

AVE01300

"Smarter than we're given credit for": Youth perspectives on politics, social issues and personal freedoms

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The status of youth itself involves a number of contradictions and tensions surrounding the delay of adult accreditation despite adult development. This set of tensions creates an anxiety on which almost any matter involving youth becomes a social issue.

(Sercombe, 1996, 181)

Youth are frequently constructed as a homogeneous social group in need of "fixing". Moreover, as Sercombe has shown, the ways in which youth are constructed in the media reflect an ambivalence in social attitudes towards young people: "youth can be alternately cast as 'child' to be controlled or as 'adult', to be censured" (1996, 169). Sercombe has further suggested that just as youth are always in the newspaper — portrayed as either 'off the rails' or less frequently as being 'on track' — "governments are always trying to do something, or not do something, about the latest youth problem [...] youth is a problem, a puzzle [...] that never really gets solved" (1996, 10). One aspect of the 'youth problem' relates to the fact that young people seem to have trouble recalling the succession of Australian Prime Ministers and displayed a "widespread ignorance and misconception about Australia's system of government, and the way in which it can serve the needs of its citizens" (Munter, 1996, 28); in fact, young people are perceived as cynical and passive about "pretty much everything to do with politics" (Healy, 1999, 200).

Following the landmark report *Education for Active Citizenship* (1989, cited in Phillips and Moroz, 1996), various education departments throughout Australia responded to the "new thrust with clear signs that political and civic education was being given a higher priority" (Phillips and Moroz, 1996, 14). Thus, Owen has suggested:

What we are witnessing in Australia at present is a policy-led resurgence of interest in civics and citizenship. That is, the Commonwealth government has identified a "problem" — that young Australians are unmotivated, alienated from our structures of democratic governance, and displaying worryingly low levels of political literacy — and has set in train a range of solutions ...

(Owen, 1996, 20)

However, Owen also argued that a 'problem-leads-to-policy-leads-to-program' approach in citizenship education is not likely to address the interests, or indeed meet the needs of young people. I will expand on this in a later section of this paper.

Given the emerging interest in civics and citizenship education, this paper is concerned with teasing out what young people perceived the issues which confront Australian society to be, what they felt could be done to improve society and what they wanted for themselves in the future. The data from the study reported here suggests that, far from being 'too young' to hold politicised views or to express informed opinions, young people are frequently very aware of social reality and often are deeply committed to creating a more socially just

society. The data also suggests that these young people have relatively modest aspirations for themselves but that these are closely tied to their visions of an equitable society. While young people may very well be cynical about politics and many may be ignorant about the names of past Prime Ministers, they nevertheless have strong opinions about what might constitute a fair society. This has enormous implications for education. As the student whose words form part of the title for this paper said:

It would be easy for us to sit back and take it — to listen to our parents and our teachers and just concentrate on our homework. But young people are smarter than we're given credit for. We know things really need to be changed.

If young people are generally disinterested in party politics and disdainful of politicians (Beresford and Phillips, 1997, 14), but are committed to a more egalitarian society, then approaches to citizenship education must address these concerns in a practical way (Owen, 1996).

Background to the Study

The data for this study are drawn from interviews with 48 respondents (29 male and 19 female) ranging in age from 15 to 24, with an average age of 18. Although 40 were born in Australia (this included a number of Indigenous people) and only eight were born overseas, a number of those who were born in Australia mentioned that one or both of their parents had migrated from another country (n=6). All thought of themselves as Australian. Almost half of the respondents (n=21) were in full-time education or training, thirteen were unemployed, nine were in full-time employment and a further five were doing 'other things' like volunteer work or travelling. The respondents included university students, private and public school students as well as young people who had left school at the earliest opportunity; they included young people from stable family backgrounds who lived in affluent suburbs and people who called the street home. In fact, on all sorts of indicators they were as diverse as any randomly selected group of people could be.

All interviews were conducted by Larissa and Lorenzo, aged nineteen. As a researcher I had decided not to conduct the interviews myself because I felt that interviewers who were closer in age to my target group would be able to elicit more 'truthful' responses. While the notion of 'truth' is problematic, nevertheless, I have a sense that Larissa and Lorenzo's interviews produced data that more closely approximated the reality of the people interviewed than would have been the case had they been approached by someone like me. Before going out into the field I had two briefing sessions with Larissa and Lorenzo during which we constructed an interview guide and discussed approaches to interviewing; their instructions were that, as far as they could ascertain, they were to interview young people from a range of cultural backgrounds.

While the respondents' replies differed along ethnic lines when answering questions relating to Australian identity, there were remarkable consistencies in responses which dealt with politics and social issues. Hence, while the answers provided by the older respondents tended to be more sophisticated in their articulation, there were no real discernible differences in the tenor of the responses in terms of age or gender. In fact, in one way or another, the majority of answers returned to the theme of social equality.

Excerpts from an interview which Lorenzo conducted with an seventeen year old, unemployed female who was born in Western Australia are reproduced below to give an indication of the range of questions asked. They also provide a flavour of the range of

responses as they deal with voting behaviour, issues facing Australian society and issues of personal importance.

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Lorenzo | What are the main issues facing Australian society now? |
| Interviewee | Reconciliation — racism — the environment — mining of uranium — storing of waste products — logging — ignorance of other people's problems in other countries — the way we are represented internationally. |
| Lorenzo | Thanks — have you ever voted in an election? |
| Interviewee | No, I've just turned seventeen. |
| Lorenzo | OK — will you vote at the next election? |
| Interviewee | Yes, I most certainly will. |
| Lorenzo | So, you think your vote will make a difference? |
| Interviewee | Yes, if you think about how you vote and you vote intelligently — if you know where your preferences will go. |
| Lorenzo | Which issues, do you think, will play a part in the way you vote? |
| Interviewee | I'd vote for a party that is concerned with listening to the people — is concerned about the environment — no selling of Government assets — youth, unemployment — I'd vote for a party that has a bit more of a social conscience — a country shouldn't be seen as a company — it should be seen as a group of people. |
| Lorenzo | OK then — Do you think the politicians are doing a reasonable job? |
| Interviewee | No — I suppose they're doing the best they can but they have really bad priorities. |
| Lorenzo | What are the things the Government needs to focus on to improve society? |
| Interviewee | They should focus on unemployment issues — I don't see how it helps to give kids crappy jobs with crappy wages — they should focus on the environment more — stop taking money out of hospitals and schools and put more money into the arts — thinking about where we are going to be in twenty years time in terms of environment — it's so important you can't just ignore it — I think ... I don't know ... people just need to be heard in so many ways that they aren't — at the moment being heard, I feel. |
| Lorenzo | If you were the Prime Minister now, what would you do to improve society? |
| Interviewee | Nice one! I'd stop logging old growth forests and stop telling other countries what to do — look at other models of running the country — and I'm not talking about communism — Australia needs less priority on competition and aggression and more on reason and compassion. |

| | |
|-------------|--|
| Lorenzo | On a more personal level, when you retire, what would you want to achieve in your lifetime? |
| Interviewee | Never stop learning — help people — having money is only important as long as you have enough to be comfortable — if I had excess money I'd give it away — make a positive difference in peoples lives — get along with family — be remembered — have done something that would live on after I've gone. |

While not 'representative' (in an empirical sense) of this group of young people as a whole, the excerpt reproduced above is not atypical of the group of people interviewed in that it touches on many of the issues that were raised time and time again. Thus environmental issues and issues related to reconciliation with Aboriginal people (as well as issues concerned with equality more generally), questions of whether Australia should become a Republic and specific youth issues such as education and unemployment as well as issues relating to drugs, crime, homelessness and suicide were the most frequently cited issues to plague Australian society. The latter were invariably framed in terms of structural issues of inequality rather than as issues endemic to young people because of their youth. Certainly, the comment that "people just need to be heard in so many ways that they aren't at the moment being heard, I feel", was not an isolated sentiment.

As a researcher I believe that it important for young people's voices to be heard. In this paper, therefore, I have allowed the interviewees to speak for themselves as much as possible. Moreover, in attempting to be more faithful to the interviewees' utterances I have resisted the temptation to translate the spoken language into 'proper' sentences. Instead, I have used dashes (—) as a way of punctuating and ellipses (...) to indicate thoughts which were left unfinished.

Views about politics, politicians and democracy

The majority of respondents did not have a high opinion of politicians. Indeed some of the comments regarding politicians do not bear repeating. Only eleven respondents (23%) thought politicians were doing a reasonable job. For example, one of the respondents commented:

They're all as bad as one another I think — they come out with some good ideas to start off with — once they've been in term for a couple of years they loose sight of the reason why they went into politics.

Others felt that while their vote might make a difference in terms of who was to govern, they had no input into the ways in which we are governed or the policies of governance as the following shows:

We get to vote on who we get but we still don't get to actually like ... have any input into what they're doing, because ... you know it's ... if you think about it there's not that much choice in who you vote for, you know.

As these quotations illustrate, lack of interest in politics appeared more a function of lack of interest in and cynicism about politicians and party politics than a lack of concern in local or indeed global issues or in the way democratic processes operate.

While this may well be a function of a system of compulsory voting, most of the respondents had voted or intended to vote when they were old enough (96%). When asked if they thought their vote could make a difference, by far the majority (83%) answered in the affirmative. The following give some indication of the responses:

Yes I do — I think everyone should vote — just to have your say — even if you don't enjoy voting.

Yes — but I also think a lot of people aren't serious about voting — they vote "willy-nilly".

Yes — that's the point of having a democracy — everyone's vote counts.

Yes it does— it doesn't make a huge difference — but I'd definitely take it seriously.

Yes, absolutely, because you've got thousands of individuals doing it.

Yeh I do — I think it does count, even if it doesn't actually get someone in — it might shake the other politicians up into having a look at what these other parties that are getting a higher proportion of the vote are saying and maybe, trying to adopt some of those policies to capture that vote [...] I don't necessarily agree with our system of democracy — meaning our method of election ... umm ... I don't necessarily agree with our political structures either — but the fact that we do have a choice in who governs us and how we are governed is a good thing.

The majority of respondents felt that their vote could make a difference, nevertheless, there were also some reservations. One respondent, for example, said that even though "voting is one of our democratic rights so we should use it", she felt that more could be achieved by "just looking out for the people around you — you can do a lot more that way". Another commented that he felt that his vote did not make a difference but that he had voted anyway because he wanted to avoid a fine. He indicated that his vote was influenced by his perception that "one side seemed slightly better than the other, you know, so I went with the lesser of two evils".

So how can the notion of one side of party politics appearing only marginally better than the other be understood; that is how is "slightly better" constructed and how can we understand the sentiment that "you can do more by just looking out for the people around you — you can do a lot more that way"? To begin to fathom these questions, it is illuminating to take a closer look at the issues that these young people said were important to them.

Issues of Concern

While many of the young people in this study said that they were not really interested in politics (81.6%), they nevertheless were interested in, and cared passionately about social issues. As Beresford and Phillips have suggested "a distinction needs to be drawn between interest in the political system and interest in political issues" (Beresford and Phillips, 1997, 16). Thus, of the total of 48 respondents only five (10.4%) said that they "didn't have a clue"

when asked about issues facing Australian society. The others mentioned a range of issues, which when grouped together concerned the environment (mentioned 38 times), equity issues (mentioned 24 times) and issues of particular concern to young people (mentioned 19 times). Republicanism was mentioned ten times and taxes eight times.

The issues which this group of young people identified as being of concern to them often bore a direct relationship to issues that had occupied media attention at the time the individual was interviewed. Interestingly, schools were not mentioned at all as places where they had been made aware of particular issues. While certainly not the only source of information, the ways in which ideas and images of the main issues facing Australia at the turn of the millennium stem from media reports was evident in a number of interviews. For example, two respondents commented:

Main issues, aha ... umm ... the main issues that we're facing are probably the ones you see every day on television and in the newspapers and what not ...

Teenage suicide wasn't a big issue but ... I noticed it and I read a bit about it ... I dunno ...

Another respondent appeared to have internalised constructions of youth (or perhaps he was merely commenting tongue-in-cheek?) as the following illustrates rather poignantly:

- Interviewee I think there's a lot of problems with youth ... um ... crime, theft, drugs that kind of thing.
- Larissa Youth, how do you mean?
- Interviewee Ah just, young people
- Larissa What's wrong with them?
- Interviewee Ah, we're out of control, I think.
- Larissa How?
- Interviewee Just everything we do ... umm ... Oh I dunno ... it's just, you hear about it on the news all the time ... problems...

However, media construction of social reality were not always accepted unproblematically as the following show:

Well if you listen to news, it's crime ... but I don't believe that at all ...

Looking after aged people — youth, crime — definitely a problem — probably older people are being made afraid of youth — a lot of old people are fearful of young people — they think a lot of crime committed by young people is violent — from the newspaper — but it's not really like that.

While one might have expected young people to be particularly concerned about issues affecting youth, this was not the case. When specific youth issues were mentioned by respondents, they included issues as diverse as drug taking and decriminalisation of certain types of prohibited substances, crime, suicide, homelessness, unemployment, education and a general sense that young people did not have a voice. On environmental and equity

issues, however, those who mentioned it as an issue of concern agreed that government treatment of these issues appeared to be falling short of the mark. There were only two exceptions to this (4%). The young people in question expressed singularly racist opinions which found no echoes in the other responses.

The emphasis on social justice and environment issues is not altogether unexpected as a number of studies have shown that when young people are asked what they would do to make a difference, or what they felt constituted good citizens (Phillips and Moroz, 1996; Cope and Kalantzis, 1998), they tended to respond in terms of "a core of shared values" (Beresford and Phillips, 1996, 11). Thus Beresford and Phillips identified support for a racially non-discriminatory immigration policy, reconciliation with Aboriginal people, republicanism and a more egalitarian society (1997, 16) as belonging to a set of core values. Certainly the responses in the present study would support this idea. When asked to identify issues of concern the following are indicative of the range of responses:

Things like racism and stuff ... I dunno...yeh, just racism and things like that, I dunno ... the referendum ...

Drugs I think ... drugs and like ... I dunno, racism and stuff — the environmental issues I think as well — they're the ones that come to my mind first off.

Ah ... dealing with the ... inequality of Aboriginals to whites ... is pretty major — and ... making sure that we keep the environment and don't ruin any of the natural wonders.

Reconciliation ... huge, huge, huge ... I think we need to come to terms with finding solutions about environmental problems which are just not going to go away — things like Jabiluka — I think it's huge — you can't ignore it.

Main issues ... umm, well, there's the Republic — whether we should be attached to the monarchy — umm ... racism — the mixed immigrants coming in ... the multicultural sort of ... people's attitudes towards people who are different — from different backgrounds ... umm ... are not that good here either.

Equal rights for Gays and Lesbians — cheaper food — the GST — improving economic standards in Australia.

Umm ... going Republic ... basically government altogether is a waste of time — they don't change anything — they keep the same things going on ... ah ... I don't know beyond that — and ... forestry and timbering — that's a big one — although I'm not sure which way they should go because I can understand the one side of the subject and the other side as well — but there has to be a maintainable equilibrium between the two sides.

Making a difference

Answers to the question "Is there anything the government do to improve society?" reflected the issues that concerned young people. While a proportion said that they had "no idea" (8%) and some conceded that this was a "tough question" (12%), the majority had a great deal to say about what government could do. Some answered succinctly:

Umm ... pump more money into things that are important — such as education and environmental issues.

Everything really — I could run the country better than they could.

Take on board a lot more grass roots opinion and also what young people think.

Get rid of GST, save the forests and lessen drug laws.

Ah ... probably try and educate kids more — get them into school so that they can have more jobs for the future and stuff.

Others attempted to voice solutions to the problems they perceived, despite having been 'put on the spot' to consider rather weighty issues. Their answers frequently showed how they struggled to articulate their thoughts:

Oh, I could bitch and moan for hours about what people could do ... and like, as people in general, you just ... you can spend your whole time ... you know, saying what could be, you know ... I think ... if everyone oh, this is just so hard for me to say — there are a hundred-and-one things that I could say, but definitely issues about Reconciliation I think we need to sort out quickly and not keep putting the blame on ... and ... branding ... ah ... races in certain ways.

Work out ... work out a way of reducing the crime rate...which is directly related to drugs — illegal drugs ... my guess is ... umm, legalise drugs — if you legalise drugs the prices of the drugs would drop, the quality of the drugs will increase and — there won't be any dealers — they'll all be out of business and there won't be any reason for people to do break and enters and armed robberies to get money to get drugs — because they can be put on drug programs — and at least they're gonna survive long enough to try and get off it instead of ending up in prison and — I dunno, I think that might work to improve society.

Perhaps, maybe speak to the people a bit more — maybe start talking to people that have actually experienced those sorts of things — it's like young people that use drugs — I mean no-body asks them what they think should be done about the problem and how to fix it.

Well I think the Federal government could ditch the GST because it's so inequitable — with low-income earners being taxed at a proportionately higher rate than anyone else — umm ... yeh, I ... things like ... I think the last election was about middle-class compassion and it just proved that the middle-class doesn't have compassion for poor people any more — I think that you have to look at ... at issues like education and health-care and equal access for all — I know it sounds idealistic and stuff like that — but stop letting market forces dominate everything — you know, people are people, people need services and you can't put a monetary value on someone's health-care, or someone's education, you know, I think it's ridiculous.

I reckon that they should close down the uranium mining in Jabiluka and yeh, that's about all — and I reckon they should like help more youths on the

streets and stuff — I don't reckon they should live on the streets, they should like, set up more places for them to go and stay

Listen to the people — Umm ... put money where...where it's gonna count more ... not so selfish reasons ... money to the hospitals — to the rejuvenation of forests and towards the Aboriginal people, communities up north.

Umm ... they could be... I don't think society is helped by big business — I don't think it's helped ... you know by ... ignorance — umm...so I s'pose education and ... being quite sort of strict with ... industry umm ... sort of in an environmental aspect I s'pose (embarrassed laugh) — I'm not wording it very well...

Some of these ideas may be idealistic, however, they illustrate the range of responses and closely relate to the core values expressed by other young people in other studies (for example, Beresford and Phillips, 1996).

Responses to the question "If you were the Prime Minister of Australia, what would you do to change things?", not surprisingly again mirrored the issues of concern that were identified and elicited acknowledgment that it might be one thing to want government to take action but quite another to actually find oneself in that position of responsibility. Thus a number commented along the following lines:

Geez ... Umm ... Well, OK, Jabiluka would stop, immediately — we'd find something else, you know ... and ... get some education about uranium and ... I would ... umm ... to be honest, I don't know what I could do differently ... I do not ... I really don't know ... you know that you're faced with so many things that you have to weigh up and balance and ... be fair to so many people and ... I really don't know — it would be a tough job and I don't think I ever want to be there.

I'd call in good advisers — people I respect — some Democrats — some idealistic people — and then some people who actually knew the business and how to go about it ... in other words I have no idea.

On the other hand, there were some interesting ideas which were captured succinctly by the respondents who simply saw the 'solution' to problems (but not the method of arriving at those solutions) and said: "I'd just try and make everyone equal"; "give a lot more say and power to Aboriginals" and "do something about all the homeless people you see around the place". Others thought carefully about what their priorities might be and showed a remarkable grasp of the complexities of the issues under discussion.

What would I do to change things? ... umm ... I would ... I would pretty much ... I would ... umm ... take money out of the things which I see as, you know, non-important ... things like ... say for example in Western Australia the Premier's bell tower that he wants to build for millions of dollars — when there's just so many things ... some of which I sort of touched on before when I said the things I was concerned about — you know, things like the forest — that's the kind of things that ... umm ... you know, you should put money into — basically, doing that — I think it's really important to do that and also put money into making sure there's employment and stuff for the people who, you know might actually lose their jobs — I mean people who work in the forestry industry they're going to lose jobs anyway once the forests have run out ...

I think ... I'd ... really push for ... umm ... for ... I'd ... I'd push for Aboriginals to get a lot of their land back, or be primary controllers of it — I'd really look at the future and say well, what's future hold — and it's not gonna be fossil fuels — it's not gonna be you know ... it's gonna be renewable resources — the whole world's gonna be run on renewable resources and I think that's a very important thing to look at because I don't want my children's children to be living in a cesspool of muck — I want them to be breathing clean air, and ... just being able to enjoy life.

Even given the often superficial and frequently negative comments in the media concerning, for example, land rights for Indigenous people, these young people were not persuaded by the scare tactics surrounding land rights and a subsequent decline in national prosperity. Nor were they oblivious to the light of forestry workers. They had formed their own opinions about what was right and fair in ways that attempted to take all sides of the argument into account. Others worried about funding for health-care and education, as well as the position of women under a conservative government and employed quite sophisticated analyses to make their point.

I'd ditch the GST, I'd increase funding for health-care to the states, so I'd increase state funding under the proviso that it went to specific areas such as health-care and government education, 'cause I do think they're major issues — and yeh, I'd basically try to move away from a market rationale that's been used to justify everything — so yeh, I'd stop using the neo-liberalist ideals to excuse or justify conservative actions — including things like with the child-care, you know, the child-care issue — they ... the Federal Government goes and says "oh well we can't afford it" — but really — I think anyway — it's a conservative thing to get women back in the home and get women out of the work-force because you know they can't afford to be in the workforce if they've got to pay so much for child-care can they?

Umm ... like I said I'd probably do a few surveys and work out where the money really does need to go and ... probably cut the wages of all the other politicians a bit ... especially when they retire — like it's just ridiculous — and like I said, put it towards people that need it — health care and ... you know ... general things like that.

So-called 'youth issues' were another area that came under scathing attack from some of the respondents. Sometimes they spoke from personal experience, at other times they drew on their general knowledge to critique government policies and spending. It is interesting to note that education was valued and seen as having a crucial role to play in producing better informed citizens, even though for some education had not been an entirely positive experience.

I think the welfare system could use a bit of work — the work-for-the-dole is a complete and utter waste of time 'cause I've done that — it teaches you nothing — it doesn't give you any skills that are useful, especially in the city.

The government spends money on like ... all the rich people like, you know — putting out land for them for houses and stuff — then you've got all the poor people that have like, nowhere to go or anything — I'd set up things for them like so — like soup kitchens and places to stay — like people that live under the bridges and that die.

I wouldn't legalise Marijuana at all...ah...maybe decriminalisation, I'd be a bit more environmental than what the others are and I'd accept the fact that the hemp plant is a bit more of an environmentally friendly option as opposed to cutting down trees, etc. etc. You can use hemp for everything, you know.

Mmm ... I'd over-fund all the schools instead of under-funding the schools — and hopefully by over-funding the schools we can get more well educated children interested in politics — in twenty years down the track we would have better politicians — doing better things — rather than the people that are doing it now doing what they are doing.

Issues of personal importance

The final question was framed in very personal terms: "Politics aside, what's important to you personally?" and consequently elicited very personal responses which showed some evidence that aspirations for the future might be linked to socio-economic status. For example, those respondents who came from more affluent backgrounds generally answered in terms of wanting things like happiness, enjoyment and sometimes included references to "making something of myself". They said:

Family — sport ... having fun ... just normal.

Enjoying life and seeing the world.

My friends — and happiness and that's it.

My girlfriend, my music and my bike.

Just being happy — having fun.

Umm ... a good standard of living ... you know — just being happy ... having a job to go to and ... nice people — stuff like that.

Making a future of my life not just being nobody — making something of my life.

On the other hand, those young people who were struggling to make ends meet, expressed more concrete aspirations that centred on simply meeting basic needs of food and shelter. Their responses are indicative of the hardships some of them have experienced and express the hope that in the future life would offer some of the things that their more privileged contemporaries took for granted. When asked what was important to them, they simply said:

To get a job.

To be safe.

A clean places to live in.

...family...I would kill for my family...I swear to God I would kill for my family...I swear to God...

Older respondents and those with more formal education tended to be more expansive and saw their personal happiness bound up with a healthy society and an orientation towards community rather than profit. These comments reflect an understanding that social inequalities exist and that despite the rhetoric, all Australians do not share in the benefits of a prosperous society.

Personally ... umm ... young people having a fair-go in this country and ... everyone having equal rights to a fair-go in this country, like...

... Umm ... basically just a good condition of living which most people have — you don't need anything more than the basic necessities which every Australian should have because we're a good country ... I understand there's a lot of people don't — but that's a bad situation — getting screwed over by banks and such as that ... to me the most important thing in Australia is just ... making sure everyone ... there isn't too big a gap between the rich and the poor.

Umm ... education ... very definitely ... umm ... belief in the public good — public benefits ... umm ... communal living and sharing basically ... you know — looking out for everybody — sure you're number one but just everybody....

Umm ... happiness ... happiness mainly — it's nice to have money — like money can help you ... like I've just gone and bought some nice presents for my girlfriend — it's her birthday tomorrow and, like, she'll probably be happy with that and like ... that's good but just like — having good experiences basically — like doing things for other people.

To be true to myself — like I've been thinking about this a lot recently — to realise that, no matter what or ... what other people will say or do ... to have a belief in my heart that I can be the best person that I can be — my friends and family are important to me ... ah ... a sense of integrity and honour ... and ... a love ... a love of everything without taking anything down.

Umm ... like if you go out today and make someone's day then that's cool ... that's important ... I think it's important for people to realise that they're worth ... realise that we're all equal ... yeh, just stuff like that ...

Certainly, these young people aspired to the basic necessities in life, as well as a degree of personal happiness but they were also able to articulate the ways in which personal happiness and 'looking out for number one' were not their sole concerns. They echo the respondent quoted earlier who was disenchanted with the political system and said: "you can do more by just looking out for the people around you — you can do a lot more that way"? In fact, the majority of respondents in this study showed a great deal of idealism about ways in which society might operate as well as concern for the well-being of humanity and the future of the planet.

Implications for citizenship education

While some survey research has suggested that young people today are cynical, pessimistic and disengaged, the Youth Partnership Study which involved a series of scenario-developed workshops showed that young Australians have a capacity for "idealism, altruism and optimism about the future that needs greater recognition and encouragement" (Eckersley, 1996, 11). Given these outcomes, Eckersley has argued that more must be done in schools to nurture the "conviction that the future is theirs to shape" (Eckersley, 1996, 17). In concert with Eckersley and on the basis of the present study's findings, I would argue that if the call for educating a more active and involved citizenry is not to dissipate into the response that "learning about politics is boring" (Phillip and Moroz, 1996, 17), then educational programs must take a different approach and begin with young people's concerns. Thus Phillip and Moroz (1996) have presented data which suggests that what is missing in citizenship education are discussions of 'rights'. They commented:

When asked what topics about politics should be taught in school, students gave a high priority to knowing the rights of citizens. This observation [...] should be noted by educators. Inspection of most Australian political and civic education teaching materials indicates an emphasis on the duties of citizens. Only rarely has attention been devoted to rights. However, a more thorough treatment of rights may assist youth more readily identify with the curriculum content. Their preferences need to be recognised in the quest for better educational outcomes.

(Phillip and Moroz, 1996, 16)

Given that the concerns expressed by the young people who participated in this present study are not entirely idiosyncratic, they could well provide a starting point for classroom discussions within the context of citizenship education. However, discussions will of themselves, not necessarily contribute to the creation of more informed and active citizens. Young people need to have their views and opinions taken seriously. They also need to feel that their voices are heard and that they can play an active part in shaping a more socially just society. At the same time they need to be taught critical literacy skills that will enable them to deconstruct media 'truths' as well as their own ideological constructions. This is not an easy task and is likely to ruffle some more conservative feathers if the responses following recent examples of student activism are any indication.

For example, during the massive walk-out by high school students in 1998 to protest the rise of Hansonist racism, editorials across the country were unanimous in their condemnation of the action: some suggested that the demonstrations were an attack on freedom speech; the NSW opposition leader was quoted as saying "I believe that student diversion from their core activity, that is, learning in schools, is something that should not be encouraged"; others suggested that the demonstrators didn't quite understand the implications of their actions and had somehow been duped and manipulated into participating (Healy, 1999, 207). More recently, following the nation-wide May Day action protesting the negative effects of a global economy, the Prime Minister John Howard commented on radio that the school-age young people who participated in the protest were "pawns in political protest" and that they "ought to be in schools, that's all they should do" (ABC Radio News, 1st May, 2001). Given this mindset, it becomes "difficult to understand why citizenship should be viewed by young people as other than something that will happen *later*" (Owen, 1996, 21). As Owen has further suggested:

This view of citizenship necessarily pushes us toward redundant pedagogies that focus on training people for future roles, rather than equipping them with skills and understandings that can and must be given expression immediately. It reduces young people to either non-citizens or, at best, apprentice-citizens. Neither status is likely to provide an appropriate starting point for learning.

(Owen, 1996, 21)

Despite the overwhelming convictions that young people should be passive recipients of schooling and not become active citizens until they were able to make more 'mature' judgements, some schools have taken the leap to address this critical gap in education and have opened up to other possibilities of 'doing' citizenship education. Thus Munter (1996) described one school which has taken young people's concerns as their starting point. This particular school developed programs that follow the nationally developed studies of society and environment statement and profile, and within that framework encouraged students to take a stand on issues of concern: to paint banners, write letters and even participate in demonstrations. One teacher commented:

Our girls are very outspoken , but we've also trained them to reason, to think and be critical ... we're teaching them that they do have the power to make a difference and if they don't speak up, nobody knows and nobody listens.

(quoted in Munter, 1996, 31)

Thus in the final analysis, it is how we run our schools, rather than what we teach in them, that will determine levels of active citizenship. As Wilson has argued:

It is hoped that when schools respond to calls to teach citizenship and democratic values to young people, they will do so by encouraging students to experience democracy, rather than just learn about democracy as an abstract concept removed from their school lives.

(Wilson, 2000, 31)

If, as I have argued young people are generally disinterested in party politics and disdainful of politicians, but are committed to a more egalitarian society, then approaches to citizenship education must address these concerns and must be included as part of the 'core activities' of schools in ways that model participatory democratic processes.

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