The Struggle for "Thick" or Transformative Citizenship and Democracy in Australia: What Future Teachers Believe and Why it is Important

David Zyngier
david.zyngier@monash.edu | Monash University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper analyses pre-service education student perceptions and perspectives related to education for democracy in Australia. Using a critical-pedagogical framework to analyse data from an on-line survey, the paper presents both quantitative and qualitative responses to contrast understandings of democracy. The paper begins by outlining the concepts of thick and thin democracy, and revisiting the (parlous) state of civics and citizenship education (CCE) in Australia. Overall, pre-service teachers in this study display a tendency to view democracy in a very narrow or thin way that may impact their classroom practice.

KEY WORDS

Civics and citizenship education; Neo-liberalism; Democracy; Critical pedagogy.

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INTRODUCTION

> Reducing the notion of citizenship to a set of dispositions, skills, practices, and ideals that can be "delivered" and then performed by purely conscious rational subjects in institutions that are often not even organized democratically, not only ignores the tensions of governmentality but also disregards the importance of automatic, non-conscious learning in human cognition (Fischman & Haas, 2012, p. 185).

While there have been important studies of how school students understand democracy and democratic participation[1], there has been no such study of teachers. The study of what teachers and especially pre-service teachers think about democracy has not been attempted before. This paper discusses how a representative sample of Australian pre-service teachers perceive, experience and understand democracy, especially democracy related to education. Determining the linkage between education and democracy is important as it may have implications for how students themselves relate to democracy (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b) both in the classroom and in

1 IEA-CIVED Civic education study 1999 and 2005 (see http://www.iea.nl/cived.html).

society. This paper is informed by the need to critically understand the perspectives and experiences of educators in relation to democracy in education (Carr, 2007, 2008).

This paper builds on research from the international *Global Doing Democracy Research Project* (GDDRP)[2], which currently has some 50 scholars in over 25 countries examining perspectives and perceptions of democracy among pre- and in-service teachers, teacher education academics, and educators, in general. It is also part of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada study and an Australian Research Council project that have received over $500 000 in funding.

These studies are using a collaboratively developed and locally contextualised on-line survey tool to collect both quantitative and qualitative data from diverse groups of educators[3]. Each researcher is responsible for the analysis of the data within the shared critical pedagogical framework that was originally developed by Carr (2010b). The aim of the research, ultimately, is to compare and contrast these findings and implications across diverse political contexts, including the *old* democracies (countries such as the USA, Australia, Canada and England), *emerging* democracies (those countries coming out of autocratic, military or other dictatorships and/or colonial rule), and what we have termed the *new* democracies (places and countries that may be doing democracy differently as a result of public initiatives found in Latin America and elsewhere).

The broad objective of our various research projects is to collect and analyse data from a significant number of participants from diverse contexts in order to determine with greater authority how democracy is perceived, experienced and undertaken in and through education. The result would then enable the elaboration of specific tools, measures and practices at the local, national and international levels, taking into consideration where diverse constituencies start, as well as their contemporary realities.

2 The Global Doing Democracy Research Project was established in 2008 by David Zyngier and Paul Carr who are co-directors. While there are many on-line networks created among academics for the exchange of ideas, the development of such an on-line activist research group focused on democracy and democratic education is uncommon.

3 At this time, the on-line survey has been translated in to Portuguese, Spanish, Bhasa Malay, Greek, Turkish, French, Russian and Arabic and has been adapted and applied in over 30 international contexts. The comparative analysis of the data gleaned is an on-going, major task for the Global Doing Democracy Project.

THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE PERSPECTIVES, EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS IN RELATION TO DEMOCRACY IN EDUCATION

Studying the perspectives, experiences and perceptions of educators, and how they understand, cultivate and anchor democracy within the educational experience is considered an important piece of the equation in the development of a more participatory, empowered and engaged citizenry that safeguards democratic society. Contemporary debates about citizenship are not just about who is and is not a citizen. Rather, they ask: Is citizenship a status or a practice? Does citizenship liberate or control populations? Is citizenship only national or could it also be cosmopolitan and transnational (Fischman & Haas, 2012, p. 171)?

THIN AND THICK DEMOCRACY AND THE ROLE OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

Democracy means many things to many people. The research project which this paper reports on seeks a more robust, critical, *thicker* interpretation of what democracy is, what it should be, and, significantly, how it can be beneficial to all peoples (Carr, 2010a). Our research critiques the belief that elections are the key component to building a democracy.

The research of the author and associates and others over the past several years has raised the pivotal concern of what role education plays in forming, buttressing, cultivating and sustaining a meaningful, critical democratic experience for all sectors of society (Banks, 2001; Lund & Carr, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b). The shift toward and acceptance of market-based neo-liberalism in education has had a wide range of well documented and widely accepted consequences for society (Porfilio & Carr, 2010).

Democracy incorporates strong participatory and deliberative elements in which citizens are engaged at local and national levels in a variety of political activities and regard discourse, debate and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large, multicultural society. Participatory citizenship expects every member of the community to participate in self-governance, which ultimately leads to the building of a strong democracy (Green, 1999).

Deep or thick democracy goes beyond just the formal institutional framework that outlines or governs how society should function and is a set of structures, concepts, habits and practices that reach out to the community as well as to the very core of individuals. There is an element of interconnectedness with the community in which people are able to voice their opinions freely and learn from others about creating spaces for social transformations by including the under or disenfranchised and not merely focusing on the needs, aspirations and prosperity of the select few – the elites (Green, 1999).

Democracy must be constantly cultivated, conceptualized and re-worked, with less dependence on formal political processes and cycles of elections, and more emphasis on critical engagement in developing the conditions for emancipation, enhanced power relations, and epistemological discovery that may lead to some of the virtues that are commonly extolled when discussing democracy (freedom, liberty, rights, common virtues, etc.). Critical pedagogy offers a framework to understand political literacy and social transformation, in which static representations of power, identity, and contextual realities are rejected (Darder & Miron, 2006; Denzin, 2009; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007). This is not about providing a checklist to determine the level of democracy within a given society (Carr, 2008). Rather, it aims to identify oppression and marginalisation at all levels, and seeks to interrogate, problematise and critique power and inequitable power relations.

The traditional approach in civics/citizenship education in schools focuses on understanding formal political structures, and is often confined to a single unit of study in both primary (elementary) and secondary (high) school education. Preliminary research undertaken by team-members in this project underscores how educators in Canada, the USA, Peru, Argentina, Brazil, Malaysia and Australia generally have only a superficial conceptualization of democracy (Carr, 2010a; Carr, Zyngier & Pruyn, 2012; Westheimer, 2008).

This paper analyses data collected in Australia. It seeks to understand, add depth to and contextualize how those involved in school education comprehend, experience, perceive, and implement democracy in education. Defining the linkage between education and democracy at the educator level is important, as we believe that it may have far-reaching implications for the delivery of teaching and learning that influences how students relate to, and do, democracy (Lund & Carr, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b) within the classroom, within the school and, more broadly, at the societal level.

The discourses on democracy have been variously characterized in terms of representative versus participatory democracy[4], with the former highlighting thin electoral processes, and the latter focusing on *thick* critical engagement and social justice. The notion of *thick* and *thin* democracy, attributed to Gandin and Apple (2002), builds on the seminal work of Barber (1984, 2004), who raised pivotal questions on the relevance of liberal democracy. His work discusses the tension between individualism and the rights of all citizens as framed by concepts of *shallow* and *deep* democracy and suggests that participatory citizenship demands that every member of the community participate in self-governance, which ultimately could lead to the building of a strong democracy. This tension has been problematic and even disenfranchising for many citizens.

What Furman and Shields (2005) call 'deep democracy' attaches "significant value to such goods as participation, civic friendship, inclusiveness and solidarity" (p. 128). Deep or *thick* democracy, according to Furman and Shields, espouses a number of principles that champion individual rights and responsibility within diverse cultural communities in the interests of the common good.

In practice, *thin* democracy is exemplified in activities such as students contributing to a food drive, whereas *thick* democracy would explore why people are hungry (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004b). Through the notion of *thin* versus *thick* democracy, we conceptualize the visible tension between the superficial features often associated with teaching *about* democracy and the fundamental scaffolding which permits people to appropriate the deeper meaning of the term teaching *for* democracy. Bolstering efforts to teach through the academic disciplines – whether pursued through high-stakes exams or well-crafted curriculum frameworks – is insufficient to further the goals of teaching *for* democracy (Davies & Issitt, 2005).

NEW CIVICS AS THIN DEMOCRACY

In Australian school education this tension has played out in the Civics and Citizenship Education (CCE) program. The rhetoric of active participation found in these programs usually is "not achieved in the activities that are provided for school students" (Davies & Issitt, 2005, p. 404). Dejaeghere and Tudball (2007) conclude that most recent assessments of the CCE program

4 Others have referred to democratic binaries such as weak and strong (Swift, 2002), passive and active (Criddle, Vidovich & O'Neill, 2004), minimalist and maximalist (McLaughlin, 1992).

suggest "further work is required to promote depth and breadth" (p. 41). The lack of agreement on the philosophical and practical applications of education for democracy led to the exclusion of concerns about social justice from the material distributed nationally to every school which was orientated towards a *thin* understanding of democracy. Giroux boldly states that

> Democracy cannot work if citizens are not autonomous, self-judging, and independent – qualities that are indispensable for students if they are going to make vital judgments and choices about participating in and shaping decisions that affect everyday life, institutional reform, and governmental policy (2006, p. 73).

Schwille and Amadeo (2002) in their analysis of the Civic Education Study (CIVED, 1999) argue that "as long as parts of the political system aspire to foster active, informed and supportive citizens, schools will be considered a possible means to this end" (p. 105). Schools which model democratic practices in classrooms, by creating an open climate for discussing issues, are most effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement in *thick* ways; however, this is rarely found in schools (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003).

Democratic citizenship education is generally one of the central aims of public schools and the social studies curriculum in particular. One has a hard time finding a curriculum document that does not trumpet "the preparation of students for informed citizenship in our democratic society" or words to that effect (Fischman & Haas, 2012).

The CCE Project in Australia, like others elsewhere, places a "growing emphasis on the promotion of civic awareness and individuals' rights and responsibilities embedded in discourses of citizenship" (Garratt & Piper, 2008, p. 486), highlighting the conflicting discourses in citizenship education (Criddle, Vidovich & O'Neill, 2004), which "permeate both policy production and policy practices across all levels" (p. 32).

The CCE project emphasises a passive consumption of knowledge about citizenship with a strong historical focus – *thin democracy* – whereas what is required is more critical and active participation[5] in change, which is labelled as an 'active citizenship' – *thick democracy*.

5 There are examples of some critical intentions in the unit on the Indigenous Freedom Fighters which seemingly defies any neo-liberal interpretation. It is about indigenous activists in Australia in the 1960s. While these are acknowledged, it remains that overall the materials support a broadly conservative approach to history and politics.

Many researchers (Forsyth & Tudball, 2002; Knight, 2000; Tudball, 2005) have extensively critiqued the CCE curriculum for its restricted or *thin* scope, reflecting the struggle over how democracy is to be perceived. Overwhelmingly we see that the *thin* concepts of citizenship of "privilege, education markets and individual choice at the expense of public and democratic purposes for education" (Reid & Thomson, 2003, p. xi) privileging the "aggregation of individual votes … [that] endorses hierarchy, elite agency and mass passivity" (Seddon, 2004, p. 173) – that has been dominant. Davies and Issitt argue that CCE "seems in the eyes of policy-makers to be the instrument by which societies can find a way still to cohere in the face of new challenges" and compensate for "civic deficit" (Davies & Issitt, 2005, p. 393), concluding that this form of *thin* democracy has promoted a pragmatic conservatism.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Critical Pedagogy (CP) underpins the analytical approach to understanding how democracy is perceived. CP considers how education can provide individuals with the tools to better themselves and strengthen democracy in order to create a more egalitarian, equitable and socially just society. It seeks to empower the powerless and transform those conditions which perpetuate injustice and inequity. Unlike traditional perspectives of education claiming to be neutral and apolitical, critical pedagogy views all education theory as intimately linked to ideologies shaped by power, politics, history and culture. Using this framework of analysis signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students and classrooms and communities thereby illuminating the relationship among knowledge, authority, and power.

A previously validated instrument (Carr, 2008) was modified for the Australian context, and then administered anonymously on-line to pre-service teachers (PSTs) to identify their beliefs about democracy. It contained approximately thirty open and closed questions in three sections: (1) an introductory section requesting demographic information; (2) questions on democracy and education; (3) questions on citizenship, social justice and education. We did not define such terms as democracy, citizenship, and social justice to participants but, rather, asked them to do so. In addition to providing a quantitative score based on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, the survey

instrument invited respondents to expand on their answers. The research reported here has Human Research Ethics Committee and Department of Education and Early Childhood Development approval.

THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This paper reports on the second stage[6] of the research with over 200 respondents from the PST category[7]. The education students were from the faculty of one of the largest and most research- intensive universities in Australia, currently rated as 6th in the world.

This paper reports only on the questions relating to understanding democracy and focuses primarily on the narrative comments, using the quantitative scores as a means of providing an overview of the sample studied.

The PSTs (N=252) are part of an initial teacher education (ITE) course, predominantly female (80%) and relatively young, with 66% under age 30, 15% between 30-40 and 17% 41 years and over. 40% were undertaking undergraduate studies, 18% a double degree, 38% a graduate diploma or master in education[8] and 2% doctoral studies. One third of the respondents were in their first year of study, with the rest evenly spread between the second and fourth years of study; 25% were studying early childhood education, 30% primary education, 40% secondary education, and 5% sport and outdoor education.

While 74% were born in Australia, 48% of their parents were born outside Australia and 22% spoke a language other than English at home when they were growing up. 74% identified as White/Caucasian, 17% as Asian and 0.5% identified as Aboriginal or First Nations. Almost one third of their fathers worked as manual labourers or skilled tradesmen and 31% of their mothers worked either in clerical, service or trades-related employment with 20% being home-workers. Reflecting the significance of teaching as a pathway for upwardly mobile and aspirational working and lower middle class families in Australia, over 25% of respondents' fathers and 34% of their mothers had

6 Stage 1 reported on the pilot program.

7 A very similar survey was also sent to teachers, academics and community activists. This paper reports only on the responses of the PSTs.

8 These courses are offered for post-graduate students who want to teach in schools and many of these are typically older and come back to study for a career change.

not completed 12 years of school. Significantly, 44% of the respondents are first in their family to do any form of tertiary education.

While 55% stated that they affiliated with a religion – Christianity, 4% Buddhist, 5% Moslem and 3% Jewish – of those who responded as having been affiliated to a religion, 60% no longer practised any religion.

Australians are sometimes thought of as a very relaxed and apolitical people, apart from membership in a trade union or professional organization, which have suffered heavy declines in recent years under the continued assault of neo-liberal political and media attacks. Australians do not join political parties as a matter of course, and this is reflected in the perceptions of the respondents about their parents. Most of the PSTs' (86%) parents were not politically active beyond compulsory voting as required in Australia. This could also reflect a generational viewpoint, with PSTs overwhelmingly being born in the late 1980s at a time of Australian political stability. There was no apparent significant correlation between the education level and employment type of the parents and their involvement in politics.

FINDINGS

This section reports on some of the key findings regarding particular understandings of democracy and seeks to understand them in relation to the framework of *thin* and *thick* democracy.

UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

Participants generally related democracy to voting as the voice of the people. They possessed a limited understanding of what goes on in other countries and espoused a thin understanding of democratic principles, suggesting that being actively engaged in democracy is about staying current with political issues through watching or even reading the news. However, respondents were also critical of the lack of power the average person has over the decisions government has made in their name.

The majority of respondents stated that democracy was about personal freedom of opinion and free and fair elections where governments are chosen by the majority of people, with 87% stating that elections are very important to democracy. Overall, the vast majority (85%) has a *thin* concep-

tion of democracy with voting and elections as central to democracy, where individual rights are of equal value as those of majority or national interests and a narrow or non-existent engagement with alternatives to mainstream political parties. 25% nominated voting as the most significant aspect of democracy and 65% highlighted the "freedom and right to choose" as the essence of democracy and 30% raised issues of equality and fairness. Diversity in society, when mentioned at all, was understood in very narrow terms in generally essentialized ways with "limited linkages to (…) inequitable power relations" (Carr, 2010a, p. 333).

Yet there were also differences. A very limited number (5%) demonstrated a 'justice orientation' (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, 2004b) through their understanding that democracy was also about recognition of difference and social justice. These respondents highlighted concepts such as "recognition of universal human rights and laws against discrimination; fairness and working towards equality for the people; power vested in the people; a government powered by the people that promotes equality and social justice". Only 10% alluded to the concept of "power" that needed to be controlled by the people. One respondent commented that democracy is "a system of government where the power is in the hands of the people. Their political rights, needs and wants are demonstrated through elected representatives". More critically another student commented that:

> Democracy is intended to provide equality for all citizens of a country. *Formal equality* in terms of access to public systems of: health, education, employment etc. *Informal equality* in terms of social systems, within the "community".

It was notable that a number highlighted the requirement to be able to speak freely without fear of retribution or punishment where "everyone has a say (…) when people listen and value your opinion".

Only three respondents raised issues of social justice as being intrinsic to democracy "where members of society are treated as equal or social equality". These two indicated an understanding that there is an unequal distribution of power and highlighted an "equal participatory role" where "all citizens have equal input". One of these defined democracy as:

> A political and social system based on social equality. It works on the basis that every citizen is equal and their vote carries the exact same weight as any other citizen, regardless of social, economic or cultural status. Key concepts of democracy include freedom of rights, civil liberties and political freedom.

Another cynically defined democracy as "hegemony of the ruling and elite class".

DO YOU BELIEVE AUSTRALIA IS A DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY?

While there was a range of views on how democratic Australia is, some issues need to be highlighted. About one third of the PSTs indicated that they had serious concerns about the degree of democracy that they experienced in this country with only 20% believing that Australia is very democratic.

PSTs who felt that Australia is very democratic adopted a very uncritical acceptance of their previous *thin* definition of democracy, explaining their decision on the basis of *thin* conceptions, such as equality of rights, freedom of speech, and voting rights. Typical comments often made a comparison to other countries, including: "We are free to vote and speak out on issues that concern us without fear"; "Australia is a fair country"; "We have choice, rights and options in nearly every aspect of the community"; "The government listens to what the majority of people want"; "Everybody is able to have a voice here and there is an equality of opportunity"; and "Processes are equal, just and fair for all citizens".

These respondents uncritically stressed the importance of elections: "We vote in a fair electoral process"; and "Anyone can run for a government position, regardless of policy platform and personal background. Education, information, and legal system is (sic) accessible to everyone regardless of personal background, sex, age, wealth"; and "Nearly everyone can vote. Voter participation is up around 95%, elections are fair". One summarised this viewpoint as:

> When you compare Australia's system to the rest of the world, we are probably one of the top democratic countries. We are free and liberated to do almost everything that we want. More importantly, we can cast our vote without being watched by guards with weapons who will force us to vote one way or another. We are incredibly lucky.

However, many raised issues in relation to minority groups, especially the treatment of Australian Indigenous (First Nations) People, with over 75% believing that Indigenous Australians are not a full part of Australian democracy. One PST who considered Australia very democratic still added that "Australia has a long way to go in changing narrow minded, racist, bigoted thinking. I am amazed at how many Australians continue to harbour negative thoughts on new Australians, Indigenous Australians based on information gained through print and television media".

On the other-hand, another student who also was of the view that Australia is very democratic, added that we need to "amend the Constitution to ban implementing Sharia law" and stated that:

> Aboriginal people have no relevance to modern Australian society. Every country was once occupied by some race of people that no longer exists. Such is the case here. Other minorities: they can vote like the rest of us. However, the fact is, most minorities want to change Australian democracy to be more like where they came from, which is their right to try, but I think does not have mainstream support, therefore has no impact.

A significant minority (10%) were prepared to call Australia not democratic, highlighting that while "we flaunt that we have freedom of speech, equal rights and are fair to all, you will be thrown in jail before you actually get the chance to speak what you believe is wrong or should be changed". Further, many of these mentioned the "class-based distribution of power" leading to reduced democracy. These reflected a thicker democratic analysis of class and social hegemony. The following is typical of their comments:

> We live in a pseudo-democracy. Even though we get to vote and have a say, it does not go far and is not really taken on board by politicians as they have their own agenda. Underlying our society is still inequality [based on] the colour of your skin, gender and disability. Until this is rectified, we cannot have a true democracy.

Another such respondent stated that "there are very narrow ideas about education, ways of life, and languages dominating school systems (…) people don't have full freedom because of their economic or social status". Significantly, these were typically older; spoke another language at home; with

more studying early childhood and primary education on a campus where a number of academic faculty shared a critical pedagogical epistemology. In addition, their parents had more education and worked in the professions to a larger degree than the other respondents.

Typical comments stated that "as a country, by and large, we fail to cater for the needs of and often ignore the rights of our Indigenous peoples and those groups of people with limited access to the instruments of power (social, cultural and economic capital) such as refugees and migrants"; and that "consciously or not, racism and indirect discrimination is (sic) inherent in our society's structures, schooling, workforce". One stated that:

> I have difficulty labelling it a true democracy [because] one particular type of citizen (high-status, white, Christian, high economic capital etc.) is being more valued (and more likely to have their wants and needs represented) than other citizens, including those who are vulnerable or disadvantaged. With institutionalised racism and discrimination common in Australia, many citizens are considered "second-rate", including migrants and their descendants, refugees, indigenous Australians, women, those of low socioeconomic status and those with little cultural, social or financial capital, and it would be inaccurate to state that Australia values every citizen or considers every citizen to be of equal worth.

Another added more succinctly that "underlying our (Australian) society is still inequality for the colour of your skin, gender and disability; until this is rectified, we cannot have a true democracy". A third questioned the power of money, "The rich can push their views more (too much)".

These respondents, while in a minority, were able to differentiate between *thin* conceptions of democracy that emphasize elections and superficial equality of rights and a *thicker* democracy beyond voting to establish a clear connection with social justice. Typical comments from these respondents stated that "There are many disenfranchised people (…)"; "Some groups in society are disadvantaged in this system (…)"; Many voices are silenced, including the many indigenous languages (…)"; "We still need a lot of work when it comes to our own indigenous people". A very small number of PSTs also referred to power imbalances between social and economic groups because "the minority hold(s) the power and the voice in major decisions".

The most critical of the PSTs who were negative about Australia's *thinness* of democracy commented that "full participation (is) often dependent on

who you are and where you live". They referred to the rhetoric of democracy being "strictly reduced to majority vote via a political system which serves to turn the majority off from politics. Our representative system does not include enough public forums or encouragement to be involved in political matters of a public nature".

Referring to current issues, some cited the lack of democratic rights of Asylum Seekers and so-called illegal arrivals who "(we) lock away in detention centres and we do not accept our so called 'friends and allies' as climate refugees, who are suffering for the greed and consumption of the mining companies which our government protects above all". Alluding to the disproportionate distribution of power through wealth, one wrote about the "laws being passed now so that businesses can sue individual people, massive logging companies can sue individual protesters for millions just to shut them up".

Similarly, another wrote critically about the unequal distribution of power in Australia: "Top 1% of population has a disproportionate influence and power over government"; "Some people have equal opportunities but many do not – indigenous people and refugees do not have the same opportunities or support, so it is not equal and therefore not democratic"; "Some groups of society are not treated equally, as evidenced by policies such as the Northern Territory intervention[9]". Another added that "Australian people do not have decision-making power in proportion to how much they are affected by the decisions (…) the wealthy have disproportionate power". Highlighting the superficiality of the choices available within the system, one wrote "that in reality we are dictated by the mainstream – white, middle-class and male – and the assumptions that everyone can access the things that make us powerful, and must necessarily want to, underpins our education and political systems".

These respondents were also able to highlight the lack of a thicker democracy, suggesting that "I don't think we have a very active democracy but only when citizens take a stand against government action (…) it is not very democratic in its 'norms' and values".

9 The Northern Territory National Emergency Response (also referred to as "the intervention") was a package of changes to welfare provision, law enforcement, land tenure and other measures, introduced by the Australian federal government under John Howard in 2007, nominally to address claims of rampant child sexual abuse and neglect in Northern Territory Aboriginal communities. Operation Outreach, the intervention's main logistical operation, conducted by a force of 600 soldiers and detachments from the ADF (including NORFORCE) concluded on 21 October, 2008. The package was the Federal government's response to the Territory government's publication of *Little Children are Sacred*, but implemented only two out of ninety-seven of the report's recommendations. The response has been criticised, but also received bipartisan parliamentary support.

A number also volunteered that they felt there is a strong link between education and democracy. They suggested that "some minority groups such as Indigenous people can sometimes not have their opinions heard due to a lack of education. Many people may also lack the knowledge of the working of this system failing to be beneficial for them (…) it provides a great way of life for those that are educated". Again, this reflects an understanding that power can come with, and from, education.

TEACHING ABOUT AND FOR DEMOCRACY

> We can learn that students have the power and intellect to mould their own education, because it is in fact their doing and their life of life-long learning (…) democracy is in the way we allow students to un-tap their own inner light and power, and we cannot do that if we are stapled to a standard that is not prioritizing empowerment and critique and change (PST).

While responses to many of the questions in the survey differed dramatically among the respondents, there was a previously unseen congruence with over 70% agreeing that teachers should promote a sense of democracy in students. One of those who were unsure (30%) whether teachers should strive to promote a sense of democracy stated, "Class isn't a democracy; it's a benign dictatorship. Democracy is an integral part of global history and society, so it's important to learn about it and link knowledge into the broader social framework that democracy is a part of". Another added, "They should (only) educate students on what democracy is", while another, addressing issues of bias asserts, "as long as it is balanced and they respect the views of others. I don't think one agenda should be forced but students should hear many voices".

Others were concerned about issues of potential conflicts of interest and bias when dealing with controversial topics, stating that "this can be done neutrally though, not trying to influence children one way or another". Whether one actually does this, however, a PST said depends "on whether bias or ignorance influences their presentations".

Many (36%) returned to the importance of understanding the political and electoral systems, with comments such as: "I think students should be made aware of their voting rights, the way our system of government works and what democracy is opposed to" and "Students should be politically

aware – they will vote one day". They reflected the view that "we need to prepare students for the future and educate them about the political system we live within".

These comments reflect a *thin* understanding of democracy that centres on the individual. They discuss the primacy of values – not actual participative action – because it is "important to provide a direction and answer to the students and where their values lay on matters that effects them (…) values are very important". Another PST stated: "Democracy is a very important concept, and if we nurture those values in our students we can continue a legacy of freedom and the fight for equality"; "(The fact that) teachers are capable of manufacturing or nurturing any value in students is definitely important as students need to understand what happens regarding a democracy". Others referred back to their definition of democracy and related it to freedom of speech (but not necessarily to action), asserting that "it is very important for students to understand that their opinions count".

20% of PSTs understood democracy more *thickly* and tendered such comments as "Educating students to be concerned, involved and contributing citizens of our country" is very important because it allows them "to critique and question and write letters to politicians (…)". One PST added that what is actually important is for teachers to learn that "students have the power and intellect to mould their own lives". Another added that:

> If kids start learning early that their voice is important, that their opinion matters and can make a difference, there is more chance that they will be engaged and care about what is happening around them, and this can only create better, more active people and citizens for the future.

DISCUSSION: A NEO-LIBERAL AGENDA – RHETORIC OF ACTIVE PARTICIPATION: LEARNING ABOUT BUT NOT FOR DEMOCRACY

How are we to understand and contextualise the contrasting and sometimes contradictory views presented here? Print (2007) argues that the challenge to democracy is not from an external or internal enemy but from its own citizens "who have grown distrustful of politicians, sceptical about democratic

institutions and disillusioned about how the democratic process functions" (p. 325). However, he points to the paradox of over 20 years of CCE, stating that "as the demand for democratic citizenship grows, youth participation in formal democracy is declining" (p. 326). He reiterates the importance of "learning about participation (…) developing of political engagement (…) to learn about democracy, government and citizenship (…) to acquire civic knowledge, and skills and values" (p. 336). He concludes that this may "enhance political knowledge and probably political engagement" (p. 336) (…) [and] "can influence engagement and participation" (p. 337) in the future. Criticising "participatory pedagogy" (p. 338) as weak in schools, Print explains that "engaged or conversational pedagogy" epitomized by "class voting, group inquiry, simulations, fieldwork and co-operative learning" has a strong correlation with future civic engagement. However, I would contend that this pedagogy may only reinforce the *illusion* of democracy.

What emerges from the PSTs surveyed is that too many believe that children are required to learn *about* democracy but not – at least in a serious way – *do* democracy. Missing from their comments was a thorough understanding of what a good citizen is. The civics versus citizenship debate can be seen in terms of the struggle between *thin* and *thick* democracy. Giroux (2000) suggests that because there has been a shift from creating a democracy of citizens to producing a democracy of consumers:

> Public education becomes a venue for making a profit, delivering a product, or constructing consuming subjects, education reneges on its responsibilities for creating a democracy of citizens by shifting its focus to producing a democracy of consumers (p. 173).

Producing better curriculum materials will not in itself deliver the expected or intended results. Prior (2006) concludes that of stand-alone, unlinked or de-contextualised, one-off programmes do not provide the lasting effects planned for. Schools are accused by students of "talking the talk but not walking the walk" because teachers are not able to model good citizenship in their practices. Seddon concludes that:

> Contemporary education policy, practice and politics have become primarily framed within a dominant economic discourse which marginalises and obscures the political purposes of education necessary to the formation and

> sustainability of a democratic citizenry. The challenge is to re-acknowledge the crucial contribution of political education outcomes in sustaining democracy and to work for a pattern of citizen learning that accommodates necessary learning for work and life-with-risk, and also learning for citizen action that can imagine the democratic ideal, support ethical judgement and protect democratic decision-making (2004, p. 172).

This analysis raises concerns that much of the contemporary CCE may actually "pose a significant threat to Australian democracy" (Reid & Thomson, 2003, p. xi). How then can CCE be "remade to serve the purposes of a just and democratic society" (Seddon, 2004)? Countering this requires what she calls a *deliberatively thick* democracy which "assumes ethical and informed citizens who participate as equals in the public sphere" (Seddon, 2004, p. 171).

Thick democracy goes beyond the championing of electoral and legislative processes, the rule of law and basic civil rights (Howard & Patten, 2006). It encourages and facilitates the legitimacy of collective citizen and civil action as external to government and business. *Thick* democracy envisages a 'social citizen' – an individual always in relationship with others – capable of reflexive agency (Giddens, 1994). Paradoxically, many of the democracy-exporting countries are those experiencing crises of democracy at home[10].

In contrast, the active citizen of neo-liberalism is conceived as an entrepreneur and a '*can do achiever*' who largely benefits the individual. While schools are expected to prepare students to live in diverse democratic societies (Furman & Shields, 2005), the views of many of the PSTs in this research indicate that their school practices will not go far in fostering democracy or democratic practice.

Thick democracy must be about "voice, agency, inclusiveness and collective problem solving" that is "rooted in the capacity to see oneself reflected in the cultures of society" (Howard & Patten, 2006, pp. 462-463), and not just in the freedom to pursue one's own individual self-interest.

Howard and Patten (2006) explain that, despite the common rhetoric of active citizenship, there are two perceptible trends within the new civics: the *thin* neo-liberal and the *thick*(*er)* radical democratic trends. They suggest that the latter is motivated by egalitarian commitments and "the desire to extend democracy while enhancing the political agency of once marginalised

10 The massive youth led-unrest of 2011 Occupy Movements is an example of this phenomenon.

citizens" (p. 459). Being active in this sense means being "socially engaged and committed to collective problem solving at all levels of the political community" (Howard & Patten, 2006, p. 460). Democracy, then, should be more than elections, and includes all power-structured social relationships. In essence, they explain that this requires the ability to "navigate and influence the power-structured social relations that characterize the politics of civil society" (Howard & Patten, 2006, p. 460). It would, therefore, be advantageous for educators to acknowledge that what students need to experience is an equalisation of agency; otherwise, democracy may not be possible.

Thick democracy actively challenges the view that "unregulated markets are by definition realms of freedom that produce equality of opportunity" with "extensive social and cultural citizenship rights" (Howard & Patten, 2006, p. 461). These in turn are linked to politicized empowerment in the social processes that shape society, where all are visible and heard despite their social status. *Thick* democracy must be about "voice, agency, inclusiveness and collective problem solving". That is, it must be "rooted in the capacity to see oneself reflected in the cultures of society" (Howard & Patten, 2006, pp. 462-463), and not in the freedom to pursue one's own individual self-interest. Therefore, *thick* democratic teaching should centre on recognitive, not just redistributive, social justice (Gale & Densmore, 2003). A *thick* democratic teaching that incorporates both the *participatory* and *justice orientated citizen* is implicit in Westheimer and Kahne's vision, which goes beyond the *personally responsible citizen* of the 'critical democracy[11]' posited by Dejaeghere and Tudball (2007) to incorporate both the *participatory* and *justice orientated citizen*.

Nevertheless, Westheimer and Kahne warn that:

> While pursuit of both goals may well support development of a more democratic society, it is not clear whether making advances along one dimension will necessarily further progress on the other. Do programs that support civic participation necessarily promote students' capacities for critical analysis and social change? Conversely, does focusing on social justice provide the foundation for effective and committed civic actors? Or might such programs support the development of armchair activists who have articu-

11 This is a distortion of Westheimer and Kahne's thesis which makes it clear that, without real action and involvement, there can be no thick democracy.

> late conversations over coffee, without ever acting? (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004a, pp. 242-243).

Thick democracy will not be easily achieved by society in general or by schools in particular. As the agents of society in which they exist, teachers can rightly claim that they are restricted in what they alone can achieve, since national agendas and budgets are nationally and state controlled.

The challenge for us as teacher educators, teachers and education students is to ask questions of, rather than summarily accept, neo-liberal received wisdom. For Armstrong (2006), the definition of teaching as the uncritical transmission of knowledge begs the question of "what and how knowledge is constituted as a social and political stance towards the truth" (Armstrong, 2006, p. 10).

Armstrong argues that as participation and dissent are central to democratic life, they too should be central to school systems which, in turn, are fundamental to the contestation between a *thin* or *thick* democracy. For teachers:

> These possibilities are revealed through dialogue with our students and in dialogues with the communities of policy and practice with whom we work. We cannot simply be concerned with the accumulation and transmission of knowledge and competencies; it is our duty to interrogate what is meant by knowledge and how it is formed and to understand the limits of competency. As educators we are engaged in a process of human inquiry that makes us human (Armstrong, 2006, p. 10).

But can this be done without "education *in* and *for* democracy" (Dobozy, 2007, p. 116)? Students cannot acquire the knowledge, attitudes and skills to successfully become agents of citizenship without the simultaneous democratization of pedagogy, the schools and the school system itself. The democratic role-playing characteristic of pretend parliaments – recommended in the CCE and supported by the majority of respondents – means too often that students are involved in decision making on "an abstract and often detached level" (Dobozy, 2007). Programs associated with a *thin* democracy are unable to take the "social organisation of specific schools and the everyday life of individual students into consideration" (p. 118). The responses detailed here indicate that to "inspire political empowerment", a change in education-

al practice at all levels involving more than off-the-shelf products or programmes is required.

CONCLUSION

Civics-related knowledge is necessary but not sufficient to prepare a student to become a "competent, democratic citizen" (Schwille & Amadeo, 2002). *Thick* democracy, however, has the potential of becoming an important medium in the struggle for social justice and equity, that does not necessarily involve assimilationism (Taylor, 1996).

Teachers have the choice of promoting and doing *thicker* democracy that is reflective, critical, participatory, tolerant and non-hierarchical or choosing a *thinner*, authoritarian democracy that is based on uncritical knowledge, standards and competencies that serve to measure of the 'good citizen'. A *thick* democracy focuses on "how citizens understand themselves as members of a public with an obligation to promote the public good" (Howard & Patten, 2006, p. 472) and the competencies required of civic citizenship that encompass informed and active citizens participating in political debate and action on equal terms (Reid, 2002). Education needs to assume a "deep democratic engagement" (Reid, 2005, p. 292). The top-down imposition of policies designed by 'teams of experts' is incompatible with *thick* democracy and must be rejected if we aspire to the true ideals of democracy, in favour of the active involvement of the least powerful (Reid, 2002).

There have been detailed studies of school students' attitudes to democratic values and participation in society that conclude that, while Australian students have a well-developed set of democratic values (Walsh & Black, 2011), they adopt a passive rather than an active style of engaging in conventional citizenship activities. There has not been any commensurate study on pre-service teachers.

No claim is being made that the views expressed by these participants are anything more than personal views or that they should be seen as generalizable to the broader population. In this current research the empirical and qualitative data analysed suggest that practicing educators have a *thin* conception of democracy and that if they are typical of our current teachers, it raises many concerns for and about the *health* of democracy in Australia. It also raises issues regarding the *stickability* of teacher education programs

and the acknowledged pressures and influences veteran teachers put on new teachers to adopt accepted practices.

On-going research will foster the development of framework for conceptualizing democracy in education, highlighting, in particular, what educators can do to become more critically aware and engaged in democracy within their teaching. But it will also enable us to better understand any correspondence between teacher's cultural and social capital and their perceptions and beliefs.

Further research will provide insight for the broader educational community and serve to expand knowledge in education, instead of education reproducing the current *thin democracy* that leads to disengaged citizens (Dejaeghere & Tudball, 2007). However, examples of excellent teacher practice will enable the development of an educational framework of teaching for *thick* democracy, which leads to a more participatory, empowered and engaged citizenry and a more inclusive participation in, and therefore safeguarding of, democratic society.

Schooling can and does contribute to the production of citizens' identities. However, its contribution cannot be controlled or measured in the same way as we measure how much math or literacy a student has learned in a given year. Citizenship education programs suggest that a "new identity will emerge" but that the endeavour is "always an educationally unfinished project, an unsolvable tension, that cannot be learned and understood through conscious rationality alone and thus not solved through the delivery of explicit instruction on what democracy is and how a good citizen should act" (Fischman & Haas, 2012, p. 174).

Education, including citizenship education within schools, cannot supersede the experiences students have had throughout the course of their lives. Yet school experiences often challenge "the notion of self and identities of large groups of students especially among minorities and those such as refugees, stateless migrants, and others who do not easily fit the traditional definitions of citizens within the nation-state" (Fischman & Haas, 2012, p. 177). A more holistic and dynamic approach that is pedagogical, experiential, political, social, economic and cultural is needed if we are to attain a more decent society and produce citizens who are engaged, critical, and productive agents of positive change.

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