Across the globe there has been, since the early 1990s, increased interest in the role of citizenship education in creating cohesive societies, by both national policymakers and international organisations (Reid et al., 2009). This chapter explores the tensions within national education policies and specifically citizenship education policies between promoting identity, belonging and social cohesion at the national level and realising a sense of cosmopolitan citizenship which might support global cooperation, recognising our sense of interdependence. One aim is to make explicit some assumptions about learners which underpin policies and explore the meanings of terms such as diversity, citizenship and community cohesion within education policy.

The chapter focuses on the example of the UK, and specifically England, since the British government introduced a new policy to promote citizenship through schooling at the beginning of the twenty-first century, which not only attracted international attention but which also made explicit a link between citizenship education, social cohesion and concern about the apparent lack of integration of specific visible minorities, a concern which has been echoed in political rhetoric and policy developments in a range of other nations in Europe and beyond (Osler, 2009; Osler and Lybaek, in press). A key assumption of this chapter is that education policy and practice and wider social policy agendas need to be underpinned by a commitment to universal human rights which fosters solidarities between those struggling for social justice in different contexts.

Citizenship and belonging: nationalism and cosmopolitanism

From the introduction of mass schooling in the late nineteenth century, governments have seen education as a means of promoting national identity and national pride (Green, 1990). In this sense traditional civic education, promoted in Britain for example largely through the teaching of national history and through special celebrations such as Empire Day, might be said to have been about promoting national cohesion. The philosopher John
Dewey observed how this nationalism, mediated through state education, replaced the cosmopolitan traditions of the Enlightenment:

So far as Europe was concerned, the historic situation identified the movement for a state-supported education with the nationalist movement in political life... Under the influence of German thought in particular, education became a civic function and the civic function was identified with the realization of the ideal of the national state. The ‘state’ was substituted for humanity; cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism. (Dewey, [1916] 2002, p. 108)

According to Dewey, mass education provided by the nation-state and introduced at a time when nationalism was at its zenith not only replaced in large part an older tradition of education as a charitable function, but also contributed to the demise of an older cosmopolitan tradition of loyalty to fellow humanity. As cosmopolitanism gave way to nationalism, so schooling became part of a nationalist project.

Following the First World War, the nationalist project of education was challenged in a number of European nations by pacifists. For example, in 1918, a group of French primary school teachers, influenced by the feminist and pacifist movements of the time, sought to challenge the militaristic messages of textbooks developed during the war (Siegel, 1999, 2005). Pacifist beliefs were not presented as a counter to nationalism. In fact, the teachers were calling for a return to cosmopolitan values, where loyalty to fellow humanity was promoted as part of the French republican tradition of patriotism, rather than something in opposition to it. Education was central to this cosmopolitan and pacifist project, since these teacher activists, who were also concerned with women’s rights, were convinced that

no amount of international arbitration or economic cooperation would effectively prevent return of war unless the peoples of the world first abandoned their chauvinistic impulses and embraced cross-national understanding as the keystone of global stability. (Siegel, 2005, p. 3)

In England, alternative beliefs about the role of education in promoting either nationalist or broader cosmopolitan visions of society were played out in debates among professional historians and teachers about the role school history might play in shaping the attitudes of young people. On one side were those who wished to continue to promote pride in the military and the Empire. On the other were those who believed nationalism was the major cause of war and that a programme of world history should be developed which emphasised international cooperation and social progress, and who felt supported by the claim of the League of Nations, which argued that ‘history syllabuses must also be purged of war if they were to become an effective instrument of peace’ (Elliott, 1980, p. 40). A small group of