

Civics and citizenship education

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- What's all this public interest in civics and citizenship about?
- Who's driving this 'debate' and why?
- What's it all got to do with us as teachers when we are faced with Grade 4 or Year 9?

The following discussion is the second in a series about Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE), the first being in the last edition of *Ethos*, when I began a conversation with you about current challenges and conundrums in teaching and learning CCE.

This time I have the opportunity to discuss meanings of CCE with a specific goal in mind of assisting you in auditing and reviewing both your personal

and your school's current policies and practices. In trying to do this, it's clear to me that the broader context of the public debate – its underpinning values and assumptions – needs to be included. If we can't articulate why we are engaged in some teaching and learning activity, then don't do it.



Citizenship: A renewed interest

There has been a massive worldwide renewal of interest in citizenship in the last decade, sparked by a number of political events and trends throughout the world, including perceptions of increasing voter apathy, the resurgence of nationalist movements, the impact of global forces on local social traditions, the stresses created by increasingly multicultural societies and the decline of volunteerism in community activities. These events have made it clear that the well-being and stability of a democracy depends not only on the justice of its basic structures but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens (IEA Civic Education Study, 2000). Two outcomes of these events have been the challenge thrown out to the concepts of western liberal views of democracy, particularly in emerging nations, and the viewing of citizenship as problematic and contestable. (Ichilov,1990; Gilbert,1996; Hannam,1999; Prior,1999; Cogan,2000)

Understanding CCE

The first point I would like to make clear is that meanings given to CCE are problematic, contestable and value laden. So from the start, whether it be the Prime Minister identifying his three ideal hero citizens, the federal Minister of Education Julie Bishop announcing her support for a national curriculum and national statements of Learning in CCE or the federal Leader of the Opposition, Kim Beazley, promising to abolish Australian Workplace Agreements, they are all giving their views about their vision of Australia and its citizen. We might like their vision or we may oppose it. Likewise what will follow will be 'my' view of what I think are the

characteristics of a 'good citizen'. Therefore embedded in this conversation will be my values.

I'll declare my hand immediately. Here's my list.

- I'm not a great fan of the PM's views about the teaching of Australian History
- I oppose the introduction of the proposed citizenship test
- I support State developed curriculum rather than a national curriculum.
- I see all curriculum as socially constructed
- I believe that CCE programs are best developed by school communities
- I support the debate process about trying to articulate 'Australian values', but do not support a common list of values.
- The sole purpose of schooling is to assist young people to be 'good' citizens.

You might like to look at my list and extract out the values and assumptions that appear to underpin my items. Similarly let's also start by looking at the place of CCE in VELS. To be consistent, my argument is that CCE here reflects the values of the current State government. VELS identifies two dimensions of CCE – 'Civic Knowledge and Understanding' and 'Community Engagement'. In other words the current values underpinning CCE in VELS is a 'good' citizen is one who is both well-informed, and secondly, has a positive disposition towards being actively engaged in the community. Let me assure you these two components of CCE are by no means universally accepted. My reading of CCE policy frameworks from other countries indicates that, for example, being an

'active' citizen is not often promoted. It's not valued in some places as a dimension of citizenship.

Civic Knowledge and Understanding

An examination of this first dimension focuses on *Civics*, that is, 'the understanding of the principles and practices that underpin civic institutions and civic life in communities and societies'. The Prime Minister places great store on this dimension and in the History debates asserts that there is one 'great narrative' that should be told to all students about the heritage of this dimension. Overwhelmingly the context of this study for the Prime Minister is Australia.

Civics has the longer tradition and is the more defined of the two terms. Generally it is perceived as the study of the political, legal and sometimes the social institutions, their structures and the roles they play in the processes by which a nation is governed. It is generally argued that to understand these structures and processes, one needs to know about the history and development of the traditions of those structures and processes, and have an appreciation of the political and social culture they encompass – in the past, currently and potentially. The roles citizens can play in these processes, their rights and responsibilities, in the context of the wider political and constitutional rules by which power and authority are exercised, are the other main part of civics learning.

If you support the notion that curriculum reflects a particular view of the world by people who happen to be in power at a particular time, then a discussion needs to be held within your school community about just what civic knowledge your students need to know in order to be 'good' citizens. Is knowing about the origins of our parliamentary system, more important, less important or equally important than knowing about the so-called 'black-arm band view of History? As we all know there is not enough time to teach everything in our classes, so decisions need to be made to prioritise areas of learning.

Who decides? Teachers? Parents? Students? Do we just accept literally what is in VELs? Has the curriculum been captured by 'lefty Maoist ideologues'?

Community Engagement

This second dimension is the *Citizenship* part of this domain. Although meanings given to 'active citizenship' appear to me to be often ambiguous, this dimension 'focuses on the development of skills and behaviours student need to interact with the community and to engage with organizations and groups'. The main focus in citizenship education is the development of an understanding about, and a practising of the attitudes, beliefs and values that will predispose students to participate, to become and remain engaged and involved in their political society/culture. This engagement can be learnt and exercised through participation in formal political processes such as voting, but equally also through active engagement in formal and informal decision-making their society at all levels; local, community, regional, national and global.

In other words, this is the dimension in which students have the opportunity to enhance their skills- intellectual, emotional and social, to explore their values and to generally develop a positive disposition towards actively engaging with the community. This dimension also enters into the public arena as the federal government has already developed a set of nine

values and we all know that public schools are lacking in values direction! Another 'complication' is that this dimension appears to be asking for a broader range of classroom pedagogies and a rethink about whole school policies and practices about student decision-making, both inside and outside of the school grounds. Yet another complication is the legal aspect of having our students out there in the community largely directly unsupervised. And really is this engagement 'serious work'?

To be competent, to actively engage requires a complex set of understandings, based on civics knowledge, attitudes and dispositions, plus skills. The opportunity to have learning experiences which assist in the acquisition of civic and citizenship competencies is required for effective civics and citizenship education. Without both civic knowledge and a disposition to engage, a person cannot fully develop the relevant competencies to effectively practise citizenship.

Both VELs dimensions have competencies as a focus and a desired outcome. The definitions used by civics and citizenship courses and educators in different locations and times range across these two definitions, and most affirm the importance, in civics and citizenship education, of encompassing the scope of the two definitions and of establishing linkages between the two terms.

So, in summary, I come from the position of not accepting literally all that VELs has to offer in CCE. I have no troubles with the two dimensions. It is the relative emphasis given to both dimensions and the relative emphasis given to components within each dimension that I think school community conversations should consider. I think the beginning of the conversation about what it means to be a 'good' citizen is a whole school community activity – teachers, parents, students, administration staff, and local community groups.

Dimensions of a CCE program

So what do I think are the 'ideal' dimensions of a CCE program? What would be the dimensions against which I might audit my current policies, practices and curriculum? I used to worry that my dimensions of CCE were mine alone and that other stakeholders might oppose them. A few years ago I did some research (Prior,1999) about perceptions of CCE by key stakeholders – teachers, parents and students – in a large sample of schools in Victoria. What I was most interested in was to see the extent of synergy between all three stakeholder groups. The common element in the thinking by the three groups about the 'good citizen' was whole school community support for what can be called the 'social concerns' element of citizenship. Characteristics of this dimension of citizenship include concern for others, respect for diversity and social tolerance. This is in the area of citizenship and not civics. One of the most significant contributions of the report of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century – *Education: The Treasure Within* (Tedesco, 1997) confirmed this dimension of citizenship.

... the ability to live together as one of the fundamental objectives of education in the future ... The capacity to live together means respect for diversity and the search for resolving social conflict through negotiation ... Living together is a key element in the building of democracy.

However the concentration on only one attribute of citizenship, for example, the acquisition of civic knowledge or a disposition towards social tolerance, is only one component of a good citizen. Research data (Turney-Porta, 1997) clearly indicates that a curriculum approach which emphasises the learning of civic knowledge only, has minimal impact on young peoples' sense of efficacy and interest in community affairs. Likewise an attitude of social tolerance cannot be taught or learned in isolation. There are numerous attributes that together might constitute the good citizen and that put together all of these attributes constitute the major goal for education.

Cogan (2000) has identified the following attributes of a 'good' citizen:

- a sense of identity
- the enjoyment of certain rights
- the fulfilment of corresponding obligations
- a degree of interest and involvement in public affairs
- an acceptance of basic societal values.

Ichilov (1990) has developed a 10 dimensional model of the characteristics of citizenship. This model places dimensions of citizenship along a spectrum with theory at one end and active engagement at the other. A disposition towards social tolerance, for example, is by itself, only one part, perhaps theoretical, of one dimension. Other dimensions include civic knowledge, and again Ichilov draws the distinction between a person who has civic knowledge and a person who has a critical and reflective understanding of civic processes.

Gilbert (1996) has developed a typology for evaluating education programs which deal with citizenship education, suggesting:

- citizenship as legal status
- citizenship as democratic identity
- citizenship as public practice
- citizenship as democratic participation.

Hannam (1999) in reviewing the data from education studies with a focus on the future of democracy included a list of eight characteristics crucial to the thinking about the good citizen. These are a kind of a set of dispositions and include:

- attitudes towards a democratic society
- human rights
- legal education
- environmental education
- economic education
- moral education
- development education
- problem solving, thinking and communication skills.

After reading a range of reports about the dimensions of citizenship I have developed a six point framework (Prior, 2002) that I would use to examine a school's policies and practices.

Dimension 1: Civic knowledge

Civic knowledge refers to those understandings about the civic processes in any community. This is not to imply that these processes will take exactly

the same form in every community. For young people to contribute to, and participate in, decision-making processes, they need a well-developed understanding of the institutions involved and the actual democratic processes of engagement as they relate to the institutions and in their society. Examples of civic knowledge include:

- Understandings about the decision-making processes in the community, for example, the role of local councillors, pressure groups, elections and government
- Knowledge about civic institutions, for example, courts, parliament, schools.
- Understandings about the legal requirements and obligations of citizenship, for example, becoming a legal citizen, paying taxes, voting at elections
- Understandings about the historical and cultural contexts in which a community exists, for example, knowledge about different cultures and languages, the sometimes contestable and unresolved aspects of our history

Numerous Australian research studies (Mellor, 1997, 2002) and polls indicate that young people often refer to 'the government' as the major decision maker, but closer inspection of these comments overwhelmingly reveal very little understanding of the division of powers and decision-making processes. Young people mostly don't know the decision makers in the community. They do know that in schools – neither teachers nor the curriculum – offer them any assistance in enhancing their understandings about decision makers and decision making.

Finally, a sound understanding of civic knowledge, per se, may not be a positive force in enhancing the common good. If these understandings are acquired uncritically, then the collective memories of a community may well be static and may contribute to the continuing dominance of conservative elites. In the worst-case scenario, the promotion of an uncritical approach to the acquisition of civic knowledge results in little more than propaganda. If a major goal of schooling in a democratic society is to develop young active and participating citizens, then the health of the community relies on coming generations to rejuvenate ideals through critical appraisal of past performance and the creation of new visions.



Citizenship in action.

Dimension 2: A sense of personal identity

The psychological theories of the development of positive personal identity, or a feeling of self-worth, are well grounded in the belief that the level of an individual's self-esteem is critical to that person being able to, or wanting to, relate or bond with another person or group. A willingness to empathise with, and be tolerant of, other diverse cultural groups or individuals is predicated on a sense of self worth and personal well-being. Examples of a positive sense of personal identity include:

- A feeling of personal security and belonging
- A willingness to trust other people
- A sense of efficacy
- A capacity for resilience
- A recognition of the origins of one's values and beliefs.

This is a huge dimension and one that is bound up in the debate about values, recent research about emotional intelligence and the spate of shootings in American schools where reports about the offenders invariably note their sense of isolation, anger and loss of self esteem. Fear of the 'other' often comes about as a result of a fear on oneself and confusion about one's identity. The attempts to forge only one form of identity, as is often proposed by the current federal government lacks an understanding about the complexities of identity, or acknowledgement of multiple identities.

Dimension 3: A sense of community

People generally live in communities and generally undertake some form of interaction with that community. This social behaviour of belonging is rarely simple, as a complex set of rules and customs determine membership to a community. In some cultures, the family, the clan, for example, become the belonging unit to which members have both rights and obligations. These rights and obligations may be both formal, like the obligation to defend the community in times of war, or informal, like an expectation to marry within the community.

One of the major complexities now facing communities in the twenty-first century is that the sense of locating oneself in a community has undergone profound changes. A sense of community is rarely static and persons can locate themselves in a number of communities. So locations are not mutually exclusive.

Some very modern young people might also consider themselves to be also citizens of the world, and even of cyberspace where belonging to communities on the World Wide Web might have more significance than belonging to any other location.

Dimension 4: Adoption of a code of civil behaviours

Members of communities of all types operate within a code of behaviours which collectively form the values and customs and traditions of the community. Communities generally have ways and means of initiating new members into the community (and excluding them), maintaining the code of behaviours and, if necessary, adjusting them to changing conditions and environments. The term, 'civil society', describes those communities in which some form of cohering, peaceful and harmonious consensual agreement has been reached by its members in order to maintain the code



of behaviours. The symbols, ceremonies and other activities which illustrate the values and assumptions that underpin the code of behaviours, may vary from community to community, but single communities need some form of agreement among its members about codes of behaviour in order to maintain social harmony.

Examples of elements of common/core codes of behaviour which school communities might important include:

- Moral and ethical behaviour for self and towards others
- Respect towards and trust of cultural norms when they encompass diversity
- Mutual obligations, for example, to family, school, country
- Practical application of codes of behaviour, for example, attendance at school ceremonies, use of appropriate language, appropriate dress
- Peaceful co-existence with others

Dimension 5: An informed and empathetic response to social issues

As much as we might like to think that many communities operate as socially harmonious units, twenty-first century pressures emanating from individuals, groups and global forces, invariably impact on the daily practices and values of communities. These pressures, and the varied impacts they cause, simply cannot be ignored in our society which is under considerable tension and fear. Most communities engage in making some form of accommodations and adjustments to these pressures and issues. One of the tensions for communities and their education systems is the extent to which information and understandings about contentious social issues can be discussed within the communities.

Even acknowledgement of the existence of issues such as AIDS, racial discrimination, youth ennui and poverty immobilises some communities. An effective democratic community is one that encourages discussions about contentious social issues and addresses them using inputs from the community. Social cohesion will not be achieved in an environment of ignorance, prejudice and complacency.

A sense of citizenship requires both an informed understanding of social issues and also a sensitive and empathetic response to the issues. The disposition towards social tolerance and mutual understandings cannot be fully developed with just an emotional response. It requires both a cognitive response and an attitudinal response. The awareness of social

issues as a dimension of citizenship has its focus on a state of mind, or a disposition, based on moral and ethical considerations. The management of attitude change is rarely simple. In the context of a society in near crisis over a number of issues, and in a climate where there is a sense of both resignation and fear, there is the potential that the development of a positive disposition towards achieving the collective good has been replaced by self and family protection. School community issues like caring for the environment are unlikely to receive collective support in this climate. The acceptance by school communities of open discussions about social issues is more likely to occur in the context of social tolerance and harmony.

Dimension 6: A skilled disposition to take social action

Asking the question, 'What do you think education should be for?' is a provocative question in a discussion about the purposes of schools. The role of citizenship education in the school curriculum is like this big question in that it makes no sense at all if it lacks a purpose, or a practical application. Like the goals of education, the goals of citizenship are both contestable and problematic. An agreed vision of the world in which you hope young people might live happily and productively is needed, in order to give definition to conceptualising citizenship. It is a values clarification exercise, linking visions of the good life to the role education can play as an instrument of change.

Formal schooling is but one stage in learning, so to confine citizenship learning to the classroom divorced from the realities of the real world is largely a waste of time. There is little point in being a 'classroom citizen', because only a few people benefit from your actions. The bottom line for any effective social education programme is that students actually have the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge, skills and values which they willingly and purposefully offer to the broader community. In other words they become active contributors to their community. A 'good' citizen is one who does pick up rubbish in the community, who does vote, who actively engages in community affairs. In other words they take some form of action.

Some examples of how social action might be demonstrated by young people in schools include:

- Being actively engaged in community service
- Discussing with teachers how classroom activities might be organised
- Volunteering for positions in schools like form captain and on the SRC.
- Showing and taking initiatives in school activities.
- Placing posters like 'Caring for the Environment' on school notice boards
- Willingly working with groups of students on class projects.
- Inviting speakers to their school to discuss social issues.
- Writing to newspapers about social issues.

There is now a large body of evidence that indicates that taking action mostly doesn't come naturally. (Knight, 1999) School is an appropriate place in which young people can learn to take action. For young people, to develop a positive disposition to contribute to their community, they need to practice taking action, facing the consequences, and becoming contributing independent members of the school community. Schools need to develop structures and practices which allow young people to practice

citizenship. When young people do not have experiences in showing initiatives and taking action, they lack a repertoire of appropriate actions from which to choose.

Like some of the other dimensions of citizenship which contribute to the common good, acceptance of young people in taking on activities like organising school assemblies, being members of school councils and negotiating school assessment policies is predicated on a cultural shift by some principals and teachers. Some teachers comment to me on how they were unable to take 'social action' to contribute to the decision-making processes in their school. These teachers then are unlikely to allow their students to share in the decision making processes of the classroom.

The order in which the six dimensions of citizenship are listed is not meant to be of any significance. It will become clear that they overlap. Collectively they frame the notion of a 'good citizen'.

I hope that this article generates some discussions about the meanings and scope of citizenship education. It's a discussion that needs to be had within the school community *before* embarking of the next step of auditing and developing policies and programs.

In the next edition of *Ethos* I hope to develop the next step of discussing auditing processes and teaching and learning strategies.

I welcome any comments or suggestions.

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