

Civics and citizenship education

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The need for the inclusion of citizenship education in our schools has never been stronger. In a world with an increasing number of global environmental, economic, political and social issues, the role of schools in enhancing social harmony and responsible citizenship is critical. As a response the Victorian Essentials Learning Standards (VELS) has

explicitly included Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE), for the first time, as a whole school focus.

With this in mind, VASST is the first professional subject association to make such an appointment. President of VASST, Jill Wilson, commented

that, 'Civics and Citizenship Education is one of the 14 domains of VELS but many schools are wrestling with where it fits in their curriculum structures. We hope to provide leadership in this area; offering schools professional development and consultancy about how best to integrate CCE in schools. We are lucky to have Warren; he has a wealth of experience in the area.'

Warren Prior worked at Deakin University in the Education Faculty for many years and has extensive experience in developing teacher professional development programs and in writing curriculum materials in CCE. Of the current emphasis on CCE, he noted that 'the VELS curriculum offers opportunities for teachers and schools to develop not only students' understandings about civic institutions but also to actively engage in community activities.'

The challenges for schools to embed civics and citizenship programs in schools are many. Many teachers have felt unprepared for teaching about citizenship and students have found topics like government boring and irrelevant. However many schools already have engaging citizenship programs. These are the schools that give students real responsibility for decision making and time and encouragement to practice positive civic behaviours.

What is a good citizen?

In the past, the ability to be able to recall the names of Prime Ministers and name the Houses of Parliament were seen as hallmarks of a good citizen. Today students can quickly look these up on the Internet if they need to. What all key stakeholders—teachers, parents and students—all see as a 'good' citizen is someone with broad social justice concerns who is willing to contribute to both local and global communities. It's an emphasis on values.

Place of Civics and Citizenship in schools

Since the mid 1990s, Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) has been one of the five federal priority areas in education. Over \$30 million has been spent under the Howard government, largely using a resource-led approach to spreading CCE. A number of research reports indicate that while there is some heightened awareness about CCE in schools, the overwhelming

impact of the federal government's approach, through its *Discovering Democracy* program, has been minimal. Are you able to locate in your school the initial *Discovering Democracy* kit of materials that was sent free to all schools in Australia? This is an ambitious strategy and one that does not guarantee the resource ends with the teacher/s most suitable to teach in this area.

In a federation, there are tensions between federal and state initiatives, so that the timing of releasing the federal curriculum resources has not matched up with the timing of new state initiatives in curriculum revision. Thirdly, the nature of CCE is contentious, problematic and value-laden.

We are all citizens, but do we all have the same views about what are the characteristics of a good citizen? So when the Howard Federal Government puts its spin on what it means to be a 'good citizen' it invites controversy, if not opposition, to its interpretation. And this is what has happened in the case of the *Discovering Democracy* program where the focus is on the civics component of CCE. That is, the good citizen is one who has a firm grasp of civic institutions which is best learned in an historical context. Examples of topics would be the three tiers of government, the Westminster system, national icons like mateship and the historical importance of the Australia–US alliance.

VELS and CCE

So now we have VELS. What does this mean for CCE? There is no question that, on paper at least, CCE is much more explicit. Its specific and separate

inclusion as a domain of essential learning indicates its prominence. The placing of it in the core strand of Physical, Personal and Social Learning has given it both this prominence outside of a discipline-based learning area and the tensions about who 'owns' it. In VELS, CCE is not a subject but rather is a cross-curricular 'perspective', formally built into both all curriculum areas and into much broader whole school programs. There are two dimensions to the domain—civics knowledge and understanding and community engagement

In VELS the focus is more on the citizenship component of CCE. The goals are broadened to include the notion of student dispositions and wellbeing with the skills of engagement and participation. In other words, this is active citizenship, in which schools are places for students to practice being good citizens. The school community has the job of deciding what CCE learning outcomes it wishes to deliver. What are important CCE knowledge, skills and values? For whom? Why? What forms can engagement take? Can you know if students display CCE outcomes?

Students and Civics and Citizenship Education

Do students care about CCE? A recent ACER study (2002) indicates that students care about democracy but dislike politics. At school, they mostly feel disempowered, summed up by a repeated comment of 'What's the point!' In VELS is the opportunity for students to practice engagement in their school, both in classrooms and in school governance. Schools need to provide models of, and practice in, democratic decision-making. The spin-off for schools creating environments for students to practice citizenship is that there is a positive correlation of these practices and improved student learning.

What does this mean in the context of school validation discussions about VELS? My research in Victorian secondary schools indicates the existence of two important precursors to developing a CCE program. Many schools are already engaged in a wide range of activities that come under the banner of both civics and citizenship education. So you are not starting from scratch. Secondly, key stakeholders—teachers, parents, students—have broad common agreement about what should be the focus of a CCE program. However, each school needs to find out its community's take on CCE.

Research and CCE

Research also tells us that government cannot mandate what matters in educational initiatives. So school communities need to take charge of the process. The most effective schools have adopted the strategies of:

- Reviewing the school's mission statement/goals/values as expressed in such things as the school enrolment brochure, website, policy documents, daily practices.
- Engaging the whole school community in determining its meanings about CCE and the 'good citizen'.
- Organizing staff professional development activities to enhance understandings about, and the pedagogies of CCE.
- Auditing their current programs against this agreed meaning.
- Celebrating and enhancing current CCE activities

- Developing new curriculum and program initiatives in CCE that reflect the desired values and outcomes of the whole school community.
- Establishing explicit mechanisms to evaluate the achievement of CCE goals and outcomes.

The doing of all this is both complex and time consuming and it is just one component of VELS. Schools might consider nominating a committed CCE coordinator with a representative group of teachers, students and parents.

Watch this Space

In 2006–07, VASST has ambitious plans for a number of citizenship activities, including workshops, conferences, publication of curriculum materials and bringing together existing community groups with an interest in citizenship education.

In the meantime, schools should keep a look out for three reports due out later in 2006:

1. The long overdue report of the first national assessment of CCE (2004), conducted by ACER for the Federal Government, will indicate the extent of CCE knowledge, skills and dispositions of a sample of 26,000 students in both year 6 and year 10. The test items used in this benchmark study might be a useful starting point for schools to establish their own benchmarks of student understandings. The next national CCE sample test will take place in 2007
2. The development of national statements, called *Statements of Learning for Civics and Citizenship*, is the result of a collaborative effort of all Australian education jurisdictions to achieve greater consistency in curriculum in CCE. This statement is due for release later this year.
3. The development of *Progression Points* by VCAA is an attempt to establish standards or progression points in the two VELS/CCE domains of Civic Knowledge and Understanding and Community Engagement. The progression points draw on the national statements in terms of knowledge, skills and understandings, with an implicit, but not explicit, acknowledgement of underpinning values. From levels 3 to 6, three levels of progress in CCE have been developed. This report is due out about October.

Resources

Civics and Citizenship Education, Australian Government, Department of Education, Science and Training, <http://www.civicsandcitizenship.edu.au/cce/>.

Curriculum Corporation—national assessment, school case studies, professional development resources, <http://www.curriculum.edu.au/>.

Holdsworth, R. *Connect Supporting Student Participation*, available from Roger Holdsworth, 03 9489 9502, r.holdsworth@unimelb.edu.au—a small, inexpensive journal.

Mellor, S., Kennedy, K. & Greenwood, L. (2002) *Citizenship and Democracy: Students' Knowledge and Beliefs, Australian Fourteen Year Olds*, ACER, available to download at <http://www.acer.edu.au/>.

For more information

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