued more but because I was a female from a certain background and that made such an intervention or 'help' a right for me to liberate me and empower me. In short, by default, I was in need of fixing. (Excerpt from author's own journals, 2017)

Gorski (2010) describes a deficit mindset as the belief that social inequalities stem from presumed deficiencies—intellectual, moral, cultural, or behavioral—within marginalized individuals and communities rather than being caused by systemic injustices. This perspective promotes the idea that education should address inequalities by changing marginalized communities rather than addressing the systems that oppress them. Such efforts often focus on assimilation, compelling disadvantaged students to conform to the very structures and values that perpetuate their marginalization, as highlighted in contemporary discussions on poverty and education (Gorski, 2008, 2010).

Throughout my research, I strived to stress my commitment to a "post-nationalistic sense of diasporic, hybrid and nomadic identity" (Braidotti, 2006, p. 79) that was multi-layered, complex and ever-changing. Yet, because of my name and my country of origin, I was constantly being essentialized by the dominant Western gaze that reduced me to a single identity that needed fixing, an underdeveloped, irrational identity that needed to adopt new traits and get rid of certain traits in order to fit in western academia. A few colleagues expected me to be apologetic for the acts of those who share my background. There were subtle and overt

messages to me that because I was Muslim from the Middle East because I was not from the modern, rational, liberal, secular, democratic West, then I must have symbolized the opposite. Some teachers and colleagues literally attempted to elicit a response from me regarding the actions of some conservative Muslims. One teacher expected me to apologetically explain what she described as a 'disastrous' trip to a local mosque because the people at the mosque distributed pamphlets to the students that contained instructions on how to convert to Islam. The event shocked the parents, as she explained, and she asked if I could provide explanations or solutions. Another teacher asked me if I knew the real reason why immigrant parents did not take part in school meetings and activities. While the teachers' intention could have been to start a fruitful intercultural dialogue, it was very challenging to engage in a dialogue in which the other parties were sure of their righteousness and entitlement. There were many informal occasions where some colleagues expected me to speak up against and condemn the anti-liberal leaders of the Middle East. Carrying with me many narratives of pain and acknowledging the tremendous complexity of those political issues that could never be explained within a lunch break time frame, I preferred to remain silent, but my silence was sometimes interpreted as agreement.

Reflecting on my research, I realized that just like it was problematic to assume that democracy can be brought onto an undemocratic entity or country, it was also problematic to assume that the mission of democratic education was "to include children and other 'newcomers' into the existing democratic order by facilitating a transition from a pre-rational and pre-democratic stage to a stage at which children have met the entry conditions for their future participation in democracy" (Biesta, 2019, p. 110). In pluralistic societies, tension exists between two opposing discourses: that of acknowledging diversity and that of maintaining social cohesion and unity (DeJaeghere, 2009; Zembylas & Bosalek, 2011). Due to the dominant concept of citizenship-as-achievement in school, students were expected to share one nation, one language, one culture, and common values (Biesta & Lawy, 2006). Therefore, some teachers were not reconciled with having multiple allegiances in the classroom. A few teachers in one of the countries studied expressed concern over the strong sense of belonging to the grandfather's homeland by students from migrant backgrounds. One teacher thought it was problematic and unexplainable that a student from a migrant background visited their parents' country of origin every holiday and that her family even bought a house there. Clearly, there was a hierarchy in which groups of migrants had the right to show allegiances to their home country and culture. Moreover, it was clear that such conceptions of citizenship education that were based on assimilation and a narrow understanding of identity as static and single were contributing to failed citizenship among marginalized groups (Banks, 2017).

In highlighting my personal struggle, I never intend to show myself as a victim but rather to draw attention to the need for an open dialogue in academia between different voices and narratives and an emphasis on ethical and relational approaches. It is also a discussion that invites scholars from the diaspora and global south to find spaces for resistance as well as joy and emancipation. Due to a few kind, ethical, caring, and courageous individuals that I met during my research, I came to realize the healing power of simple encounters with genuine care that entailed *deep shifts in consciousness*. The agonizing experiences and battles prompted me to reflect on my assumptions and conceptualization of my own research. Within that hegemonic framework of universal rights, rationality, and predictability, as well as the capitalistic view of the good citizen as the autonomous, competitive, successful, and outspoken leader, I was in constant search for some channels of resistance and emancipation. I started reflecting on the aims of citizenship education and how a specific program or curriculum was expected to fix the youth and create an active citizen. Once in the field, I started reflecting on situations in which action was possible or other situations in which action was not possible while considering "the

fragile personal, interpersonal and structural conditions under which human beings can act and can be a subject" (Biesta, 2019, p. 142).

Decolonizing the Critical: Revisiting the Research Paradigm

Critical pedagogy strived to educate rational, critical, independent thinkers who can rethink their conditions and emancipate themselves. Similarly, it is also about "a transgressive discourse, practice, and fluid way of seeing the world" where researchers "continually attempt to redefine themselves through the context in which they find themselves [because once they] slow down and stop fluidity, the criticality is gone" (Steinberg, 2007, p. x). Prior to data collection, borrowing from research on thick vs. thin approaches to democracy (Carr, 2008), maximal vs. minimal approaches (DeJaeghere, 2009), and participation vs. the pursuit of justice (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), I had developed a thick-thin guide to evaluate the data. Although my intention was never to categorize practices, I soon felt the need to shun the guide when the fluidity and criticality were almost gone, and I was almost swamping myself "down in the quicksand of compromised liberalism" (Steinberg, 2007, p. x). If democracy is linked to social justice (Carr, 2008; Freire, 1973; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), then it must consider how a more humane society can be built away from the elitist and constitutional schemes that often disregard or demean the ambitions of all people. By going to the field with a predefined framework of what a *thick* approach to democracy should be like, was I not some elitist imposing a certain scheme of what successful and progressive teaching and learning ought to be?

One of the examples that made me realize "the importance of constantly reappraising Freire's pedagogy [or any other theory] in light of different theoretical perspectives so that it does not become itself a 'banking process'" (Zembylas, 2018b, p. 406) was when visiting a school in an improvised urban suburb in one of the countries studies. The teachers I met there were not keen on promoting independent and critical thinkers who question their reality and attempt to change it (which was one of the key elements I had included in the thick approach to democracy): "I want to arrive with the heart first and after, my preoccupation is the curriculum" (PT.T.2).

The top priorities in a citizenship education class for those two teachers included keeping the children interested in coming to school by showing them care and offering them snacks. The teachers argued that hungry kids came to school for a snack, and that saved them from being out in the street and easy prey to criminal involvement. Most of those kids came from a broken home, and teaching them how to respect each other and solve problems without physical violence was another priority. Those teachers were young teachers who had not had any training to teach citizenship education. Yet they figured out that genuine social justice sometimes required the need to ditch the lesson plan and generate a culturally sensitive pedagogy catering to their students' values and needs (Cochran-Smith, 2004). Humbled and enlightened, I ditched the thick guide to democracy and found consolation in Zembylas's (2018b) call to reinvent critical pedagogy as "decolonizing pedagogy of empathy" capable of inspiring "modes of affective perspective-taking and affective practices" of teachers and students (p. 405).

Research refers to the importance of addressing the affective aspects of teaching, including values and the self (Biesta, 2011a; Tryggvason, 2018; Zembylas, 2018a). Zembylas (2007) sees potential and transformation in establishing a pedagogy of emotions in teacher education. Yet he explains how several factors have made the task difficult, including the "deep prejudice against emotions" in Western culture (Zembylas, 2007, p. 59), the divergent approaches to studying emotions, and the way emotions have often been contrasted with rational cognition. There is also the question of whether it is acceptable or possible to confront

teachers with their values and to what extent teacher education can be utilized in the personal and the emotional. The deliberative approach to democracy, which is based on rational deliberation and consensus, has been the dominant model for approaching citizenship education. Agnostics have criticized this approach to democracy for ignoring the role of emotions and expecting neutrality and consensus (Tryggvason, 2018). In line with considering citizenship as subjectification, I argue that acknowledging disagreements and conflicts in the classrooms and society should be inherent in democratic pluralism and should never be a problem that needs to be fixed. Therefore, I propose citizenship as care and relationality which "recognizes the importance of emotions in moral deliberation," places importance on "responsiveness and attentiveness" to particular situations rather than principles, and on "interdependence and relationality" rather than autonomy to guide dialogue (Zembylas & Bosalek, 2011, p. 17). In observing classrooms that promoted a standardized 'European' identity, my own background underscored the silences around alternative forms of citizenship rooted in reciprocity and community. My experiences of being essentialized within academic settings allowed me to see how students who did not fit the notion of the good citizen might feel similarly confined by singular narratives of citizenship and to appreciate the ethics of care that were practiced by some teachers.

Citizenship as Care and Relationality: A Channel of Healing and Emancipation

Citizenship education discourses and practices are heavily based on the universality of a set of human rights that should be protected. As an academic from the periphery, I argue that a human rights perspective "views human beings thinly, as part of common humanity or as a generalized Other" (Zembylas & Bosalek, 2011, p.17). A human rights view, according to Zembylas and Bosalek (2011), provides a "'sanitized' view of the diverse groups [...] with little reference to the particular or "the historical and current conditions in which marginalized groups find themselves in twenty-first-century Europe" (p. 17). On the other hand, "an ethic of care would require a rich and thick description of people's circumstances, focusing on the particularities of concrete situations in specific historic moments" (Zembylas & Bosalek, 2011, pp. 17–18). I highlight the limitation of a human rights approach to citizenship education and intercultural dialogues where principles are supposed to apply to all without considering the unequal power relations and the different circumstances and privileges that people have. From a human rights perspective, "one would have to be free from bodily contingencies and dependencies in order to deliberate on moral issues, rather than as situated and occurring between embodied beings" (Zembylas & Bosalek, 2011, p.17).

Within this approach, what matters are not overarching impartial principles but rather the micro-level interactions and daily practices and encounters between the 'we' and 'them' that shape democracy through relational citizenship, which "appears as a temporarily constructed, reconfigured, social and hybrid status of 'becoming' in and through relational micro-events" (Vandenbroeck et al., 2009, p. 213). Within this approach, it is not enough that teachers adhere to inclusion principles and "macro social and political visions" of social justice but what matters more is "the moral dimensions of micro, classroom-level interactions in their work," which is often ignored (Hytten, 2015, p. 1). It is about *how* teachers enact their commitment to these principles, which invites teachers to pay attention to *ethics* in their teaching practices. Hytten (2015) suspects that students may resist social justice education if they are made to "feel stupid, intimidated, guilty, angry, and/or silenced" (p. 2). Thus, she acknowledges the fragility of the distinction between "exposure to social justice visions and values and imposition or indoctrination," and Hytten (2015) invites educators to ethically endorse their stances. Situated in contrast with the dominant prescribed standardized approach to education, this approach places the relational at the center of the learning and teaching

processes as ongoing and emerging contextualized encounters between the teacher and the learner. Within this approach, teachers conceptualize citizenship in relation to the recognition that any attempt to locate, understand, and make sense of difference by placing it in an overarching framework can only be made from one of the positions within such a framework - which already shows that the framework itself is not overarching, just as the position is not simply within the framework [which means that it] requires a different attitude toward plurality and otherness, one on which the idea of responsibility is more appropriate than the idea of knowledge, one in which ethics is more important than epistemology (Biesta & Lawy, p. 103). Therefore, we cannot or should not understand otherness before we engage in it. Thus, teachers challenge viewing differences as a deficit or a problem that needs fixing.

Conclusion

In this paper, I attempted to provide a decolonial approach to citizenship education by problematizing some concepts and approaches that inhibit social justice and inclusion. As a scholar from the Global South, my experiences within European academia have not only informed this research but stand as a testament to the resilience required to navigate and challenge these hegemonic spaces. This study advocates for citizenship education that embraces diverse epistemologies, recognizing that nurturing spaces of relationality and care are essential for fostering genuine democratic engagement. This study suggests that a relational approach to citizenship could offer a pathway toward more inclusive and culturally sensitive educational models capable of bridging the values of Western and Global South perspectives. By embracing community-centered, reciprocal frameworks, citizenship education can evolve to honor diverse epistemologies, moving beyond the individualism often emphasized in European contexts. I provided a critique of some of the widely acceptable notions in education, which reduce the notion of citizenship to social cohesion, a linear educational process, or a list of knowledge, behaviors, dispositions, and skills that are consciously taught by teachers and performed by students. Because citizens' identities cannot be created only via explicit instruction on how to become a good citizen or what democracy is about, teachers should embrace the unpredictable risks that come with education. In proposing a pedagogy of care and relationality as a counter-discourse to the neoliberal-oriented accountability approach, teachers are invited to approach citizenship ethically and to constantly reflect on how their practices are a reflection of their visions through everyday classroom interactions. This manuscript provides a call to action for researchers, policymakers, and educators to revisit citizenship education as a radical process of empowerment and decolonization. I also stress that citizenship education needs to move from being an object of theoretical debate and be enacted as a practice of relationship, decoloniality, and care. In this way, a relational approach can help educators build empowering environments that can challenge and transform the oppressive education systems across the globe. This call to action underlines the imperative for change that will focus on the marginalized voices of those most often silenced and promote inclusivity citizenship.

References

Banks, J. A. (2017). Failed citizenship and transformative civic education. *Educational Research, 46*(7), 366–377. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X17726741

Banks, J. A. (2020). Transforming citizenship education in global societies. *Visioning Multicultural Education*, 142-156. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003095644-12

Berger, R. (2013). Now I see it, now I don't: Researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 15*(2), 219–234. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475

Biesta, G. (2008). Sporadic democracy: Education, democracy and the question of inclusion. In M. S. Katz, S. Verducci, & G. Biesta. (Eds). *Education, democracy and the moral life* (pp. 101–112). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-8626-7_8

Biesta, G. (2011a). The ignorant citizen: Mouffe, Rancière, and the subject of democratic education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education, 30*(2), 141–153. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11217-011-9220-4

Biesta, G. (2011b). *Learning democracy in school and society: Education, lifelong learning, and the politics of citizenship*. Sense.

Biesta, G. (2013). Responsive or responsible? Democratic education for the global networked society. *Policy Futures in Education, 11*(6), 733–744. https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2013.11.6.733

Biesta, G. (2014). Learning in public places: Civic learning for the twenty-first century. Biesta, G., De Bie, M., and Wildemeersch, D. (Eds.), *Civic learning, democratic citizenship and the public sphere* (pp. 1–14). Springer.

Biesta, G. J. J. (2014b). *The beautiful risk of education.* Paradigm Publishers. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315635866

Biesta, G. (2019). Transclusion: Overcoming the tension between inclusion and exclusion in the discourse on democracy and democratisation. In G. Biesta (Ed.), *Obstinate education: Reconnecting school and society* (pp. 97–111). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004401105_008

Biesta, G. J. J., & Lawy, R. S. (2006). From teaching citizenship to learning democracy: Overcoming individualism in research, policy and practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education, 36*(1), 63–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057640500490981

Braidotti, R. (2006). *Transpositions on nomadic ethics*. Polity Press.

Caraballo, L., & Gerwin, D. (2022). Reimagining Citizenship: A Review of Angela Banks' Civic Education in the Age of Mass Migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Studies*, 9(3), 226–233. https://doi.org/10.29333/ejecs/1298

Carr, P. R. (2008). Educators and education for democracy: Moving beyond "thin" democracy. *Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy, 1*(2), 147–165.

Cochran-Smith, M. (2004). *Walking the road: Race, diversity, and social Justice in teacher education*. Teachers College Press.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications.

Council of Europe. (2018a). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture (Volume 1): Context, concepts and model*. Council of Europe Publishing.

Council of Europe. (2018b). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture (Volume 2): Descriptors of competences or democratic culture.* Council of Europe Publishing.

Council of Europe. (2018c). *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture (Volume 3): Guidance for implementation*. Council of Europe Publishing.

DeJaeghere, J. G. (2009). Critical citizenship education for multicultural societies. *Inter-American Journal of Education for Democracy, 2*(2). 223–236.

https://scholarworks.iu.edu/journals/index.php/ried/article/view/159

DesRoches, S. J. (2016). Thinking interculturally: Decolonizing history and citizenship education in Québec. *Intercultural Education, 27*(3), 245–256. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2016.1150649

Dwyer, S. C., & Buckle, J. L. (2009). The space between: On being an insider-outsider in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8(1), 54-63. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940690900800105

Fischman, G. E., & Hass, E. (2014). Moving beyond idealistically narrow discourses in citizenship education. *Policy Futures in Education, 12*(3), 387–402. https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2014.12.3.387

Freire, P. (1973). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc.

Hess, D. E. (2009). *Controversy in the classroom: The democratic power of discussion.* Routledge.

Hesse-Biber, S. N., & Leavy, P. (2006). *The practice of qualitative research.* SAGE Publication.

Howard, A., & Maxwell, C. (2023). Preparing leaders for the global south: The work of elite schools through global citizenship education. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education, 53*(2), 324–339. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2021.1914550

Howe, R. B., & Covell, K. (2005). *Empowering children: Children's rights education as a pathway to citizenship.* University of Toronto Press.

Hytten, K. (2015). Ethics in teaching for democracy and social justice. *Democracy & Education, 23*(2), 1–10. https://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss2/1/

Giroux, H. A. (2007). Introduction: Democracy, education and the politics of critical pedagogy. In: P. McLaren & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* (pp. 1–5). Peter lang.

Gorski, P. C. (2008). Good intentions are not enough: A decolonizing intercultural education. *Intercultural Education, 19*(6), 515–525. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675980802568319

Gorski, P. C. (2010). *Unlearning deficit ideology and the scornful gaze: Thoughts on authenticating the class discourse in education.* http://www.edchange.org/publications/deficit-ideology-scornful-gaze.pdf

Masschelein, J., & Quaghebeur, K. (2005). Participation for better or for worse? *Journal of Philosophy of Education, 39*(1), 51–65. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0309-8249.2005.00419.x

Muhammad, S. (2020). Teaching citizenship education in Austria and Portugal: Teachers' views and experiences. [Doctoral Dissertation, Innsbruck University/ University of Lisbon]. http://hdl.handle.net/10451/48504

McCowan, T. (2009). *Rethinking citizenship education: A curriculum for participatory democracy.* Continuum International Publishing Group.

Netz, S., Lempp, S., Krause, K., & Schramm, K. (2019). Claiming citizenship rights through the body multiple. *Citizenship Studies, 23*(7), 637–651. https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-841

Neoh, J. Y. (2017). Neoliberal education: Comparing character and citizenship education in Singapore and civics and citizenship education in Australia. *Journal of Social Science Education, 16*(3), 23–29. https://doi.org/10.4119/jsse-841

Schreier, M. (2012). *Qualitative content analysis in practice.* SAGE Publications.

Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Kerr, D., & Losito, B. (2010). ICCS 2009 International report: Civic knowledge, attitudes, and engagement among lower-secondary school students in 38 countries. *Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA).

Steinberg, S. R. (2007). Preface. Introduction: Democracy, education and the politics of critical pedagogy. In P. McLaren & J. L. Kincheloe (Eds.), *Critical pedagogy: Where are we now?* (pp. ix–x.). Peter Lang.

Sundström, M., & Fernández, C. (2013). Citizenship education and diversity in liberal societies: Theory and policy in a comparative perspective. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice, 8*(2), 103–117. https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197913483635

Tikly, L. (2004). Education and the new imperialism. *Comparative Education*, *40*(2), 173-198. https://doi.org/10.1080/0305006042000231347

Tryggvason, A. (2018). Democratic education and agonism: Exploring the critique from deliberative theory. *Democracy & Education*, *26*(1), 1-9.

Vandenbroeck, M., Roets, G., & Snoeck, A. (2009). Immigrant mothers crossing borders: Nomadic identities and multiple belongings in early childhood education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, 17*(2), 203–216. https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930902951452

Verducci, S. (2008). Education, democracy, and the moral life: Where opposites collide. In M. S. Katz, S. Verducci, & G. Biesta. (Eds), *Education, democracy and the moral life*. (pp. 1–8). Springer.

Westheimer, J., & Kahne, J. (2004). What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy. *American Educational Research Journal, 41*(2), 237–269. https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312041002237

Zembylas, M. (2007). Theory and methodology in researching emotions in education. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education, 30*(1), 57–72. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437270701207785

Zembylas, M. (2018a). Political emotions in the classroom: How affective citizenship education illuminates the debate between agonists and deliberators. *Democracy & Education, 26*(1), 1–5.

Zembylas, M. (2018b). Reinventing critical pedagogy as decolonizing pedagogy: The education of empathy. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies, 40*(5), 404–421. https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2019.1570794

Zembylas, M., & Bosalek, V. (2011). The council of Europe's white paper on intercultural dialogue: An analysis using the ethic of care. *Policy Futures in Education, 9*(1), 13–21. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.2304/pfie.2011.9.1.13

Notes on Contributor

Shaima Shehneh completed her PhD in Teacher Education at the University of Innsbruck, Austria in 2019. In 2007, She completed her B.A. in International Studies and English at Central College, IA, USA. She studied an M.A. in Applied Linguistics (Teaching English as a Second Language) at Bond University, Australia, in 2010. In 2015, she completed an MA in Lifelong Learning: Policy and Management at Aarhus University, Denmark. She received an MA in TESOL from Bond University, Australia, and worked as a teacher in her home country, Syria, and other countries. She completed her BA in English and International Studies at Central College, USA. Her research interests include curriculum development, Linguistics, textbook research, teacher education, and education for social justice.

ORCID

Shaima Shehneh, https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7594-600X