

# Teaching Democracy and Human Rights: A Curriculum Perspective

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Curriculum documents are open to multiple readings and despite attempts by bureaucracies to impose a preferred reading on the curriculum text, teachers, in the privacy of their own classrooms, interpret and implement these documents on the basis of their own experiences, discipline base, beliefs and philosophy of teaching and education. The attempt to control meaning may well be seen to be futile.<sup>1</sup>

Democracy and human rights are among the most significant concepts discussed in established and new democracies in recent times. The discussions are fuelled by conceptual and ideological controversies. The concept of democratic citizenship has developed over a historical and political continuum and is constantly being challenged and reproduced in various spheres of public and private life. There is a definite need for continuous exploration of complex but, nevertheless, essential questions concerning education for democratic citizenship. For example, how is the concept of 'good' and/or 'active' democratic citizenship understood and defined? Have recent citizenship education programs sought to control the construction of citizens in a particular way? In this paper, I will be drawing from and supporting the theory that concepts of democratic citizenship and human rights are social constructs. Thus, they are unstable categories that are subject to change as well as reproduction.

During the second half of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, global support for human rights and constitutional democracy has become prominent. Education in and for democracy and human rights is likely to gain equal prominence and support throughout the world. The teaching and learning of democracy and human rights are part of many subject areas and approaches in formal education, and have wide political and social applications. There exists, however, little agreement about what should be taught and how it should be taught in this regard. Ideological and political positions also influence what theorists, policy designers and educators think should be covered under the topic of education for democratic citizenship.

Foregrounding my analysis of Australia's recent attempts to educate for democracy and human rights through the introduction of a comprehensive and costly civics and citizenship education policy and program, I discuss some current conceptions of education in and for democratic citizenship and human rights in Australia, and explore some of the potential problems and deficiencies of recent government initiatives. The aim of this paper is to make explicit why an integrated, process-oriented, rights-based educational approach to the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights may be preferable.

### **A Changing Context for Democratic Citizenship**

Conceptions of democracy, human rights and democratic citizenship are plagued with definitional difficulties and deep-seated controversies about the nature of democratic institutions and processes. In recent times, since the formation, failure, and consequential disablement of the League of Nations, supranational organisations as well as nation-states have been trying, with increasing success, to advance broad agendas around concepts such as human rights and citizenship. The development of new international treaties and, therewith, the rearrangement of governing instruments on a supranational level to include, for example, children as ‘citizens’ with rights and responsibilities, may produce definitional challenges to conceptions of democratic citizenship.

In an attempt to reconcile the tensions and contradictions that are reflected in the dualistic relations between the individual and society in its diverse forms (aliens and citizens, private and public identities, rights and responsibilities, etc), I have developed a definitional explanation of democratic citizenship: Democratic citizenship may be characterised as the fluid, multifaceted and necessary glue between two simultaneously abstract and concrete concepts, namely that of an individual person and that of a group of people (community and/or society) to which this individual person belongs through some form of membership. It is the relational possibilities between the individual and the group, community and/or society grounded in common life and within one or multiple spheres (such as the political, socio-economic and cultural, or the collective and civil), which constitute the extent of democratic citizenship.

Democratic citizenship has three distinctive features. Each succeeding part builds upon and extends the initial understanding of the concept:

- It provides a broad framework for the successful practice of common life and ‘popular government’, which rests on the principle that each individual person constitutes an ultimate source of agency with responsibility to contribute to and uphold the common good in a democratic group, community, society, nation-state or global community.
- Through the integration of both rights and responsibilities, democratic citizenship is fundamental to the strengthening of human rights for minority groups<sup>2</sup> (such as children, women, ethnic people, refugees and the elderly) in terms of equality and justice.
- Active participation in political life and decision-making processes on communal, local, national and/or transnational and supranational levels is the life blood of democratic citizenship and needs, therefore, to be perceived not only as an individual political right but also as an individual political responsibility to serve the common good.

This multi-dimensional conception of democratic citizenship holds significant implications for the processes of the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights. This conceptualisation of democratic citizenship requires a range of abilities of their citizens. Citizens of new and established democracies are required to have highly developed attitudes, knowledge and critical reasoning skills to function effectively in contemporary democratic societies.

In addition, two distinct and conflicting ways of thinking about democracy and democratic citizenship have emerged over the years. These temper the definitional exploration of democratic citizenship outlined above. The first mode of thinking, at times referred to as civic liberalism, tends to stress individual rights to freedom and views democracy as a finished product, whereas the second mode of thinking, often referred to as communitarianism or civic republicanism, stresses individual responsibilities and concerns itself with the public or common good and views democracy as an ongoing process.

Civic liberalism promotes a rather passive role for citizens and calls for little effort on the part of citizens beyond electing parliamentary representatives to government. Yet, civic liberalism is very interested in achieving democratic outcomes through well-defined policy articulations. By contrast, communitarianism implies a much more active role for citizens where the ongoing participation of citizens in governing processes is necessary for democracy to work. In this tradition, citizenship is understood as participation in a variety of self-governing communities in which individuals are encouraged to share in a common civic life, along the lines evident in ancient Athens.<sup>3</sup> Civic liberalism promotes a weaker sense of belonging to a political community than communitarianism, which tends to emphasise individuals' social responsibilities to promote equality and social justice. Yet communitarianism is much more open to value relativism and a process approach in which benchmarks are difficult to articulate or achieve. Notwithstanding the strengths of civic liberalism and communitarianism, both approaches have identifiable limitations. A pluralist approach may open up possible forms of communication between the seemingly oppositional approaches, which would enable the shifting of positions and negotiation of understandings. Adhering to one of these two positions has fuelled the development of distinct topics, literatures and professional communities, and consequently has dominated the development of distinct educational curricula such as human rights education (HRE), civics and citizenship education (CCE), and multicultural education (MCE).

### **Toward an Integrated Human Rights Educational Approach**

Although there is a strong need to operate on a cross-curricular, inter-subject level, crossing formal borders between human rights education (HRE) and civics and citizenship education (CCE), I favour a process-oriented, human rights-based approach to education for democratic citizenship as opposed to a content-dominated, history-based approach. Rights-based educational approaches are comprehensive in their consideration of a full range of interdependent and interrelated rights and freedoms, accounting for the protection of rights and freedoms of non-dominant groups or individuals in society or community. Thus, they seem to protect against the discrimination of a wide range of individuals or groups of people often referred to as the 'other'. Or, to put it differently, adopting a rights-based educational approach means that particular attention is given to the social, political, and cultural needs of the 'other', and to issues of discrimination, equality and social justice.

Human rights education, focusing on particular processes of social life in a variety of communities and groups is essential to active citizenship in a democratic and pluralistic civil society. Citizens need to be able to think critically, make moral choices, take principled positions on issues and devise democratic courses of action. Participation in the democratic process means, among other things, an understanding and conscious commitment to the fundamental values of human rights and democracy, such as equality and fairness, and being able to recognise problems such as racism, classism, sexism and other injustices as violations of those values. Active citizenship also means participating in the democratic process, motivated by a sense of personal responsibility for promoting and protecting the rights of all. But to be engaged in this way, citizens must first be informed through open access to information and knowledge that is relevant to and current for their particular circumstances and diverse contexts. Recognising that the better members of social, political and cultural groups are informed through the transparent decision-making processes of elected governments, the better their chances will be for active participation within that community and polity. Thus, grappling with understandings of what concepts such as human rights and democratic citizenship might mean, students are in a better position to unmask hidden power structures and underlying assumptions of current political and social contexts. Rights-based educational approaches focus on raising levels of awareness of rights — and levels of accountability for the rights of minority groups and individuals — by identifying ‘duty-holders’ and ‘claim-holders’, and their respective entitlements and obligations. Rights-based educational approaches also require the development of critical thinking skills in students that link rigorous understanding of issues with a moral sensibility that may serve in the development of students’ political consciences.

### ***Discovering Democracy: An Australian Example of Political Education***

In 1989, the Australian Education Council agreed to adopt a set of ten national goals that highlight the notion of ‘active citizenship’ as a central component of basic education. In June 1994, a Civics Expert Group (CEG) was created with the goal to enable people ‘to participate more fully and effectively in the civic life of our country, and thereby promote good citizenship’.<sup>4</sup> The CEG in its 1994 report recommended a range of measures to increase the level of political knowledge, understandings, skills and attitudes of young Australians. Its report *Whereas the people*<sup>5</sup> ... *Civics and Citizenship Education*<sup>6</sup> has become the cornerstone of Australia’s renewed interest in civics and citizenship education.

Within the past decade, ‘a flurry of activity has occurred which has catapulted the new civics education into a position of national prominence’, observes Murray Print.<sup>7</sup> He further notes, now that civics education has been accepted as an important component of a well-rounded education, that the ‘next major challenge’ will depend upon ‘how successfully the emerging civics curriculum is implemented in Australia’s schools’.<sup>8</sup>

### CCE in Australia: The Implementation of Policy

Over the past few decades in Australia, as elsewhere, the implementation of education policy in general and civics and citizenship educational policy in particular has been the subject of sustained scrutiny and intense debate, involving politicians, academics, practitioners and the wider community. This scrutiny and debate has focused on the lack of success in translating policy into sustainable practice at the grassroots level. Debate on what it may mean to students to be citizens of a democracy has its problems for policy developers. The complexities of addressing and acknowledging the differences inherent in views about the conception of civics and citizenship education (CCE) has been acknowledged by the Civic Expert Group and later also by the curriculum developers of the *Discovering Democracy (DD)* education package. *Discovering Democracy*, a national program of civics and citizenship education in Australia, was launched in May 1997 and had allocated funding of \$31.4 million over seven years. The *DD* materials comprise eighteen learning units developed around four themes: *Who Rules*, *Law and Rights*, *The Australian Nation* and *Citizens and Public Life*, and have been designed for various levels (middle primary, upper primary, lower secondary and middle secondary levels). They were distributed free of charge to all schools, including Catholic and independent schools.

Much time has gone by producing, testing and disseminating curriculum materials so that 'schools have really had less than a year of effective time for implementation. Consequently, the program has not yet been taken up in any serious way in the majority of Australian schools'.<sup>9</sup>

With the introduction of the new national CCE curriculum, the inescapable struggle of educational practitioners has been to accommodate yet another justifiable curriculum program into their busy and already crowded timetable. The tension curriculum completion demands of space, time and the emotional satisfaction of teachers has been documented clearly in recent evaluations about the relative success of the *DD* policy and program.<sup>10</sup> Print notes that 'teacher reactions in large measures are less than positive and forthcoming'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the British Council<sup>12</sup> observes that 'many texts on citizenship and human rights education mention the reluctance of teachers to engage effectively with this material'.

Kennedy et al have closely scrutinised the policy texts from which the *DD* was created. They have criticised *DD* as an approach to citizenship education that emphasises civil and legal status, and as a relatively uncritical study of the rights and responsibilities arising from membership of Australia's democratic society. In particular, they note that 'a commitment to a somewhat academic rationalist view of the school curriculum' has been applied, and that 'the subject of history ... was seen to be the most vital in carrying the nation's messages about civics and citizenship'.<sup>13</sup> This analysis is consistent with the British Council's<sup>14</sup> evaluation that distinct curricula approaches are developed according to underlying ideological assumptions and political interests. Similar to Australian initiatives, 'the recent reintroduction of CCE in England and Wales is also strongly grounded in a history perspective as opposed to a rights perspective which HRE advocate', according to the observations of the British Council.<sup>15</sup> In other words, both Kennedy et al<sup>16</sup> and the British Council<sup>17</sup> suggest that the Australian, English and

Welsh CCE curricula seem to be based on a civic liberal view of democracy and thus tend to favour not only a history-based approach but a rather narrow view of democracy.

Although this education package may be a worthwhile and stimulating resource for democratic citizenship education and may well be achieving short-term goals of enhancing some students' civics knowledge, I argue that it is not a very effective way of developing an engaging and politically active citizenry. This approach to political education for the enhancement of active citizenship leads to significant weaknesses. My criticism of and struggle with the latest CCE initiative of the current conservative Australian government is fivefold:

- The *DD* curriculum applies a narrow reading of democracy rather than a more sophisticated, dynamic perspective.
- The *DD* curriculum underestimates teachers' abilities to be policy designers and reduces them to 'teaching-technicians'.
- There seems to be a general incompatibility between the *DD* subject knowledge and the perceived social and political realities of a great number of students.
- Human rights, which constitute a central aspect of democracy and democratic citizenship, are not given adequate consideration in the *DD* policy.
- The evaluation of the effectiveness of the *DD* curriculum material uncovered major inadequacies in its implementation.

In what follows, I will address all of these points in more detail.

### **A Narrow Reading of Democracy**

The *DD* program offers teachers and students a detailed overview of the historical origins, legal basis and structures of the Australian democratic system of government. Learning about democracy and human rights with the underlying perception that these concepts are finished products is a largely cognitive endeavour that involves the memorisation of large amounts of data about past events, places, dates and people. Thus, the teaching and learning approach taken is largely cognitive, memorising great amounts of data and content information. This approach to CCE, which emphasises civil and legal status, and a relatively uncritical study of the rights and responsibilities arising from membership of a community or society, can be criticised for its narrow interpretation of the concepts of democracy and human rights. Following Parker,<sup>18</sup> I describe interpretations of democratic citizenship as more sophisticated interpretations if they include the following attributes: (a) they entail an understanding of the individual as part of a shared democratic culture and (b) they take into account the enormous range of variables impacting upon and defining the experiences of individuals in the community and influencing their relationships with others.

### **Experts versus Non-Experts: The Issue of Curriculum Control**

Kennedy et al<sup>19</sup> studied recent research in policy studies and pointed to the importance of the social construction of meaning within the field of education in general and CCE in particular. They refer to five key findings of policy studies by Blackmore that have serious implications for the *DD* curriculum design:

- Policy is a process, not just a product.
- Recognition of the action-oriented, bottom-up perspective sees those in the workplace as also informing and contributing to managerial policy.
- Policy changes in the very process of implementation.
- Policy should be seen more as a pattern of actions over a period of time rather than a specific document.
- Policy is as much a study of non-decisions as of decisions.<sup>20</sup>

Constructing and interpreting CCE policies as changing, fluid processes may well be a preferable model for the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights. Subscribing to this more sophisticated view of policy, teacher professionalism is constructed in direct opposition to civic liberalism's narrow reading of policy, which is in direct relationship to narrow perceptions of democracy and human rights. The underlying positivistic assumptions of the *DD* curriculum designers are the uncritical presupposition of a 'sanitised, one size fits all'<sup>21</sup> version of reality, truth and meaning-making. As a consequence, there is a false understanding that there are established and fixed boundaries between policy and implementation processes, and this can ultimately reduce teachers to teaching technicians (implementers of policy). Mainstream educational practices in the past were primarily based on positivist epistemologies, and technical and transmission pedagogical practices. Although positivistic views continue to be challenged, the unproblematic acceptance of objectivity, established hierarchies and privileged hegemonic realities that are exemplified in the *DD* curriculum program is still widespread.<sup>22</sup>

Judith Sachs argues that:

The effect of these initiatives is the control of teachers' work, and to define what constitutes professional knowledge and judgement which promotes one particular version of teacher professionalism and is eroding alternative forms of teacher professionalism. ... There is a preferred vision of teacher professionalism implicit in how the curriculum is to be implemented and the role teachers will have in its implementation. This vision of teacher professionalism sees the teacher as a compliant technician who implements policy in an acritical and instrumental way.<sup>23</sup>

At the core of Sachs's argument is that the power in a centrally developed curriculum program such as the *DD* material may well control the practice and form of teachers' professional work. The type of control implicit in such a centrally developed civics and citizenship educational program may not be in the best interest of the students and teachers. The program takes no account of the complex contextual nature of the educational environment and, further, ignores the development and exercise of autonomy in both teachers and students. While this strategy may well be achieving the short-term goal of enhancing students' knowledge of civics, the strategy 'used by the state to control an increasingly disaffected teaching profession, is not a strategic way to develop a strong and intelligent teaching profession'.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, it may also lack in effectiveness in developing an engaged and politically active citizenry.

### **Subject Knowledge versus Social and Political Realities**

Teaching about democratic society and human rights based on history<sup>25</sup> is arguably very interesting and may be worthwhile for a number of students. At the same time, it may encourage surface-learning, as students have to memorise a great number of historical events, places, dates and names through the adoption of technical and transmission teaching and learning processes.<sup>26</sup> But more importantly, this sanitised version of Australian history and the workings of the Australian democratic system of government glosses over the real, and often sharp, conflicts among groups in Australian society. This view is confirmed by the findings of a recent international Civics Education Study, which suggests that democratic educational principles and practices are favourable in encouraging students' deep understanding of civics and citizenship. In reality, 'a quarter of Australian students, for example, said they rarely or never are encouraged to voice their opinions in class'.<sup>27</sup> Another compelling example of the great variety of experience is how a primary school principal describes the school environment of his school, which is located in an underprivileged area of an Australian capital city. The principal explains that:

I think this [school] is like a prison, because of the fact that there is a fence with three strings of barbed wire on top all the way around. We've had the Minister of Education visiting the school last week and he just couldn't believe that a school would look like this.<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, the inequality and injustice felt pertains also to the social and cultural environment of a number of these students. The principal explains further that certain teachers display a 'lack of understanding of the students' background and culture' and thus treat them unfairly:

Rather than having to deal with the teacher, they [these Aboriginal students] can come and talk to me and I go back and deal with the teacher on their behalf ... the kids can walk right in through this door. They have the right to come in and tell me ... I have about six or seven kids, its a flexible number.<sup>29</sup>

Deep-seated conflicts and perceived injustices of social life, in the absence of specifically political attention and settlement, can and often do spill over into disruption and violence both inside and outside of school life. If CCE does not address the everyday challenges of students' and teachers' lives in schools in a democratic nation, it would seem that there are serious problems with the form of that educational provision. A content-based approach to CCE seems to suffer these very limitations.

### **The Human Rights of Children**

Chief executive officer of the Curriculum Corporation, Bruce Wilson, expresses his hopes that the *DD* policy and program will assist students 'to understand Australia's democratic system' and that they will, through this understanding of the working of the Australian democratic system 'appreciate the importance of engaging constructively in civic life'.<sup>30</sup> Although the *DD* curriculum material under its heading *Law and Rules* encourages the investigation of (a) the definitions and origins of rules and laws, and (b) types of rules and laws, and presumably the

qualities of good rules and laws, for middle and upper primary students, the concept of human rights is only incorporated into this theme later, in the middle secondary school years. By the time students reach middle secondary schooling (grades 8 and 9) they are 14 and 15 years old, and are deemed to be ready to understand the importance of, for example, The Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights (USA), the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizens (France), the UN Declaration of Human Rights, the Australian Constitution, civil rights organisations, and Indigenous peoples' fight for human rights in the twentieth century.<sup>31</sup> Although Indigenous peoples' rights<sup>32</sup> have been included in the content description, women's rights and other minority rights, but foremost children's rights, have not been integrated. While Australia has been one of the first nations to ratify the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it may be seen as rather disappointing that the CRC has not been included in the *DD* content list under the heading *Human Rights*. Further, the relevance of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is not made explicit to Australian students and this omission may even be seen as breaching article 42 of the CRC, which states that 'State Parties undertake to make the principles and provisions of the Convention widely known, by appropriate and active means, to adults and children alike'.<sup>33</sup> Policy makers must recognise the richness of understandings and experiences students bring to the CCE educational environment. Tim Goodwin,<sup>34</sup> a seventeen year old Australian youth, speaking at the 2001 *Discovering Democracy* National Forum, notes that:

*Discovering Democracy* is in many ways discovering identity ... Who am I, who are we? Lets put it into context. I'm seventeen. I'm young. I'm inquisitive ... I'm not physically strong, but spiritually, I sure am. I'm Aboriginal ... I have a black mother and a white father, yet I'm no less or no more then any other Indigenous person. I'm Australian ... Then, at the International Youth Parliament in my working group ... we talked at great lengths at what makes a personal, cultural and national identity. Really, for us, it came down to three major phases: Preserving, Maintaining and Evolving. And what exactly do these words represent? A journey.

### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of *Discovering Democracy***

Despite generous funding and great efforts on the part of the *DD* designers, the evaluations of the success of the *DD* policy and program is not as favourable as its designers may have expected — many schools clearly avoid working with this material. An evaluation report commissioned by the Australian government notes that 80% of respondents to the survey 'indicated that they were aware of the *Discovering Democracy* program to some extent' but almost two thirds of the respondents (69%) 'said that they had no significant experience' in using this material effectively.<sup>35</sup> Although, the report found that teachers who know the policy and materials had 'widespread, though not unanimous, praise' for the program, it also acknowledges that teachers thought that the *DD* curriculum program is 'too wordy' or 'too hard', 'assumes prior knowledge that neither the teachers nor students may have' and is 'too much to absorb into a busy teaching schedule'.<sup>36</sup> Moreover, the report concluded that many of their surveyed schools saw the *DD* program as a valuable 'but additional curriculum element ... among

other competing priorities' and gave the over-crowdedness of the curriculum as the main reason for not using it.

In a more recent evaluation of the successful implementation of the *DD* policy and curriculum program, Kennedy et al surveyed only schools that were using or planned to use the *DD* program. One of their general findings were that the 'rationale for schools either using *Discovering Democracy (DD)* or planning to use these materials varied considerably'.<sup>37</sup> For example, Kennedy et al noted that:

The impetus to use *DD* at [one of the case study sites in NSW] was a result of junior History syllabus change in 1998, but not specifically because of the perceived merits of *DD* and its resources. At [another NSW case study site], three teachers applied for a *DD* grant in 1999 by writing a proposal that included a *DD*-related program into the school curriculum. They were successful and were awarded a sum of money that was put towards professional development and resources. This program aimed to use Civics related materials as texts to improve student literacy, and as a way to promote student awareness of citizenship. The program never became part of a regular curriculum, and ... none of the participating teachers indicated that *DD* materials were being accessed or used in 2001.<sup>38</sup>

Although Kennedy et al were overall critical of the *DD* policy, they identified two positive aspects the *DD* policy and materials had for teachers and schools in Victoria, one of which was extra funding for professional development and another was additional time to reflect on educational content materials and pedagogical practices. The report notes that:

One of the key benefits of the *Discovering Democracy* policy was that it provided significant monies for professional development. This strategy was universally applauded by all staff interviewed ... It also provided time for teachers to reflect on what the schools were doing and what they might like to change ... All three schools ... grasped what they saw as an opportunity to review their goals, and in the case of two of the schools they were significantly reviewed and augmented and in the third it resulted in a realisation that they needed more information/knowledge themselves. However, they made little use of the *Discovering Democracy* materials, which 'lie languishing somewhere in the library, I guess! ... we can always ask the librarian'.<sup>39</sup>

In contemporary capitalist societies, where monetary considerations are regarded most highly, educators who participated in the above study 'grasped what they saw as an opportunity to review their goals'.<sup>40</sup> Notwithstanding my criticism, a definite positive side of the extra funding for professional development that the *DD* policy provided was identified as the freeing up of time for additional reflective work and meaningful debate within schools about the purposes of education in general and social and political education in particular. Thus, any accommodating infrastructure that supports the development of reflective educational minds and moral visions needs to be welcomed and viewed as, although insufficient in many aspects, a positive general development.

Kennedy et al's study, following two years after that of the Erebus Consulting Group, did not point to any significant changes in teacher attitudes toward the *DD* policy and program.<sup>41</sup> Similar to the findings of these two reports, all five principals and six teachers participating in my doctoral study are aware of the *DD* policy and program but only one teacher in one school is making active use of the

material. One principal whom I asked if the school was using the *Discovering Democracy* curriculum material replied: 'Oh, I guess we should, but you know', and threw her hands in the air, indicating that there are so many things that should be done but there just seems no time for all of it.<sup>42</sup> Notwithstanding the inclusion of a diverse range of materials such as CD-ROMS and videos, its generally inviting presentation and the generous financial assistance it was given, a great number of Australian teachers so far seem to resist taking up the *DD* curriculum program in any serious way.

One reason why teachers seem to be reluctant to embrace the *DD* education policy and education package was identified by Kennedy et al<sup>43</sup> as a tension between strongly held personal views about the relative importance of civics knowledge as opposed to civics skills and the way democratic citizenship education is being portrayed by the *DD* curriculum. Kennedy et al<sup>44</sup> conclude that:

There is a scepticism about an emphasis on 'civic knowledge' as part of civics and citizenship education. Described by teachers as 'dry', teachers seem to prefer a focus on skills and on civic attitudes rather than civic knowledge ... Teachers may use the materials but they will not necessarily be persuaded by the perspective they take ... Teachers' personal values and understandings construct civic and citizenship education in these schools rather than a major policy initiative that had the support of two successive Australian governments.

My criticisms of the *DD* policy and program are extensive and highlight the problematic character of a program that envisions the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights through the uncritical acceptance and implementation of a centrally devised school curriculum, implanted as an add-on to an already overcrowded curriculum. The concept of civic liberalism — and its relationship to perceptions of the concept of democracy as a static product rather than an ever-changing fluid process — can clearly be located in modernist positivist ideologies. Similarly, the clear separation of curriculum designers and educational bureaucrats as 'experts' and the teachers who, as 'non-experts', are given the task of simply transferring the knowledge prepared by the experts to the students, and the remoteness of the relevance of subject knowledge for a number of students, given the diverse realities and histories, originate from similar positivist theories and epistemological positions.

It is central to any political education that the underlying assumptions and epistemological positions of curriculum development need to be scrutinised. The effects that presumed values have on social forces within the field of education, individual schools and classrooms, which are embedded in and form part of our civil society, must not be underestimated but, rather, must be open to critical scrutiny and debate. Such work could well be the basis for a more responsive CCE.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I pointed to the inherent interconnectedness and social construction of the concepts of human rights and democratic citizenship. I argued that both concepts need to be understood as changing over time and can therefore be depicted as being under perpetual construction. In developing a definitional

explanation of democratic citizenship, I argued for a process-oriented, rights-based education approach to the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights. The reason for this is simple: rights-based approaches focus on both raising levels of awareness of rights and accountability for rights. Raising levels of awareness and accountability for human rights will make apparent the interconnectedness of social justice, equality of opportunity, and global economic, social, and cultural contexts. Equally important are issues of accountability for human rights as marginalised groups and individuals in society are increasingly recognised as legitimate ‘claim-holders’, although they may still be deprived of some basic human rights.

Further, I have pointed to some problems of the new Australian education policy and program called *Discovering Democracy*. Despite generous funding and extensive promotion, the *DD* policy and program has not had as much success as may have been expected. A main reason may be the lack of understanding of the centrality of schools and teachers who hold strong views on this matter. ‘Too often elite policy makers take the high ground when it comes to the production of educational policy as though the creation of a new policy is enough to make it successful’, observe Kennedy et al.<sup>45</sup> I tend to agree with their conclusion that ‘a truly sustainable policy process has to both recognise and celebrate the contribution that teachers make for they are the final arbiters of policy and its true success depends on them’.<sup>46</sup> However, I would add that it is the voices of students that need to be heard. Many primary and secondary school students are denied the right to be included in decision-making processes on issues that directly affect them during their school days. The apparent paradox of this situation, which has been observed by a number of scholars,<sup>47</sup> is that formal schooling fails to be democratic in many instances and hence may fail to educate effectively for democracy. Faith Trent<sup>48</sup> explained this situation in a recent keynote address:

We exhort older students to behave ‘like adults’ ... and we treat them like children ... we talk of teaching them to make decisions but we do not allow them to do so, unless they are the decisions we wish them to make ... and we impose a formality that exists nowhere else except perhaps in the army.

One of my central arguments is that schools should work explicitly with diverse contexts and with the added dimension of students’ active participation in the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights. Thus, the diversity of students’ lived experiences, school environments and pedagogical practices could and should be closely scrutinised. A centrally devised and sanitised version of the Australian democratic governing system may not have the power or relevance to engage students’ desires to critically read their world in relation to concepts such as democracy and human rights as citizens within a particular group, community, society, nation-state or global community.

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- 1 J Sachs, 'Curriculum Control: The Cost to Teacher Professionalism', paper presented the Annual Conference of the Australian Association for Research in Education, Fremantle, 2–6 December 2001, p 1.
- 2 The question of who is to be included/excluded in the group of minority is a vexed question. Even Members of the United Nations are unable to 'arrive at a universally acceptable definition'. However, they state that 'the most commonly used description of a minority in a given State can be summed up as a non-dominant group of individuals who share certain national, ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which are different from those of the majority population'. United Nations, *Fact Sheet No 18 'Minority Rights'*, United Nations Press, New York, 1999, p 14.
- 3 The term democracy is derived from two Greek words 'demos' meaning people and 'kratos' meaning rule. Originally, democracy meant rule of the people or involvement in self-governing processes.
- 4 Civics Expert Group, *Wheras the People ... Civics and Citizenship Education*, Australian Government Publication Service, Canberra, 1994.
- 5 'Wheras the people' are the beginning words of the Australian Constitution.
- 6 Civics Expert Group, op cit. This report had a legacy of two previous attempts to assess and recommend strategies for the incorporation of CCE nationwide, the initial discussion paper produced by the Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, Education for Active Citizenship (1989) and *Active Citizenship Revisited* (1991). This later document advocated a critical and reflective approach to the issue of political education. The report reads as follows: 'This approach seeks to assess the values associated with the political structures and institutions under examination at the same time as looking at how they work and how to operate within them. It also seeks to broaden the field of what is accepted as 'political' by including power relationships in other areas of life beyond formal political structures, thus coming closer to young people's interest and experiences and giving politics and its connection with active citizenship more meaning for them'. Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, *Active Citizenship Revisited*, Australian Government Publication Service, Canberra, 1991, p 59.
- 7 M Print, 'From Civics Deficit to Critical Mass: The New Civics Education'. Paper presented at the international conference *Citizenship Education: Canadian and International Dimensions*, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, New Brunswick, April 1995, p 9.
- 8 Print, loc cit.
- 9 Erebus Consulting Group, *Evaluation of the Discovering Democracy Program: A Report to the Commonwealth Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs*, 1999. Available at: [www.detya.gov.au/archives.school/publications/1999/DD/pdf](http://www.detya.gov.au/archives.school/publications/1999/DD/pdf).
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- 15 *ibid*.
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- 20 Blackmore 1995, cited in Kennedy et al, op cit.
- 21 Sachs, op cit, p11.
- 22 E Dobozy, 'Constructivist and Montessorian perspectives on student autonomy and freedom', *Proceedings Western Australian Institute of Educational Research Forum 1999*. Available at: [cleo.murdoch.edu.au/waier/ forums/1999/dobozy.html](http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/waier/forums/1999/dobozy.html).
- 23 Sachs, op cit, p 1.
- 24 *ibid*, p 5.
- 25 For example, the themes of the *DD* program are: Who Rules? Law and Rights, The Australian Nation and Citizens and Public Life, Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, p 4 and 5.
- 26 Recent research carried out by Phillips et al uncovered that surface-learning techniques are primarily adopted by students when educational material is 'spoon fed' (utilising technical and transmission approaches) and when the content 'relies heavily on memory'. R Phillips et al, *Staff Development in Evaluation of Technology-based Teaching Development Projects: An Action Inquiry Approach*, 2002. Available at: [cleo.murdoch.edu.au/projects/cutsd99](http://cleo.murdoch.edu.au/projects/cutsd99).
- 27 Findings presented by Kerry Kennedy and Suzanne Mellor the cross-national Civics Education Study undertaken by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) at the *Discovering Democracy* National Forum, March 2001, held in Old Parliament House in Canberra. The report is available at: [www.acsa.edu.au/DD2001%20report%for%20web.pdf](http://www.acsa.edu.au/DD2001%20report%for%20web.pdf).
- 28 Transcript of principal interview for my doctoral dissertation, 14.11.2000.
- 29 *ibid*.
- 30 Commonwealth of Australia, *Discovering Democracy*, Middle Primary Units, 1998, Curriculum Corporation, Carlton South, p iii.
- 31 For a detailed description of the structure of the *DD* program, refer to Print, 1998, op cit; Commonwealth of Australia, 1998, op cit, p 4–5.
- 32 Although Indigenous peoples' human rights find mention in the *DD* materials, the IEA study found that 'it didn't really address students' knowledge and awareness of Indigenous people and their issues'. Findings presented by Chris Harris at the *Discovering Democracy* National Forum, March 2001, held in Old Parliament House in Canberra. The report is available at: [www.acsa.edu.au/DD2001%20report%for%20web.pdf](http://www.acsa.edu.au/DD2001%20report%for%20web.pdf).
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- 36 Erebus Consulting Group, loc cit.
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- 42 Transcript of principal interview, 23.03.2001, op cit.
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- 45 Kennedy et al, op cit, p 19.
- 46 Kennedy et al, loc cit.

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- 48 F Trent, 'Current Educational Issues or are there Aliens in the Classroom?' Keynote Address, Association for Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA), *Briefing the Board Conference*, March 24, Perth, Western Australia.