Towards Citizenship: The Untapped Potential of Students in the Middle Years of Schooling

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ABSTRACT
This paper proposes that there is a pedagogical urgency in education for citizenship in the middle years of schooling. Mere emphasis on resources and program outlines alone cannot achieve enduring citizenship. There needs to be a pedagogy that embraces the ideology of participatory citizenship as a holistic endeavour for every student throughout their schooling. Adolescents in the middle years of schooling deserve special attention because they are at the juncture of childhood and adulthood, a time when they are evolving as citizens with the critical capacities to act effectively in and on the world. It is suggested here that by transforming classrooms into communities of philosophical inquiry, the skills and attributes essential for effective citizenship may be promoted.

In the past few years, citizenship has regained important status in education in this country. As in the past it is still, however, largely synonymous with civics and the teaching of political history. These are important elements of course, but there are foundational skills and values, alongside key areas of knowledge, that need to be addressed for the development of young people as effective citizens. Indeed the obligation for schools to pay close attention to the development of essential knowledge, skills and attributes are clearly spelt out in the agreed national goals for education in Australia. *The Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* recommends that when students leave school they should:

…have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and to accept responsibility for their own actions. (MCEETYA, 1999)

A community of philosophical inquiry can provide a learning environment where the above goals can be achieved so that our students are well equipped for effective participation in society. Such participation is founded on critical thinking, social and moral awareness and well-developed literacy skills along with a confidence and assurance that enables positive and assertive action.

The Community of Inquiry
The concept of a philosophical community of inquiry was conceived by Matthew Lipman, an American philosopher, who had the chair of philosophy at Columbia University in New York over 30 years ago. Lipman’s vision was to provide an educational pedagogy for optimal intellectual, moral and social growth of children of all ages in a holistic way. His work was founded on Dewey’s social thesis that individual
and social growth go hand in hand, that the psychological and the sociological
development of a person are inseparable from the individual’s social reality. The duality
of the psychological and sociological is further emphasised by other influences on
Lipman’s work, namely the philosophers George Herbert Mead and Charles Peirce on
one hand and cognitive psychologists Lev Vygotsky and Jerome Bruner on the other.
This is further reinforced with the realisation that at the heart of the community of inquiry
is the search for meaning explored with and through others, a search that exploits
language (mainly through dialogue) and critical thinking to the full.

Dialogue, Diversity and Democracy.
It seems futile to approach citizenship education without considering the classroom
environment. If this is at odds with other democratic processes that are demonstrated in
the school such as setting up a student representative council, or the one-off program
designed to engage students in exploring an authentic social issue, then it is counter
productive and reinforces that power, control, responsibility and rights are specious. The
way teaching and learning is enacted in the classroom can reinforce or undermine other
democratic endeavours.

Democracy is an ongoing and integral part of citizenship. It depends on co-existence and
participation alongside autonomous and reasonable judgement and action (Daniel,
Schleifer & Lebouis, 1992). If we want students to understand the concept of citizenship,
then they must logically understand the principles of democracy. As Dewey (1916)
argued, people need to experience the workings of a democracy from within in order to
envision its future possibilities. By being part of a democracy that functions daily such as
the class community, students have the opportunity of living with others in a community
that can demonstrate the value of diversity by reinforcing tolerance and respect for
differences. For most people, these attributes are not innate; they depend on initiation,
cultivation and reflection (Lipman, M. 1988). They also depend on a commitment to the
rules, order and logic of a collective inquiry.

Dialogue is essential for participation in a democratic classroom. By listening to views
and perspectives of others, students are faced with fundamental values of democracy,
equal rights, freedom of speech and respect for different points of views. And while true
dialogue is one of the most challenging processes to facilitate in the classroom, its power
cannot be underrated in terms of effective citizenship. This ideal reflects the work of
Paulo Freire (1970) who saw dialogue and reflection as essential precursors to the critical
action necessary to transform reality. For students in the middle years of schooling who
are in danger of alienation and failure, such empowerment can offer hope, liberation and
possibilities for a confident and purposeful future. For many students who are grappling
with moral and social issues there is not always the forum or outlet for them to talk about
the big issues that confront them. The work of James Beane (1983) in stressing the
untapped intellectual capacities that are evident in adolescence, given the opportunity,
highlights the urgency for a pedagogy that is truly student centred, inclusive and
visionary. He appeals for a curriculum that has the capacity to:
…open the hearts and minds of young people to the possibilities of a just and more humane world – a world in which human dignity, the democratic way of life and the prizing of diversity are more widely shared and experienced (Beane 1983, p xiv).

A fully participative citizen requires the intellectual skills of thinking, judging and acting for themselves and on behalf of others when necessary. The importance of critical skills at all levels of society cannot be underestimated. Robert Fisher (1998) reminds us of the dangers of complacency and apathy and therefore the need to be critical actors: ‘as the voices of those who would do our thinking for us become more persuasive, we need the skills of critical thinking to help us form intelligent judgements on public issues and thus contribute democratically to the solution of social problems’ (p. 10). Such skills cannot be handed out to students; they need to be practiced in democratic settings across the curriculum.

Along with fostering ‘reasoning’ in people, is the attribute of ‘reasonableness’ referred to by Splitter and Sharp (1995) as the characteristic that embodies and demonstrates care, respect and the valuing of ideals that work for the good of others. The cognitive and affective domains that are fostered in a community of inquiry are well suited for the characteristics and needs of adolescents in the middle years of schooling. Braggett (1997) notes that at this age there is a particularly strong desire to apply critical reasoning and explore issues ‘beyond their own personal experience to discuss philosophical concepts that transcend local issues’ (p. 27). Ethics and morality are recognised as compelling interests of adolescents as they are the juncture of childhood and adulthood and are confronting ideas and responsibilities with a fresh awareness (Braggett 1997; Beane 1993). According to Dewey:

Adolescence suddenly brings the manifestation of thought and reason… (as) youth should bring with it an enlargement of the horizon of childhood, a susceptibility to larger concerns and issues, a more generous and more helpful standpoint toward nature and social life (1998, p. 88).

Such interests resonate with the aims of philosophy with children which include the promotion of intellectual curiosity and strengthening of moral judgement.

**The Engagement Factor**

Maxine Greene (1995) suggests that philosophy can challenge apathy and indifference through the workings of the imagination, the ‘capacity to invent visions of what should be and what might be in our deficient society, on the streets where we live (and) in our schools’ (p.5). Other writers, Vico (1994) and Nussbaum (1997) also emphasise the importance of the imagination in speculating about the future, in envisioning a new world. Nussbaum (1997) describes the narrative imagination as the ability to see connections between human actions and their likely consequences. The invitation to young people to speculate, inquire, justify, reflect and imagine through classroom dialogue is demonstrating faith in human capacity to solve its own problems. Moreover, the challenges presented through this ‘openness’ provides many different ways to
recognise, accommodate and celebrate difference in the classroom hence allowing for engagement of students who might otherwise be bored of disconnected. And while philosophical inquiry can be seen to be a celebration of ideas, it is the way the ideas are used that provides the challenge necessary for engagement.

Students are encouraged to dig deeply into ideas using the following critical skills:

• ask thoughtful questions
• give reasons and learn to distinguish good reasons from bad ones
• note and challenge assumptions and contradictions.
• make connections and distinctions
• speculate, build concepts and arguments
• develop hypotheses and analogies
• find examples and counter examples
• seek evidence and probability
• understand relationships

Other attributes that are fostered include those that are crucial for social competence and cohesion:

• seeing different perspectives
• confronting one’s own beliefs
• open mindedness
• encouraging others
• respecting ideas and points of view

Within such an environment that allows students to explore self and social meanings there is the potential for the raising of self-esteem as students see themselves as integral to the functioning of the group. As pointed out by Braggett (1997) young adolescents experience a fluctuation of self-esteem due to the many changes they face. There is a consistent need for the search for self-identity. Positive interaction in a community of inquiry can build self-esteem and actively value the contribution of all students. It is an ideal strategy to combat alienation. Through the spirit of collaboration students have the chance to test ideas, share meanings and interact in a constructive way. They come to understand that there are not always immediate, apparent solutions to contestable issues, at least until there is some agreement on the criteria upon which they should be judged. The dialogic process, apart from advancing critical thinking and literacy of students provides a forum for the universalisation of contentious problems. It’s comforting for adolescents to know that things they are anxious about are shared by others.

**Conceptual Development for Citizenship**

As suggested by Eyers, Cormack and Barrett (1992), it is important that students become aware of the social and political happenings around them. Philosophy for children has an important role in this as it provides for the growth of critical thinking and reasoning necessary for dealing with social and political issues. Furthermore, the emphasis on inquiry allows for continued debate and dialogue on core and contestable concepts that
are of common interest and concern. Lipman (1988) claims that without a clear understanding of these concepts, which include freedom, justice, equality and democracy, students cannot be expected to evaluate the effectiveness of elected social institutions and the people who work within them. So it is important for students to have internalised the rules of law, codes of fair practice and guidelines of diplomatic inquiry- all of these are essential workings of democracy- they are also imbedded in the pedagogy of a community of inquiry. What makes a philosophical approach appropriate to all areas of the curriculum is that the critical and contestable issues are cross-curricular, hence the possibilities for a philosophical community of inquiry as a foundation for all subjects. See Fig 1 for an example of concepts that parallel philosophy and the curriculum learning area of SOSE and are linked to citizenship.

Fig 1
An example of philosophical concepts in Studies of Society and Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Philosophy</th>
<th>SOSE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice</td>
<td>Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td>Diversity and difference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>Ecological sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laws</td>
<td>Rules and laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Co-operation and conflict</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Democracy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ownership</td>
<td>Human dignity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>Rights and responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>Equality</td>
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<tr>
<td>Logic and order</td>
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</tbody>
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Citizenship

‘…I know what is going on in the world, I’m part of it and I’m doing something about it…’


Many of the concepts presented above are applicable to all curriculum areas and they are connected by the process of intellectual inquiry. For further cross-curricular and philosophy links see Teaching Thinking, (1998, ch. 7) by Robert Fisher who provides a
comprehensive rationale for the ways philosophical inquiry can enrich students’ understanding of key concepts, language, ideas and skills across the curriculum.

**Transforming the Classroom into a Community of Inquiry.**
Facilitating a community of inquiry with any group of students is a challenging task. It should be seen as a gradual transformation rather than an immediate consequence of asking students draw up an agenda for discussion and expecting them to enter into dialogue. This transformation is often couched in terms such as ‘building’, ‘converting’ as well as transforming (Splitter and Sharp 1995). This take time because many students have become conditioned to a passive form of learning over time and have lost the impetus to reason and question. Therefore sensitivity to context and an ability to read and judge student interest and readiness is important.

Training with experienced philosophy for children practitioners can be advantageous. Such training provides the skills of Socratic method of questioning that is essential for conducting an effective community of inquiry. An example of possible questions includes:

What is it that puzzles you? (focus)
Why do you say that? (reasons)
How are you using that word? (definition)
How does that fit with the previous comments? (making connections)
What is the difference between those two points of view? (making distinctions)
What have you based that on? (evidence)
How can we tell if this is true? (testing)
Can anyone give me an example of that? (examples)
Can you think of a case where it wouldn’t work? (counter example)
Ref: (Sprod (1993)

**Conclusion**
To become effective citizens, children need to be engaged in the issues currently confronting society at local, national and international levels. These opportunities should not be seen as a rehearsal for a time when they ‘grow up’ and become citizens. Young people urgently need to be equipped with the skills and attributes that allow them to live purposefully in the here and now. This aim is being realised by those educators who build into the everyday lives of their students the thinking and inquiry associated with philosophy.

Philosophy for children can co-exist alongside other citizenship education approaches that endeavour to provide for learning in democratic settings. Such co-existence is possible if each program or approach reinforces the need for ongoing inquiry.
whether it is historical, philosophical or empirical. However it is not just a matter of imbuing students with the spirit of inquiry that leads to liberating learning and rational action, but also of allowing them the freedom to exercise the kind of imagination that asks, ‘What kind of world do we want to live in?’ and ‘What is my role and responsibility in bringing that about?’ Community and individual reflection on these kinds of questions can ultimately lead to the considered action that is a mark of an effective citizen.

References:


