Under the power lines

Reflections on schooling, civics education and citizenship

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In late 1998 a nationally developed curriculum package entitled Discovering Democracy was released to all Australian schools. It comprises the official answer to the low levels of civic awareness widespread in our communities. Following some comment on the ways in which this package selectively represents questions of citizenship and nationalism, this article argues that knowledge of facts alone is not sufficient to educate for participatory democracy. By demonstrating that young people can and do operate with a sense of political awareness in the daily context of schooling, the article urges a more self-conscious approach to the question of civics education, one that attends to the processes and practice of schooling as well as the transmission of information.

In Australia in recent years there has been much attention paid to the question of civics education. In 1992, having raised the issue of Australia becoming a republic, the then federal Labor government commissioned a study to be made of civics education which led to the publication, *Whereas the People* ... (Civics Expert Group 1994), a report which identified the widespread weaknesses in public knowledge of civic structure and which set out specific curriculum suggestions and injunctions to the nation’s schools to address the problem. The change of government early in 1996 was associated with some pause in the development of this curriculum, especially as the current prime minister has continuously affirmed his position of commitment to the monarchy and hence against the notion of an Australian republic. However, the conservatives also deplored the lack of public knowledge of the existing system of government and the decision was taken to proceed. The latest development has been the issue in November 1998 of a curriculum package entitled Discovering Democracy, which was delivered to every school in the country. This package proposes a detailed multimedia curriculum to cover the school Years 4 through 10 in the area of civics education.

The lack of representation of and consultation with teachers was a feature of the composition and conduct of the original committee, the Civics Expert Group. Their recommendations for curriculum clearly proceeded from a concept of what every child should know. Attention was directed to the assemblage of fact, in increasing levels of complexity, whereby the widespread ignorance of government structure and process could be overcome. Although the Discovering Democracy package did involve some
teachers as writers and the materials were trialled in some schools around the country, these materials remain very much in the information-rich orientation adopted by the original report. The package does incorporate the latest technology – there are videos, and a CD-ROM which can be used interactively and which affords both teachers and students the possibility of communicating around the country. There are attractive booklets which are readily available for teachers to photocopy and generate class sets of the pre-ordained exercises from. However, the attention is on the learner gaining possession of a series of facts – upon which she or he can be quizzed at regular intervals; there is no attention to the 'grammar of understanding' (Haste 1987, p.164) seen by some theorists as essential for theorising the ways in which children come to learn about society and its institutions. Even more importantly, perhaps, the implication that democracy is itself an entity which awaits being discovered – as implicit in the title – is manifest throughout.

The tone adopted in the writing of the materials could be described as triumphal – in terms of democracy, we may have made some mistakes in earlier times but now we've got it right! There is none of the ongoing struggle for democracy of the sort that John Ralston Saul (1999) writes about, no way to deal with the urgent and divisive quality of current debates about, for example, bioethics, indigenous rights or uranium mining. The static version of citizenship presented in these materials is constructed in historico-legal terms – stories of citizen-heroes of the past and questions of rights and responsibilities in the present. Feminist critiques of the male-centric construction of the citizen have had no impact on these materials. While women are mentioned, they are not included in any real way in the construction of the citizen. The package is essentially bland, and carefully skirts 'dangerous' topics by opting for accounts of past history and the facts of civic organisation. In particular – and especially notable given that the materials are designed for children from their fourth year of schooling – there is virtually no mention of children in these materials. Citizenship, it would appear, is an attribute of adult status. Children's voices, their perceptions of current issues, their importance to the country in general are issues entirely unexamined. Hence the educator's dictum that in order to teach effectively one must first discover just what the students know already has been completely overlooked.

WHAT DO YOUNG AUSTRALIANS KNOW ABOUT CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP?

Some local research has recently chosen to focus on student knowledge of government structure and procedures, especially in the senior secondary years. Generally this work has reinforced the findings of the survey mentioned above, namely that young Australians in the senior years of secondary school are poorly informed about governmental structures and process. However an even more important question has been left unaddressed in this work. That question concerns the quality of thought that students use to address the area of civic power – how their thinking proceeds and with what it engages, rather than the simple facts of how much they know. Several commentators have registered the lack of fit between knowledge of civic structure and the ability to think and act politically (Finn 1990; McAllister 1998). In these cases it is argued that because students
or people generally do not know the correct title or procedure associated with public power it does not follow that they are incapable of thinking politically and of acting on their thinking. The fact that curriculum can be written without any consultation with young people in terms of what they already know and how they already see the situation is educationally both incredible and indefensible.

Not since Connell’s work based on a study of Australian children’s responses to questions of politics some 30 years ago (Connell 1971), has there been any qualitative investigation of the current levels of perceptions of civic power and its articulation from the point of view of primary-school-aged children. While Connell’s groundbreaking study is hailed as a first in its field, it must also be immediately evident that the changes in Australia in the past 30 years have been so profound as to render the findings quaintly inadequate in terms of the current social situation. By the late sixties, when Connell was gathering his data, Australia was just beginning to recognise the political existence of the indigenous peoples. Royal visits were occasions of great patriotic excitement and fervour. The Vietnam War was in full swing and the nation was experiencing widespread levels of public protest never previously encountered. Many of these issues were raised by the children in Connell’s interviews – their feelings about the Queen, the royal family, their experience of waving the flag and lining the routes for the visit, as well as their understanding about the war in Vietnam and the arguments both for and against it. Such issues are unlikely to have currency for young people at the beginning of the new century. In particular, Connell’s treatment – or in fact his silence – about indigenous issues is perhaps one of the most dated features of the work. The listing under ‘Aboriginals’ in the index says ‘see Race and racial conflict’, a conjoining with the evident implication that race inevitably involves conflict. On following up entries under ‘Race and racial conflict’ it appears there is more discussion about race relations in terms of American blacks than of Australian indigenous peoples. The point here is not to castigate Connell for this omission, but rather to demonstrate that social science is always and quite properly reflective of its social context. As an example of the ways in which children are recruited by what Haste has termed the ‘social origins of meaning and the frameworks the culture provides for making sense’ (Haste 1987, p.169), the study is exemplary. The questions that engaged Australians in the late sixties and which were reflected in the conversations with children are very different from those that are current now. It seems likely that children’s thinking on these issues will differ accordingly.

THE STUDY

The current study was initiated to remedy the lack noted above in our knowledge of what primary school students know and how they think about issues of public power and politics. The sections described in this article form part of a larger work in which the authors sought to describe the political awareness of Australian primary school children.

The study began in one middle-class primary school in a pleasant hills location just outside Adelaide, the capital of South Australia. The school comprises around 100 students and has been in place for just over 100 years. There are many features specific to
this particular school – its small size, its age, its homogeneity, and its mostly middle-
class, English-speaking, Australian-born population. The researchers made a conscious
choice to begin the study in this location despite its specificity – and attendant questions
of generalisation – as we wanted to generate a discussion that was as rich as possible
unhampered by issues of differences in language facility and social position. No doubt
we shared to some degree the popular misconception that politics is hard for children!
The study is continuing in locations markedly different from the one described here.
However there are, in our view, significant features of children’s thinking already uncov-
ered by the study that warrant report and discussion.

Because we wanted to comment on the quality of the children’s thinking, rather than
to produce a simple report of what they know, we opted for a qualitative approach to
data-gathering based on small-group interviews, each lasting around 40 minutes. These
interviews allowed us to probe understandings beyond the availability of correct termi-
nology or existing knowledge of actual structures of government. The taped discussions
were held with groups of four to five children. This feature was also important as it
allowed us to capture something of the ways in which young people’s thinking develops
in interaction – an essential feature of what we wanted to find out. Previous research has
demonstrated the advantages of group work such as this insofar as the social process can
be seen to operate ‘as both a catalyst for and a consolidation of individual thinking’
(Haste 1987, p.172).

The school is organised around four combined year levels: R/1, 2/3, 4/5 and 6/7.
We talked with students from all year levels except the Reception/Year 1 group. In each
case the relevant teacher selected groups of four to five – three from each year level –
with each group comprised of roughly equal numbers of boys and girls. The discussions
were recorded using both audio and video recording in order for the transcriber to be
able to distinguish student voices not easily identifiable from the audio recording alone.
The material was subsequently transcribed and organised for analysis using NUD*IST
software. Data from work in this school alone comprised 134 pages of transcription of the
students talking about power and politics. We reproduce sections of transcript through-
out the article as evidence. The children’s names have been changed and the numbers in
brackets refer to their ages.

The approach taken in the semi-structured discussions was to initiate discussion
about power in terms immediately relevant to young people’s lives. Hence we started
with the idea that certain jobs have to be done in connection with the institutions of
home and school. Our initial questions related to issues of power and responsibility.
Questions such as ‘What do you have to do?’, ‘Who makes you do it?’ and, in particular,
‘Who is in charge?’ – at home, at school, in the classroom, in the playground etc – were
productive of lively discussion. Our position was based on the shared conviction that
young people’s understanding of politics is likely to be derived from their own lived
experience of the operation of power.

One theme in our study emerged quite clearly and quickly. This was that children’s
thinking about power, its locations and articulations, develops in ways highly congruent
with their developing cognitive capacities. This process we have likened to the ‘pebble in the pond’ phenomenon, an ever-widening series of circles of possibilities in their perceptions of power relationships (Howard and Gill, forthcoming 2000). The feature we wish to discuss in this article is not concerned with the developing sophistication of the children’s conceptualisation of power, but rather with the quality of thinking used to address the question from the beginning. In this approach we are using theories of social cognition.

BEYOND EMPOWERMENT – SOCIAL COGNITION

Educationists of late have embraced the notion of empowerment as a positive effect of the educational encounter. More often than not, the claim for empowerment rests on inference rather than empirical enquiry. If teachers act in mutually respectful ways, we are told, the students will be empowered. Authoritarianism is disempowering as it represents domination of students by teachers. While the approaches commended in this way are intuitively reasonable, we want to suggest in this article that there is a need to go beyond the assumption that if teachers act in accordance with currently acceptable pedagogic principles the students will automatically and transparently achieve a more potent position in their classroom and their worlds. We want to theorise what transpires when teachers and schools operate consciously in ways that render their processes accessible and up for student comment and discussion.

In order to do this, there is a need to deconstruct some familiar ways of theorising young people’s thinking processes. One of the long-lived binary oppositions in the way educational psychology has presented theories of minds concerns the disjunction between the cognitive dimension – meaning primarily mental processing governed by logical rules – and the affective dimension, which necessarily involves feeling, an emotional level of response. In addition there is the split between the cognitive function of schooling, wherein the study of the ways in which children’s minds develop is privileged, and the socialisation factor, which is usually associated with the internalisation of social rules. In this article we propose the need for theorising which resists these long-standing distinctions. Instead we argue for theories of social cognition which insist on the cognitive dimension of social learning and in which the social is not so much a system response into which behaviours and attitudes must be fitted but rather the social itself is registered as a focus of thinking, a response sometimes described as metacognition. As set out by Zimmer:

The term social cognition refers to a new hybrid field of study that treats matters of how people think about themselves in relation to other people and how they perceive society and its institutions. (Zimmer 1990, p.287)

Political thinking inevitably involves thinking about the ways in which society is organised and struggling to achieve some sort of balance between the individual’s needs and the society’s requirements. Such thinking also necessarily involves a moral dimension – questions of justice, fairness and the general good – and a felt response, at times passionately felt, to current questions. In the analysis of the children’s talk about power in their
world of school and the ways in which their concerns are managed, we acknowledge the contributions made variously by Vygotsky in terms of the importance of the social context to cognitive operations generally and also of Kohlberg in the insistence of a developing moral dimension to young people’s thinking. However, as shall be evident in the following, we also felt a need to go beyond the work of these major theorists in our efforts to theorise the ways in which young people approach political thinking.

THE AWARENESS OF INSTITUTIONAL HIERARCHY – AND WHO HAS THE POWER REALLY?

Much has been written of the need for the transference of authority and affection from the child’s primary caregiver – parent, pre-school teacher, child care worker – to the teacher in the early years of schooling. Anecdotal accounts abound of the young charges frequently mistakenly calling the teacher ‘mummy’. Similarly parents often report somewhat ruefully that their authority becomes subverted in the early school years by offspring’s insistence on what Miss So-and-So said as being right and proper and the ultimate authority on the matter at hand. The children in our study had all completed the first two years of schooling and were thus in a position to have experienced not simply one teacher in charge of them but rather were able to see the school as a system of authority in which power was articulated through a structure. For instance, in response to the question ‘Who’s in charge in the classroom?’ they offered the following:

Q: Who’s in charge in the classroom?
All: Teacher.
Q: In every classroom?
John (10): Yeah.
Mandy (10): There’s some classrooms that the teacher’s one of the leaders, some of the kids are too.
Q: Is that a good thing or a bad thing?
Mandy: I think it’s a bad thing.
Q: Okay, tell me about that. Why is it a bad thing?
Mandy: Because the leaders who are the kids are basically more independent, harder to agree because they want their own way.
Q: I see. What sort of situation does that produce in the classroom?
Mandy: A fight.
Q: Okay. So you’re saying it’s more comfortable in the classroom where the teacher’s the leader?
Mandy: Yeah.

These middle-primary children show that they have rationalised the need for authority and structure in the world of school, but they are also aware of the transitive nature of power – it’s not simply a top-down affair, the children have power too. They are also aware of the emotional dimensions of issues of power – they identify conflict, a fight, as a feature of competition for power between teacher and taught, and readily concede a greater degree of comfort when teacher is in charge.
From quite a young age the power implicit in the institutional structure appears to be understood by the students, as noted by Haste, 'the child learns to enact the rule before she can express it or make it conscious and articulated' (Haste 1987, p.166). Even the youngest informants had a clear impression of the school hierarchy:

Q: So the principal is at the top of the school, is that right? Who comes next?
Brian (8): Mrs Steele because she is ...
Martin (8): Mrs Woolley after.
Angela (7): Mrs Wilson.
Brian: Mrs Green, Mrs Giles, Mrs Hill. Mrs Hill right down the bottom of the list.
Q: Why are they in that order? Why is Mrs Hill on the bottom?
Phillip (8): Because she teaches the R/1’s.
Q: So Mrs Hansbury is with the R/1’s – the little ones.
Angela: Wouldn’t it be too heavy to be on the bottom, wouldn’t you get squashed?
Phillip: It is a ladder.
Q: That is a good example. So the principal is at the top and the Reception/Grade One teacher is at the bottom. Who tells the principal what to do?
Phillip: All the other teachers?
Brian: The law.
Angela: The law.

The middle-primary children had incorporated other power effects into their hierarchy, such as age and size:

Q: All right, so the situation in the school, we’ve got, if we look at power going from the bottom to the top, who’s on the bottom?
Mandy (10): Usually ...
John (10): The children.
Q: Children?
Mandy: Children.
Q: What about ... which children are right at the bottom?
John: Receptions.
Q: Receptions are right at the bottom.
Mandy: The youngest.
Q: The youngest. And then it goes up in terms of age. And then who’s the next one up?
John: Size is also important because a little kid wouldn’t want to challenge a bigger kid.
Q: Okay. Because?
John: Because that’s more of a chance that you’re going to get beat up.
Mandy: Yeah.
Q: It’s a pretty dangerous activity. All right, so we’ve got the kids at the
bottom, and then who’s next in the power?
John: Then teachers.
Q: And then above the teachers?
John: The principal.
Q: What about the principal?
John: The government.
Mandy: Government.
Q: All right so the government’s above …
Mandy: Everyone else.

To some extent the way in which the very arrangement of schooling into classes/levels
along age lines is ratified as a power effect by the child informants. This effect is consist-
ent with the process argued by theorists of social cognition:

Meaning and implicit theories about social relations are revealed in the practice of mem-
bers of the society; the resources for the child’s understanding of the grammar of rules
are represented symbolically by the culture and within the framework of metaphor,
symbol and action the child develops her own understanding. (Haste 1987, p.168)

At the upper-primary level the discussion reveals that the students’ perception of power
and its articulation extends beyond the school to the further specification of government
as comprised of departments:

Q1: Who has power over education?
All: The Education Department
Q: What is the Education Department?
Sam (12): That is the big place somewhere. For schools.
Q: Is it just a building? How can a building give you power?
Leanne (12): The people in it.
Sam: A group of people who have more power than the principal, and
then decide.
Caroline (11): They make the main decisions that the principal doesn’t know, like
to go on an excursion the principal will send a letter and see if it is
okay with them.
Sam: Like with the movies we have been doing we have just watched
Moby Dick and we had to get the video from the Education Depart-
ment so we didn’t infringe on copyright.
Caroline: So they had to make sure that it wasn’t like unsuitable so they
wanted to watch this movie – we had to send it to the Education
Department first and get the okay sign from them so we could
watch it.
Q: Who gives the Education Department power?
Sam: The Minister for Education.
Q: Who is he? Where would we find him?
Sam: In Parliament House. On King William Street, is that it? On North Terrace, on the corner, kind of at the crossroads.
Q: Where does he get his power from?
Caroline: I don’t know.
Sam: Some mystical being ...
Leanne: Who knows! Someone very high.
Anne (12): Is it from the Prime Minister, the Premier?
Q: From the Premier? What is the difference?
Sam: The Premier is for the State Liberal and the Prime Minister is for the Federal Liberal or the ...
Q: Do you agree with Sam about that?
Adam (11): (Laughs).
Q: All right well where did we get to, we got to the Education Department and who gives the power to the Education Department, the Minister for Education, and the Minister for Education is in Parliament House, but we seemed to get stuck there, who gives the Minister for Education power?
Caroline: The government.
Sam: The budget, the Treasurer who gives out the budget, he kind of gives them enough money to give them a certain amount of power.
Caroline: I don’t really think that. Like it would have to be really serious I think if something had to be taken to the Minister for Education, like if it was a movie with language in it, like if the Education Department doesn’t think it is right and they don’t really know what to do they will just ... and it would have to be really bad if it still went up.

This discussion is particularly interesting in that it offers a clear example of the Vygotsky’s scaffolding effect as the young informants build on one another’s comments to construct a more complex picture of the articulation of power through school and community. They also maintain a sense of their own position within the hierarchy they mutually construct – the job of the higher powers is to look after their interests in the safety of the excursion and the choice of ‘suitable’ movies. This is a very different picture from the official curriculum, which represents the seat of power as a somewhat remote historical construction far removed from the actuality of student experience.
POWER/CONTROL SEEN AS NECESSARY FEATURES OF THE CLASSROOM

In their thinking about the ways in which schools and classrooms are managed, the students seemed almost surprisingly compliant. In their assessment, order is important for the organisation of successful classrooms. In their perceptions, the power of authority is a benign and necessary feature of the classroom. As Anne (12) noted: 'But there has to be some power, otherwise it just all falls apart.' Before this feature can be dismissed as so symptomatic of the middle-class location of the students as to be unremarkable, some points are worth noting. First the students are not simply obedient to the existing power structure. Even the youngest groups offered some counter and resistant reading of the school situation:

Q: Okay, tell me some more about how do you know, what does the teacher do that tells you that the teacher is in charge, what sorts of things do they do?

Angela (7): They tell you what the work you have to do.
Phillip (8): And what the rules are.
Q: Phillip?
Phillip: They send you out of the classroom sometimes.
Brian (8): If you been naughty that is.
Martin (8): They can tell you off if you are messing about on the floor or talking to people and put you in the Time Out book.
Q: Martin, what do teachers do that says they are in charge?
Martin: Give you work.
Q: Is it fair that the teacher is in charge?
All: No.
Brian: Because they give us heaps hard work.
Q: Okay hang on a second. What about the other way around, suppose the kids were in charge, would that be good?
All: Yeah.
Brian: Then we could get sport and activities.
Mary (7): It wouldn't be too good because what happens when we grow up, you won't be able to do anything.
Q: What would happen when you grow up?
Brian: You wouldn't be able to do anything, like be able to spell.
Phillip: You wouldn't know how to spell anything. I would keep some of the maths sheets, I would do them in my spare time.
Q: So you reckon, so do you think it is ...
Phillip: At least do some work.
Brian: Sport on some days, like and ...
Angela: An activity on some days and work on some days.
In this excerpt we see the children actively reasoning about whether or not school is a good thing, imagining what would happen if you didn’t learn what they understand as important knowledge – notably maths! – and constructing ways in which they could possibly get by without attending. They end up in the position of supporting the need for there to be schools, but this is not a straightforward effect of ‘the socialisation process’ with its passive overtones, nor is it a simple effect of class location, although no doubt these scripts are at work too. This sequence offers evidence of the ‘complex social and cognitive processes through which children engage in the negotiation of meaning, of justification and legitimation’ (Haste 1987, p.170). Elsewhere there is the appeal to developing notions of fairness and justice in their argument for the need for teacher control, as in:

John (10): There’s usually a decision with the class. The children make up the … they agree on what rules – they give the suggestions and the teacher says whether they’re good or not.

Q: I see, so the teacher can actually say, ‘This is okay’ or ‘It’s not okay’.

John: Yeah.

Q: So is that fair?

Mandy (10): I think it is.

John: Because you could just say ‘Kill everyone that you see’ and the teacher wouldn’t be able to say ‘yes’ or ‘no’.

SCHOOLS AS MODELS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESS?

The degree to which schooling processes enable and facilitate the role of students in decision-making has been recognised as an important feature in the promotion of participatory democracy (Brennan 1996). It seems to us unfortunate that Discovering Democracy does not do more to actively involve the students in the analysis of their own school location and its processes in its efforts to constitute a student citizenry. This is especially concerning because our young informants offered numerous examples of their ability to analyse their own schooling processes from the standpoint of a truly democratic sharing of power. For instance, the teachers at Melford appeared to follow the currently accepted practice of involving the students in the generation of class rules. The children were familiar with the practice of discussion and voting in order to determine whether or not a rule should be incorporated or changed. However even the youngest group were somewhat cynical about an individual’s potential to affect outcomes in this regard:

Q: Okay now who made up those rules?

Phillip (8): The teacher.

Brian (8): No we did.

Angela (7): Mrs Green.

Brian: No we did because Mrs Green said we are going to make our class rules and we said what the class rules were.

Q: So you had a say in that did you?

Brian: Yes.
Mary (7): I was in Mrs Hill’s class then, because you see the Year 3’s used to be Year 2. Me and Martin were in Mrs Hill’s.
Q: So how does that work then? How do you get to have a say in those rules?
Martin (8): We make them up.
Angela: I am not quite sure.
Q: Supposing you make up a rule that the teacher doesn’t like?
Martin: Then she won’t write it down.

Angela’s doubts, as in ‘I’m not quite sure’ give rise to Martin’s assertion ‘Then she won’t write it down’, a clear indication that although democratic process is officially followed, the teacher’s power remains supreme. The school rules regarding the teacher’s power over the students are to varying degrees structurally embedded, and the children learn these rules in ways that the simple voice-over ‘we can negotiate the rules for our class’ doesn’t easily overwrite. To some degree this is ratified by the older children in terms of the teacher’s status as adult, while at the same time they appear healthily aware of their reciprocally constituted importance in the classroom situation:

Q: Okay, who gives the teacher the power to do that?
Bruce (12): The Principal.
Damien (11): Us.
Rachel (12): All of us and the Principal.
Q: So how do you give the teacher the power to do things that you don’t like?
Rachel: Well if we weren’t there, then she wouldn’t be able to have anybody to talk to.
Bruce: And also because we’re younger.
Anna (11): Yeah.
Bruce: And she’s like the leader and we have to follow.
Q: And it’s like if you’re an adult you’ve got power. If you’re adult, like if you’re older, or being the oldest in the family, being old gives you more power.
Darren (11): It’s just like the teacher’s the follower and everyone in the class.
Anna: No, the leader.
Darren: Yeah, the teacher’s the leader and everyone in the class has to follow or else.

Our data provide ample evidence of the degree to which democratic process is taken on board in social arrangements by the children. By middle-primary school the children appear to be disinclined to consider any one of their peers as a ‘leader’ and prefer to see themselves as equally involved in joint decisions.

Q: Okay, what about, let’s think about your friends now, in your group of friends. Some kids have told us that in their groups of friends that
there's always a leader and you know other kids follow on. The leader determines what's going to be played, what games to play and where you're going to play them and so on.

Sally (9): Because with me and Alicia, we're best friends. We knew each other from when we were born because our brothers knew each other. We don't really care. We just go like, if one says something we just do it and if she wants to do something we do it.

Alicia (9): We swap.

Q: All right.

Neil (9): I don't really think it's fair how one person's the leader because some other people might want to do something else which they might enjoy but they still want to hang out with their friends.

Blair (9): I reckon it's better if two people discuss what like, good friends discuss what they want to do, and see if they can make a compromise. Or people go off in their different directions.

Even in terms of friendship behaviours – usually regarded as straightforward socialisation – there is evidence of the children's thoughtful insistence on democratic process. In terms of decisions about what to do:

Q: What about with your friends, who gets to say what you do when you are with your friends?


Sam (12): It is just kind of automatic, it is just kind of like a domino effect really, someone does something that is good, everyone else does it, yeah.

Q: So somebody makes a suggestion and the other people say ...

Sam: Agree or don't agree.

Anne (12): If they don't agree we sort of go our separate ways.

Sam: If someone goes 'boing' we go ...

Caroline (11): We usually just make our decision as a group, we don't usually like have one person make the decisions, we are all the leader.

Anne: It is more everyone has ...

Caroline: Everyone has a say in what you do.

Melford School, like many if not most Australian schools, has a student representative council, SRC, which operates by having elected members from each year level discuss school matters and contribute to the running of the school by giving student input about the various rules and activities. While Melford students, like students elsewhere, were somewhat cynical about the degree of impact the SRC had on school-wide decision-making, it is abundantly clear that this school management structure was constructed very much along the lines of representative government. As such it provided a ready opportunity for a civics education program to build on in terms of its democratically
elected membership and its decision-making processes. Unfortunately Discovering Democracy does not take up this opportunity. In addition, the ways in which the students viewed the SRC appeared to be coloured by media images of politics; in other words they exhibited a cynicism about student government much in the same way they regarded politicians as inherently untrustworthy:

Darren (11): Yeah, and then what they normally do in Parliament is say they'll do something really good but sometimes it doesn't mean they'll really do it.
Bruce (12): You have to get voted in.
Q: All right. They make promises.
Darren: Yes, they make promises but they break them.
Damien (11): They break them, they twist them.

and

Sam (12): It is kind of like our jobs in the classrooms, if you are like, a computer monitor but you don't know how to work computers, you just use your power to look important and stuff and then when something happens and you don't ...  
Leanne (12): Are you talking about anyone here? I am a computer monitor and I do know how to use it.
Sam: I am just speaking as an example. So you know how to use your power because you ...
Q: So some people can have power and have particular responsibilities but don't necessarily know how to do those things very well.
Caroline (11): It is like for the class monitors, they have power like inside of the classroom and in different classes except ones that actually are controlled by other class monitors.
Leanne: The Prime Ministers also, some of them like just have power but that is only because they work their way up there but they are not probably very good at their job – anyone can work their way up there if they just get people to vote for them, just say what people want and want to hear and they will get up there.

The fact that the students themselves made explicit connections between the way in which their class monitors and elected SRC members worked and the way in which they saw politicians as working underscores the potential of making these connections in the teaching of civics education. Their cynicism and disenchantment reflect both the media images but also are testimony to their felt sense of disappointment in structures they can conceive of as working more properly. This is not simply a case of these students being effectively socialised – they are sophisticated and articulate social agents. But they are also actively thinking through the implications for governance that emerge from existing routines, and thinking about possible alternatives. Their responses are inflected with
moral judgments about the rightness of particular arrangements and they are emotionally invested in the outcomes. Some of this is lost in the simple transcription of student talk — the urgency of expression, the keenly felt quick response, as in Leanne’s ‘Are you talking about anyone here?’, the equally quick denial and affirmation of a certain cynicism. Our conversations with these young people provided us with a unique opportunity to observe them constructing understanding about the ways in which schools and society operate, and their place in the broader picture. It is our contention that this process involves far more than the simple transmission of fact about the structure of government and the purposes of elections. To have an opinion about such matters, to have your say, certainly involves a thoughtful response to the facts as known, but also such action involves an affective response — to want to do it — and some degree of moral judgment about how you see what is right in the process. In our view, schools need to provide young people with these sorts of opportunities and then consciously relate them to the larger questions of public power.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our study of children’s reading of the power relations implicit in their daily schooling encounter appears to carry profound implications for both the processes of schooling and the ways in which teaching and learning are understood and theorised.

Firstly we would urge schools and teachers to become more self-consciously reflexive about their practices in the interests of teaching for participatory democracy. We have shown in this article that students do internalise aspects of their daily lived experience of schooling in ways that relate directly to their participation in institutional life. They see themselves as able to contest — to varying degrees — the rules of school existence. They see their school operating to incorporate them as individuals into features of corporate life — and they have opinions about the validity and fairness of this process. The students revealed themselves as critical commentators on the institutional politics of the school and ready to apply that learning to other social institutions. It is imperative that educators take note of this feature of school learning if they are to respond to the requirements of civics education in a democratic society.

Appeals to democratising the processes of schooling are not new. Ever since 1971, with the advent of the ‘new’ sociology of education, it has been argued that the ways in which schooling is organised impact on the forms of knowledge produced. Strangely, however, in this particular area, civics education, it would seem to appear that the curriculum developers have been wilfully blind to this sort of thinking. Discovering Democracy owes much to the current technological developments for information exchange and packaging. However, in terms of what is actually happening in the schools and the way in which classrooms are run, the materials are conspicuously silent. We say conspicuously because the essential project of education for participatory democracy is one of providing encouragement for people everywhere to speak up, to give voice to their concerns about what is actually happening in their lives, as well as to their hopes and
dreams and visions for the future. A suitable curriculum would need to attend to issues of practice as well as issues of factual knowledge.

The second implication from our work thus far concerns the way in which psychological theory has been taken up in teacher education. The split that is frequently forged between learning, as in the cognitive domain, and socialisation, as in the affective domain, is an artificial and dangerous construction. In this simplistic approach, schooling is seen as learning school subjects and socialisation is seen as making friends and learning appropriate behaviours. What is elided, and what we have been focusing on here, is the fact that children also learn about school and the ways of doing school becomes a focus for their cognitive and affective attention. In this article we have shown that the processes adopted by schools become internalised by the students in a conscious, reflective way that is not accountable in terms of typical theories of socialisation. Rather we have argued for the necessary place in theory of social cognition to offer an explanation of this process.

A related point concerns curriculum. The features of schooling described in this article have sometimes been loosely termed by some writers as the 'hidden curriculum' – meaning that which is not made explicitly part of the set of school-produced knowledge that every student must master. However our work has shown that this aspect of curriculum is far from hidden – in fact it is a powerfully evident part of the schooling encounter as experienced by students. Possibly it has become hidden or at least hardly noticed by the teachers and educators for whom the mysteries of schooling have for too long been understood as a series of managerial practices pragmatically adopted and subsequently taken for granted. Examples include the SRC, the negotiated classroom rules, the election of monitors etc. Such practices carry democratic overtones but may lapse into mechanisms for control and behaviour management, rather than offering an introduction to civic participation and responsibility. Curriculum theory needs to address the ways in which schools operate as part of the key learning areas associated with schooling.

THE WAY AHEAD

The task for civics education is not simply one of making sure all the students have learned the correct information about our government, but rather of providing explicit treatment of the way in which the school and the classroom is managed so that students can obtain a clear idea of their potential contribution to the running of that particular context. The arguments behind this approach are not simply that it is fair. Neither is it just a case of equity demands it. What we have argued in this article is that social cognition plays an important part in the intellectual development of the students. It is through social cognition that students perceive and understand the ways of institutions, home, school and broader society. Social cognition involves much more than simply being socialised – i.e. learning the correct behaviours to take part in the group. It implies a cognitive experience whereby group and institutional procedures are subjected to recognition and then an intellectual scrutiny within which the student is drawn to make some judg-
ment about the situation and her or his part in it. This is surely the ultimate goal of civics education and must therefore merit incorporation into its practice.

REFERENCES


