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School ethos and citizenship

Suzanne Mellor, ACER
Michael Elliott, Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER)
Review Paper

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by

S Mellor and M Elliott

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Preface

The point of view put forward in these papers suggests that it is only through recognising the primacy of pedagogy as the focus for the development of democratic citizenship that a democratic community can be constructed. The argument finds its clearest expression in the work of Dianne Common (1994). Stated simply the argument put forward here is that it is only through a pedagogy in which processes (such as critical thinking and conversation with others) are key elements that a democratic educational community can emerge and which is able to embody a truly democratic culture within the school organization.

These propositions have important implications for materials development: the literature suggests that pedagogy must be at the centre of any reform efforts. Providing that the principles of pedagogical reform are established then the precise directions for subject matter are contained within these broad assumptions.

Approaches to subject matter and to pedagogy in the literature have been characterised in several ways. A ‘traditional’ approach emphasizes factual knowledge and a more didactic style. A more ‘reformist’ approach teaches about the resolution of issues that are part of ‘real life’ This approach favours discussion and inquiry methods of teaching. More ‘radical’ approaches suggest that a ‘critical’ appraisal of subject matter (such as doctrines, policies and so on) is required so that students learn to understand that society is dynamic. Inquiry and discussion methods are evident but there are suggestions that students also need to participate in school and community politics and practices.

Much of the writing on pedagogy in the civics and citizenship literature is predicated on the notion, which is held to be both logical and necessary, that such a pedagogy cannot be effective without a co-existing school ethos which is amenable to the reflection on those considerations and the practice of those learning activities congruent to citizenship learning, as defined by that school. As to how this co-existence is to be achieved, there is a divergence of opinion. The introduction of a citizenship curriculum may induce changes in the ethos, or the prevailing ethos may induce the introduction of citizenship curriculum. Most, if not all, the writers referenced in this Review Paper argue for the interconnectedness of pedagogy and school ethos, of them being part of the one environment.

Another key assumption held by the writers is about teachers: they are ultimately the people whose task it is to translate theoretical notions into practice. In this sense classroom events are the embodiment of the curriculum, of the pedagogy and of the school ethos. Despite this assertion, there is often an unwillingness to view the work done by teachers as the complex activity that it is. It is crucial to recognise that the teacher is at the centre of any reform efforts. It will be necessary for teachers to evaluate their existing practices in the light of the data outlined in these papers, and to make judgments about which practices need to be re-assessed. In other instances,
teachers will see the desirability of, and ways to incorporate changes into their
practices, if the arguments put forward in these reviews are convincing.

An Overview of the Research

In recent years civics and citizenship education have been given increasing attention.
Part of this attention has focused upon the role of the school in developing attitudes
and abilities in relation to these areas of a school's ethos. The purpose of this
literature search was, in part, to examine what theoretical and research work had
been done on the effects the espoused ethos of a school might have on the citizenship
attitudes of its pupils, or whether other causative relationships, if any, had been
identified.

Some writers assert that when considering the preparation of people for citizenship
the general ethos of the school is as important as the teaching of the curriculum in
classroom contexts and the attitudes derived from family processes (John and

Against this claim it should be noted that some researchers argue that their studies
indicate that many schools have no formal policy for citizenship education (see

Differing Conceptions of Citizenship Education and its Relationship to Ethos

Approaches to political/civics/citizenship education have been varied. One
approach, for example, places emphasis on a civic education in which the curriculum
of the school embodied the knowledge and attitudes needed for informed citizenship
espoused, focuses on a more 'liberal reformist' argument in which political/civic/citizenship education was seen as producing 'autonomous learners,
whose efficacy and critical frame of mind would lead them into more active
participation in the political process' (see Harber 1984, cited in John and Osborn

The differing conceptions of civic/citizenship/political education clearly raise the
question of the 'overall political function of the school' (Osborne 1982, p 67). It is in
this regard that the impact of the so-called 'hidden curriculum' on political learning
becomes especially relevant. If it is considered desirable to develop 'morality or a
sense of justice...you have to create a just school, a just classroom environment'
(Kohlberg 1972, cited in Osborne 1982, p 67). Extending this idea suggests that
schools need to continue experimenting with organizational frameworks which
allow for student participation in government so that effective political learning can
occur (Osborne 1982). This point is joined again, in other parts of this paper.

If these propositions are accepted then it becomes important to ask whether the
school exists only for the purposes of cultural reproduction or whether it can be 'an
instrument for change' (Osborne 1982, p 67). There is, according to Osborne (1982,
p 67) 'room for genuinely political education in the school, but one should not expect
too much from it.'
It is clear that in these positions there is a broad agreement on the desirability and need to develop positive conceptions of citizenship, in order to ensure the long-term continuation (and stability) of society. It is assumed that through a process of political socialisation in school, attitudes and behaviours can be formed which will endure through subsequent processes of maturation and socialisation (Davies 1991, cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 154).

Dyneson, in his extensive research with the legendary Dick Gross, has developed a view which sees civics learning as insufficiently connected to the fundamental concept of citizenship as a socialization process. The weakness of ‘civic learning is that it ‘tends to de-emphasise the role of social influences on citizenship education’ (Dyneson 1992, p 55). His work supports the view that the ethos in a school will be a significant factor in students developing a clearer perspective on their role as part of a community. The students’ opinions on what constitutes a ‘good citizen’ reverberate with the recognition that the acquisition citizenry is socially-based, not systemic. ‘According to our analysis, students rated an ability to make wise decisions and concern for the welfare of others as the most important good citizenship characteristics’ (Dyneson, p 57). The importance of the school and its curriculum (including its delivery) embodying an ethos which takes account of student alienation and provides a view of community and citizenship which is sufficiently personal for students to feel they can both belong and influence is of the utmost importance to the success of any citizenship program.

Bickmore (1993, p 341) suggests that ‘society is conflictual’ as the key assumption of her research into how teachers in her study devised strategies to involve their ‘diverse students in social education’. Bickmore (1993, p 341) argues that ‘pluralistic democracy in particular relies on conflict as a mechanism for change. To be incorporated as citizens, young people need skills and information for making decisions and solving problems; that is, for handling the conflicts that come up in society’. ‘Inclusion’, Bickmore (1993) asserts, must underpin citizenship education. Schools thus must foster classroom environments and practices in which students deal with divergent materials so that the students’ analytical skills and attitudes, as well as behaviour, allow them to understand broader conflicts ‘in other contexts at later times’ (Bickmore 1993, p 342). The key argument, then, put forward by Bickmore (1993), is that schools need to ensure that ‘a wide spectrum of voices are heard’ through both the choice of subject matter and pedagogy. If these elements are assured by a school’s ethos and principles then ‘alternative viewpoints’ become part of the process of representing minorities as ‘significant parts of the national community’ (Bickmore 1993, p 343). Moreover, if these diverse voices are included in content, in pedagogy and in the school community as a whole, ‘then a wide spectrum of students are both practicing skills for and observing models of inclusion in a pluralistic democracy’ (Bickmore 1993, p 343).

The Research Base

Research findings in this field are varied. One major cross-national study found (inter alia) that citizenship was culturally specific (Oppenheim and Torney 1974, cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 155). This supports the view (of this team) that the concept of citizenship developed by a school community needs also to be culturally specific. Thus the ethos espoused by a school will create and convey and reinforce the concepts of citizenship that can be practised (and inevitably learnt) by its
students. There is no one, definitive citizenship to be explored, but the ethos of the school will be pivotal to the citizenship concepts experienced and adopted by students, in their dealings within their school community and beyond.

Some studies have reported that ‘schooling has a limited effect upon political attitudes...’ (Rose 1980, p 159, cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 155), though an understanding of the true meaning of this judgement depends on a clearer definition of the key terms and variables being investigated.

This view is challenged by other research which has claimed that schools were one of the ‘most important and effective instruments of political socialization’ (Hess and Torney 1967, p 101, cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 155). Not only are these effects evident at the school/institutional level but they are also suggested by studies which indicate that the ‘democratisation of the classroom was the essential precursor to the fostering of particular attitudes and values consistent with a mature democracy’ (John and Osborn 1992, p 155).

What also seems a crucial finding in this research of the interrelationship of school and classroom ethos, is the importance of recognising the predominant impact of pedagogy: the school ethos operates as the context for the pedagogy which can deliver appropriate learning. Moreover, the appropriate ethos and pedagogy are seen as ones which do not adopt as the key educational objective the training of pupils to acquire preferred ideas. Rather these schools see the need to encourage the development of ‘the wider cognitive and affective implications of political education’ (see Mercer 1974, cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 155).

Another fundamental ingredient of a school ethos, which would assist in developing such attitudes, is the ‘participatory framework’, consisting of a ‘less formal atmosphere; fewer petty rules and regulations and less deference to authority’ (Lister 1989, cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 156). Noddings’ view of the importance of ethos encapsulates the feminist position that the female contribution to the debate is one of asserting the essential difference of the male and female attitude on how best to manage the affairs between people and communities: that is the operation of the democratic process.

In their own research, as reported by John and Osborn, (1992) they administered a questionnaire, based on the Oppenheim and Torney 1974 model, which is conceptually based and operates on a political, literacy framework. The framework clustered the concepts in the areas of Democratic Values, Power and Authority, Rights and Freedoms, Conceptions of a Good Citizen, and Classroom Processes. The questionnaire was administered to students from two (English) schools, selected for their shared characteristics in terms of size, geographic location and pupil catchment, but having differing characteristics in terms of their approach to political education. In the ‘traditional’ school, there was a 4 week block of Political Education, as part of the personal and social education, most teaching was didactic, there was a caring ethos in the school, which the pupils espoused, though there was no formal equal opportunity or multi-cultural education. (This characterisation suggests a somewhat stronger sense of community and recognition of the rights of the individual than is commonly the case in a ‘traditional’ Australian school). In the ‘democratic school’, the ethos was explicit, there was a closely defined set of values and principles, communitarian beliefs were actively encouraged and practised, independence of thought and action goals existed for all students. Democratic classroom concepts
and practices were integral to all learning, active policies existed on multi-racialism and disadvantage and political education was fully integrated into the school curriculum and structures. It fulfilled the Fletcher criteria, outlined below.

Their findings, in our opinion conservatively reported by them, show that both schools have an influence on their students' attitudes and beliefs. The students at the 'traditional' school appear to have their beliefs either confirmed or reinforced by the prevailing ethos of the school, whereas the ethos at the 'democratic' school had a stronger influence on its pupils' values and beliefs. They did note a common tendency towards quiescence from both groups in the conservatism of the students' notion of what constitutes an 'ideal citizen' as being essentially passive and private.

This study was the only one we found which explicitly addressed school ethos as a variable in a research context, attempted to examine its constituent parts and considered them, especially in relation to the impact on student understandings of citizenship. The fact that it is a study of the English situation increases its aptness to the Australian context, since the kinds of curriculum in existence are more similar to ours than are the American.

The Characteristics of a Democratic School

According to Fletcher (1989) (and cited in John and Osborn 1992, p 156), several criteria can be used to identify the key elements of a democratic school.
A school's 'institutional ethos' is based on a 'communitarian tradition' in which:

- pupils are encouraged to adopt a diversity of attitudes and beliefs;
- some integration of the curriculum/courses is fostered;
- teaching methods is emphasised activity as a key element of practice;
- pupils are encouraged to design some of their learning 'paths';
- the concept of the democratic classroom is pivotal to the teaching and learning environment; and also
- there is a considerable emphasis on the more 'affective areas of the curriculum' (John and Osborn 1992, p 156).

Other dimensions may include specific policy on the following: on equal opportunity, on disadvantaged groups or multi-cultural education, as well as elected school institutions and participation in all aspects of school life (John and Osborn 1992, p 156). Support for multi-racial awareness is also fostered.

There is a most remarkable paucity of Australian material in this field. The most precise school-based argument we located, which connected school ethos, practical mechanisms for establishing links between curriculum and practice, and the concepts associated with citizenship education, came from John Drisko, Assistant Principal at South Portland High School in the US. He argues that the support and strengthening of 'our democratic way of life' is the 'governing purpose for education' (Drisko 1993, p 105). He asserts that to achieve this, 'schools must be sure of three things': that the 'fundamental principles of democracy must be a central part of the K-12 curriculum', that 'Democratic ideals should be the foundation upon which a school is founded' and that 'There must be a means for students to apply their knowledge of democracy' (Drisko 1993, p 105). In the section of the article titled 'A Democratic School Culture' he argues that schools must function in accordance with democratic ideals, although they need not be run democratically, because 'the only legitimate government is one derived from the consent of the
governed’. He reminds us that schools do not, generally, consciously pursue a positive culture, but ‘respond to a negative culture’, which ‘is not conducive to building a positive democratic culture’ (Drisko 1993, p 115).

At his school action was taken to ‘provide a means for students to practice democracy’ for it was believed that ‘the lessons of human nature, of the nature of representation, and of the need for and means to compromise, can best be learned when students, along with staff, practice it’ (Drisko 1993, p 116). He relates a structure of management which embodied, even mandated some student involvement, and an issue which became the subject of heated debate in the school and which tested the will and resourcefulness of staff and students. The resolution achieved and the process by which it was achieved lead Drisko to (reasonably) conclude ‘The students discovered that their concerns are taken seriously and that it pays to take seriously their duties as citizens in the school community...(It) Proved to students that it does matter what they do and that they can protect their interests through the democratic process’ (Drisko p 117). Given the lack of an argued position which proves that this kind of school ethos does not have the effect that Drisko demonstrates, we must endorse the validity of his findings and urge the need for his experience to be used as a model for other schools, if the potential of an effective introduction of citizenship education is to be achieved.

Another school based example of a democratic school ethos and the curriculum changes which flow from the adoption of such an ethos is reported in Wagner (1993). He makes the point that without community consensus about both the reform goals, in which citizenship skills are a high priority, and the best ways to measure progress, all efforts to effect change ‘are doomed’. It is a question of ownership of the goals. When linked to the comments above about the need for citizenship to be culturally or community specific, the need to adopt a strategy which will include meetings of a range of school constituents, work in the local media, implementing task forces etc, all acting as models of the democratic process, becomes evident.

**Related Organisational Models of Democratic Schools**

The power of the interconnectedness of school ethos and citizenship curriculum is again demonstrated by the service learning approach. (This particular form of curriculum, which relies heavily on a smooth organisational interface between pedagogy and ethos, is described and discussed in the other Review Paper: The Pedagogy of Civics and Citizenship Education.) In the subsection of his paper entitled ‘CSL and School Cultures’, MacNichol (1993) illustrates the way in which the adoption of a curriculum policy has impact on the ethos of a school. ‘Service learning can have a profound effect on a school’s culture because it changes both belief systems about how education works and what we do in the classroom’ (MacNichol 1993, p 10).

Common (1994) has argued that ‘good teaching and good learning are intimately intertwined with good constructive talk - construction, of course, that implies the development of knowledge within a democratic community’ (p 270). Common (1994) asserts that it is ‘through the language we use in conversation that we formulate our democratic ideals and the form of community living that is their expression’ (pp 269-270). It is, Common (1994) argues, through conversations in
classrooms that such pedagogy will and must impact upon the school: talk leads to the construction of knowledge about schools as places of and for collective actions.

Some Concluding Observations

Despite the research data regarding the influence of a school’s organisation on the citizenship attitudes of its pupils, and the claim that some of the data indicates an effect of a school’s ethos on the political socialisation of its pupils, it is prudent to suppose that no matter how democratically the school may be run there are many complex interactions which are not clearly understood in terms of their effects. The need is to determine the dimensions and the interactions of other factors such as parental, peer group and media influences (to name a few) with the pupil’s ideas of their role/position in society. Such research might also take into account the perceptions pupils have of their school and how pupils gauge its particular ethos. Such research data will suggest more refined ways of building school organisations so that the community of the school more directly reflects and is able to further enhance the understandings, beliefs and attitudes of its participants.

There is no gainsaying the interconnectedness of school ethos, pedagogy and the demonstrated effectiveness of a citizenship curriculum. The bankruptcy of a civics curriculum which lacks these critical dimensions will ensure the failure of such a curriculum, as it has already previously, in other times and places, as has long been well documented. The value of this literature search has been that it has revealed a slowly-growing body of material which has attempted to better understand the ways in which the interrelationships can be enhanced, whilst incrementally developing more analysis of the existing data on the importance of the effective student outcomes which accrue from this kind of educational experience.

Suzanne Mellor
Michael Elliott
Bibliography for
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Literature Search Methodology

The methodology adopted for this literature search was to initially seek titles in the British Education Index, Canadian Education Index, ERIC (US) and the Australian Education Index. The key terms identified, in the case of the first Review paper, were: either civics or citizenship and school/ethos and culture, or the derivative 'cul'. The search terms were applied not only to titles, but also to the descriptors, identifiers, key terms and to the text of the abstracts which appeared in the entries.

Subsequent stages to the literature search were identical for both Papers. Following the collection and reading of the materials produced by this method, other titles were located by perusing the extensive bibliographies associated with the materials already acquired. References which helped elaborate 'new' considerations were incorporated. Some of these were very recent. The work of particular authors, whose interests and research resided in these areas were also searched and included. Others were suggested by and sought from colleagues, or came from the storehouse the writers already had at their disposal. As with all literature searches, some serendipity was involved. All these materials were read, and those which proved appropriate, appear in the Bibliography.

Bibliography


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