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Young children's views of Australia and Australians

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Education for Democracy throughout the World

Young children's views of Australia and Australians

References to civics and citizenship education in Australia encompass many perspectives. These range from knowledge about political structures, democratic processes, legal obligations and status, to a broader sense of social awareness and consciousness, where individuals have rights and responsibilities that guide their interactions with others. This latter interpretation emphasises a definition of a civil society (Cox, 1995) in which “there is trust, cooperation and reciprocity, ties that bind each and all and recognition of the interdependence of the private and the public” (Dally, 1999, p. 11). In a civil society, there is a commitment to working together based on a respect for self and others. Underpinning such a society are notions of identity, relationships with others, difference and diversity, and social justice and equity. This paper explores young children's views of some of these issues.

Flanagan and Faison (2001) use the term ‘civic literacy’ to refer to “knowledge about community affairs, political issues and the processes whereby citizens effect change, and ‘civic attachment’ to incorporate the “affective or emotional connection to the community” (p.3). Both these aspects have been incorporated in approaches to civics and citizenship education in Australia, where there has been emphasis on developing understandings of how governments work and the skills required to become involved in the processes of government, as well as on the “civic worth of each individual” (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p.5). The message seems to be that how people feel about their country and their place within it relates to their willingness to engage in processes such as democracy. Flanagan and Faison (2001) note, “if a democracy is to remain secure and stable, each new generation of her citizens must believe in the system and believe that it works for people like them” (p. 4).

Belonging and a sense of belongingness has featured in the recent celebrations of a centenary of federation in Australia, and in the opening of a national museum committed to

documenting what it means to be Australian. At the same time, many Australians are working towards reconciliation after more than two centuries of dispossession and dislocation of Aboriginal people. As well, the fate of those seeking refuge in Australia has promoted much heated debate about “belongingness” and exclusion. Within this context, researchers have questioned the “ways in which young people understand themselves as Australian, how they feel about this country and their place within it” (Gill & Howard, 2000).

Wenger (1998) has described identity as something that is constantly changing and open to renegotiation, such that “who we are lies in the way we live day to day, not just what we think or say about ourselves” (1998, p. 151). This is reflected in the definition of national identity offered by Gill and Howard (1999, p. 2) as “narrative, a story people tell about themselves in order to lend meaning to their social world”.

Previous studies of children’s sense of national identity have interviewed children in the upper primary or early years or secondary school (Carrington & Short, 1996; Du Bois-Reymond, 1998; Howard & Gill, 2001). They report an increasingly complex understanding of nationality, as children move from an initial definitions of nationality as something shared by a distinct group of people who have similar cultural practices, such as language or religion, or identity based on living in a particular area, to an abstract connection between the group of people and the place they inhabit, that is, the nation (Penrose, 1993).

This paper investigates the views of young children about their national identity and that of their peers. There is evidence to suggest that young children are aware of social, racial and cultural differences (MacNaughton & Davis, 2001), but little discussion of how this may impact upon relationships with others or the willingness to engage in civic processes.

National identity

In focus group interviews, 42 children (aged 5-8 years and in the first three years of elementary school) were asked to describe their own identity and to explore issues about

national identity. The majority of children were drawn from Kindergarten classes (n=23). Others were in Year 1 (n=5) or Year 2 (n=14). These children attended two schools in Sydney, Australia. Each school has a high proportion of students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, and this was reflected in the children interviewed.

The interviews were conducted in the schools. Each followed a standard format, but as the aim was to encourage children to engage in conversations with each other, rather than the interviewer (Mayall, 2000), there were opportunities for children to lead the conversation and to use this as means of positioning themselves in relation to their own and others' national identity.

What is Australia?

All the children indicated that they were familiar with Australia. Most described Australian as a country (30), others referred to it as a continent, island or place. Other comments were that Australia is:

- *a nice place to live* [Sally]
- *a free country* [Susan]
- *where koalas live* [Stephie]
- *the best country in the world.* [Rachel]

Are you Australian?

Responses to this question varied. All children indicated that they lived in Australia, yet only 21 said that they were Australian. When asked to explain this, children adopted a range of positions, as indicated by the following examples.

Uma: We come from India.

Ally: I'm an Indian and an Australian.
I'm lot Indian—no, less Indian because I don't know how to speak a lot of Indian.

Kerry: I'm a quarter Portuguese and half Chinese.

Interviewer: And the other quarter?

Kerry: Australian.

Josey: I'm Chinese.

Interviewer: Were you born in Australia?

Josey: Yes. ... Chinese live in Australia.

Just my Dad is Chinese. My Dad was born in China and then he came here and got married.

Irene: Are you Chinese?

Josey: Yeah.

Interviewer: Is your Mum Australian?

Josey: Yeah. But I'd like to be Australian.

Celia: My friend is Australian, but her face is Chinese, but she is still Australian ...she speaks like an Australian.

Fourteen children, such as Uma, Ally and Kerry, readily acknowledged a sense of dual (or more) identity, often drawing on the background of their parents as well as their own presence in Australia. In another example, Ruth described herself as Australian, but noted that *I'm kind of both, I'm Lebanese and Australian... my background is Lebanese.*

Seven children indicated that they did not consider themselves Australian. Like Josey, some referred to their parents' nationality—*I'm not [Australian], my Dad is Lebanon*, [Tina]—and others clearly stated a different nationality *I'm not, I'm Italian* [Jenny].

How do you know if somebody is Australian?

According to several children, the best way to find out if someone is Australian is to *ask them*. Other means of finding out included:

Iris: You look at their skin. If you are at school you might ask them. On some days we dress-up in different countries and they might wear their country's outfit.

Kerry: Because they speak Australian and because we're in Australia now.

Lyn: People could learn Australian.

Susan: They'd have to say, you know "G'Day" and go "Hallo Mister".

Ros: They speak Australia and they look Australian.

Fran: They've got pure skin.

Ros: No, they look like, they're, they look like real Australian people.

Interviewer: What do real Australian people look like?

Ros: My brother says that a real Australian wears a singlet with holes in it, and they are like, you know, daggy.

Phillipa: Sometimes you can tell by their face ... Maybe a white coloured skin.

Interviewer: What if they had a dark coloured skin, could they be Australian then?

Phillipa: Maybe they could be Filipino or something.

Rhonda: It doesn't matter about their skin. That's because my Dad is from

Lebanon and my Mum was born in Australia.

Jake: Because they sound like they've just come out of the bush.

Interviewer: How might they sound...?

Jake: They might say "Me thongs"

[statement is made in a strong, slow, nasal drawl]

Gemma: About their colour, if they are black they might not be Australian, or if they are brown.

Joel: They might be black and they might be Australian.

Gemma: Yes, if they are Aboriginal. But I think that most will not be Australian.

How do you get to be Australian?

In response to this question, there was a major focus on place of birth—that is you got to be Australian by being born in Australia.

June: You have to be born in Australia.

Sally: You could be born in China, but if your Mum and your Dad are Australian and your whole family is Australian, then you can't be Chinese.

Lyn: Yeah... they could have went to China, and then you could have been born there, even though they weren't Chinese...

Interviewer: But June was born in Korea and her Mum and Dad are Korean and she said that she is Australian.

Sally: No, she is Korea. She was born in Korea. Her Mum and Dad and Korea.

June: Well I was born in Korea, then I came her and learned English. I'm Korean.

Can you stop being Australian and be something else?

The most common response was that wherever you were born was the nationality you had for life. Only 5 of the children suggested that changing nationality was possible. Susan suggested that she would like to change. Her comments suggest that her definition of nationality is based on language:

Susan: Sometimes, I don't want to be Australian. I always think that it would be good if it was possible that you could change countries because you want to see what the world is like.

Interviewer: Could you still be Australian and visit other countries?

Susan: Yes, but say you went to Korea and no one in Korea knew how to speak English, and you could only speak to Korean people and it would be good if you could say "OK, I'm Korean" and you could speak to Korean people.

Gemma also focused on language, noting that *if you don't want to be Australian any more then you can just move to another country and learn to speak that country and just become that country*. More common was the sort of response offered by Jake, where being born in one country meant that you had no choice to adopt that nationality: *because once you've been born, you can't change it*.

Is there anything special about being Australian?

Seven children indicated that nothing was special about being Australian. Others indicated that *there is something special about all the countries* [Neil] or in Gemma's words:

... if you are born in Australia and that is the country you are born in and you think it's the best country ... but it's not really the best country because everybody thinks their country is the best country because they live in that country ... I like [Australia] because it's the country I live in, and if I lived in another country, then I would like that.

Others described Australia as special because:

- It's got big, wide parks to play footy in [Susan]
- I like the beach [Josie]
- You can wear nice clothes ... in some other countries they have to wear long sleeves like this in summer [Ruby]
- people felt free [Rose]
- there is no dangerous things like torpedoes or war [Ruth],
- no bad things happen [Celia]
- you know lots of people [Linda].

Reuben's comment summarised some of the discussion about safety and feeling safe: *[Australia] is a good place because there is no danger for you and your family.*

Some groups of children discussed whether or not it was important to be Australian. Rhonda referred to an abstract feeling: *I like to be Australian, because I just love it and I just like it for some reason;* and Phillipa noted her familiarity with Australia, *I was born here. I don't want to leave. I've been here for too long and I'm used to it.*

Several other children said it was not important to be Australian, with Jenny and Neil explaining that *you don't have to be Australian if you don't want to be.* Iris commented that she didn't think it was important to be Australian: *it's just fun.* Others, including Jake, said *every country was important.* Rachel referred to the personal nature of national identity: *If*

you want Australia to be important then you can have it important to yourself, but if you don't want it to be special then you just say it to yourself.

Discussion

These discussions raise several issues related to children's sense of national identity, their relationships with others, aspects of difference and diversity and perspectives on social justice and equity. In their description of Australia and Australians, these children did not dwell on the symbols and stereotypes that are readily available. There was some discussion of language (the nasal drawl used by Jake) and the mention of singlets and thongs by Ros and Jake. However, these stereotypes did not prevail.

There was strong support for diversity among families and peers, with many children accepting and supporting their own dual identification as well as that of others. There was also discussion that moved away from a focus on physical characteristics, to a greater sense of how people felt, as important in determining nationality. Such views support the view that "Australia is frequently extolled as a society that recognises, or even encourages, diversity...Diversity is held to be a national strength" (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p. 4). One of the challenges posed by the Civics Expert Group was to move beyond the accommodation of diversity to "grasp the decision-making processes whereby differences are negotiated and resolved" (1994, p. 4). This is the aim of several civics and citizenship programs that explore children's rights and responsibilities (Department of Education, Training and Employment, South Australia, 1998).

One stereotype that was revealed related to Aboriginal people. Seven children were adamant that people could only be Australian if they had light skin; others used their own skin colour and that of their families to challenge this; still others stated unequivocally that Aborigines were Australian. Clearly, young children are aware of racial differences (Adler,

2001). Previous studies have noted children's attitudes towards, and reactions to, skin colour (Avehart & Bigler, 1997) and the ways in which children create groups that include or exclude peers on the basis of variables such as skin colour and social class (Bigler, Jones, & Lobliner, 1997). There is consistent evidence that young children not only are aware of differences among people, but also of a range of meanings which are attributed to those differences (Glover, 1995, p. 2). In this study, some children had constructed understandings of Aboriginality and indigenous Australians, seemingly on the basis of a 'black' and 'white' binary. Others were less prepared to accept this, commenting on attributes such as their own skin colour, or that of family members, to proclaim that people of differing skin colours could indeed be Australian. MacNaughton and Davis (2001) have reported similar results with younger children.

These findings suggest that young children are, as Ramsey (1995, p. 20) reports, "grappling with the contradictions of our society. On the one hand, they are learning to value equality and justice; on the other hand, they are beginning to accept racist ideologies and the unequal distribution of resources". The development and implementation of curricula which challenge such ideologies and counter the development of racism would seem to be well placed in the early childhood years, when children are constructing understandings of their own identity and the identity of others, as well as notions of citizenship, justice and equity.

As in the study by Gill and Howard (1999), children in this study applied rules about how people became Australian, with the consensus that being born in Australia was the surest way to effect this outcome. Living in Australia was important, but there was recognition that the country of birth had a lasting impact. This was highlighted by discussions of being *half Australian*, brought about by being born in another country and then moving to Australia, preferably when young, or by a focus on the background of parents who were born in countries other than Australia. There was no apparent problem attached to

having a dual nationality. Rather, the children discussed such a situation with considerable interest.

Children did make comparisons between Australia and other countries. Language was the source of much comparison, with a general agreement that to be Australian, people needed to speak Australian. However, it is interesting to note that when asked by the interviewer if someone could be Australian and not speak Australian/English, there was no open rejection of the idea. For example, Reuben stated that *you can talk a different language if you are in Australia if you want to*. There was a strong feeling among children that once you had been born in Australia, you were and remained Australian. It was possible to move to another country and to learn another language, but most children were adamant that you remained Australian.

Conclusion

The most striking conclusion from his study is that these young children have a strong awareness of their own identity, whether it be Australian, Lebanese, Italian or some combination of these. This is in keeping with current theoretical perspectives, that, despite persistent media images, there is no one true Australian national identity (Gill & Howard, 1999). While identity is important, it does not seem to have a predominant role in the lives of these children, a sentiment which is summed up by Rachel's view that *it can be important if you want it to be*. Neil's comment that *there's something special about all countries* reflects an expectation and acceptance of diverse identities, a view that may well be prompted by his presence in a strong and supportive multicultural school community. It seems very clear that the communities in which these children live influence their identity and their ability to consider the identities of others. However, even in this context, there were comments about physical appearance and skin colour that suggested a focus on "us" and "them". Part of the challenge of education for democracy through civics and citizenship programs is to ensure

that the processes of government are seen to be open to all, rather than to some and not others.

One view of promoting citizenship among children recognises children's views of national identity and then moves beyond this to encompass the concept of 'multiple citizenships' (Kennedy, 1995), where for example, being an Australian does not automatically entail severing other ties, or exclude the possibility of being a global citizen. Recent world events pose some challenges for such a view. Renewed focus on Australian nationalism has resulted from terrorist attacks close to Australia and involvement in war situation across the world. One result has been increased pressure to demonstrate 'Australianness' and renounce connections with other nations. This is despite the view that "Australian citizenship should not require suppression of cultural heritage or identity" (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p. 23). One of the aims of citizenship education is for children to connect the rights and responsibilities of citizenship with an awareness of civic processes and to apply this to their everyday lives and interactions. To shape a social and just society, children need to become well-informed citizens, capable of thinking critically about their place in society and the ways that they can impact on this. This process can start with discussions of national identity, belonging and belongingness.

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