

## THE SUNLIT PLAINS EXTENDED:

**Young Australians talk about what it feels like to be Australian.**

by

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*And he sees the vision splendid of the sunlit plains extended*

*And at night the wond'rous glory of the everlasting stars*

Patterson: *Clancy of the Overflow*.

As no doubt many of you recall, Patterson's poem *Clancy of the Overflow* draws a comparison between conditions in the nineteenth century Australian city, in which the poem's protagonist lives and works, and the bush of which he dreams. The somewhat romanticised image of the bush that Patterson creates calls up notions of the space, autonomy and freedom available to the drover which the poet sharply contrasts with the rule-bound constraints of life in the city. This vision is charged with an emotional investment in the idea of Australia and much of nineteenth century Australian literature and art is replete with similar ideas. It appears that these images were crucial to the traditional construction of Australia - a construction of place that earlier Australians called home and to which they evidently felt a sense of affection and belonging. This paper takes up the question of people's felt response to country.

For the past five years we have been conducting studies of the ways in which Australian school children understand themselves as Australians and, relatedly, what they know about Australia as a social and political entity. Our initial motivation for this work was our disenchantment as educationalists with the curriculum package known as *Discovering Democracy* which was sent to every school in Australia in November 1998. While recognising that this curriculum development constituted a courageous response by government advisers to do something about the alarming levels of ignorance of the workings of the Australian political system that had been shown to be widespread in the general community, we were concerned that it was not based on any evidence of children's present state of knowledge. As educators we are committed to the principles of constructivist approaches to learning and in particular to the idea that new knowledge is always and inevitably constructed on the basis of what is already known. Hence our attempt to find out what primary school children do know about institutionalised systems of power. Starting from those that affect them directly, such as the family and the school, we moved to questions of governance at community level and then to the state and the country as a whole (Howard and Gill, 2000).

In the course of this research we were able to establish that children were indeed aware of systematised power although they may not have the correct words to describe the processes of government. They may not have been able to name key figures but they did understand the concept of law and the need for civic regulation. and They also showed a ready understanding of the principles of democratic practice insofar as these were enacted in their school experience. In particular we were able to show the development of children's political understanding from a fairly crude construction of power in the junior primary years to a much more sophisticated realisation of the operations of community, state and nation by

the upper years of primary school. We likened this phenomenon to that of the 'pebble in the pond' with the pattern of ever widening concentric circles representing their increasing knowledge domains (Howard and Gill, 2000).

One dimension that we did not specifically investigate but which emerged consistently in the children's responses to our inquiry was that of their affective response to the idea of being Australian in the sense of belonging to a place, whether that be community, town, state or nation. Although we did not ask explicitly 'How does it feel to be Australian?' this dimension emerged repeatedly in our analysis of the transcribed interviews and thus we were persuaded to pursue it more directly in the present study. We did not seek to investigate what our respondents had learnt about Australia in terms of a literature or an official history. Rather, our focus was on their *feelings* about the place in which they live.

We were encouraged in our endeavour by the work of Helen Haste. From a broad cross-national study of children's responses to the concept of nation, Haste has proposed that affective cognition is centrally involved in any effective civics or citizenship education program (Haste, 1987). Learning to belong thus becomes not simply a question of knowing the facts and being aware of one's rights and legal entitlements but also of *wanting to be a part* of the social organisation as a civic whole.

Despite the cliché about schooling being a project of socialisation, we still do not know if and how children become drawn in to the sense of being part of a community beyond school. Traditional schooling practice has been seen as strongly connected to the establishment and maintenance of national allegiance, national identity and patriotism (Bourdieu 1990; Connell, 1993; Feinberg, 1998). Despite this belief, the ritual practices of flag raising and anthem singing, once so characteristic of the regular school assembly, were largely unknown to the children in the present study. In light of this, it is interesting to note that in recent months there has been renewed interest in reviving these nationalist practices. The Prime Minister, along with a range of other public figures, has come out in favour of requiring children to engage more regularly in the traditional patriotic exercises (flag raising, anthem singing) in the interests of developing a stronger sense of national identity in our multicultural community. This position won favour with the Editor of the national paper:

*John Howard is on the right track when suggesting schoolchildren should sing the national anthem during regular flag raising ceremonies... It shouldn't involve saluting and needn't preclude recognition of complementary symbols such as the Aboriginal flag or Waltzing Matilda. And it can't be applied too rigidly. That's not the Australian way. But a little tempered patriotism can do a lot of good in a nation as disparate as ours.*

(The Australian editorial 26-7/10/02)

It would appear that the forces of globalisation do indeed stir a renewal of the sense of the local and the state as the same ideas have gained credence in Spain and other parts of Europe. A local example:

*I passionately agree with Education minister Brendan Nelson. Bring the flag and the national anthem back into our schools. Our children are at risk of becoming Simpsons-watching McDonalds-munching Nike-wearing Britney-singing little Aussies and we'll be owned by every other country in the world but Australia.*

(Letter to the editor. Adelaide Advertiser, 26/10/02)

Clearly, understanding a key role of schooling as instilling patriotic loyalty remains the accepted norm in some circles.

This contemporary revival of earlier conceptions of the school's role in the promotion of national identity illustrates the traditional view that national identity is something fixed and stable - something to which the new generation should be inducted. By contrast, more recent theorists are speaking of the need for a sense of the nation as an overarching entity comprising many different groups. In particular, Feinberg, from an American standpoint (albeit before September 11), has recently argued that the common school has an historic and continued mission to create a national identity in a multicultural nation (Feinberg, 1998). The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum, on the other hand, has urged that education be directed towards generating a sense of global community rather than the national allegiances which she sees as inherently divisive and counter to the realisation of a global humanity (Nussbaum, 1994). Other theorists have suggested that current society has evolved beyond the usefulness of a national identity. (Castles et al, 1988; Geertz, 1997; Lawn 2001)) Against this position, Abowitz proposes the idea of a sense of belonging to place and nation as an essential precursor to the development of a sense of common global interests (Abowitz, 2002). In effect, the project commended by Abowitz is one that synthesises the positions of Feinberg and Nussbaum. Ultimately her goal is the building of an inclusive society and an educated populace that is aware of local traditions and of cultural difference as part of one's own society or nation and at the same time carries as this developed awareness is carried through to questions of global community.

It is important to briefly discuss the role of the media in children's construction of place. The question of desire as constituted by image and popular culture has all too often been overlooked in studies of children's learning. Moreover, material that comes from the media, and in particular from television, is readily seen as oppositional to the formal knowledge associated with school. And yet there can be no doubt that Australian children watch a considerable amount of television, including the prime-time nightly news, and through this medium children are introduced to understandings about the world beyond their actual community and their own lived experience. Television thus has the potential to offer a visual realisation of the 'imagined community' that Anderson theorised as the mechanism through which people are drawn into the concept of nation and belonging (Anderson, 1983).

For the purposes of the present study we place our investigation of children's felt sense of place at the intersection of many competing forces, among which are global citizenship, patriotism, educational conservatism and attachment to local community, all of which are variously represented in the media and exposed to the children on a nightly basis.

## **The Children**

As with our earlier work (Howard and Gill, 2000, 2001, 2002; Gill and Howard, 1999) our study was conducted through small group interviews with upper primary school children. We used a semi-structured interview schedule with groups of between four and five children in a range of schools in distinctly different regions in rural South Australia. We deliberately chose rural schools because our earlier studies had involved only urban children and we wished to discover if 'being Australian' carried different meanings for rural children. We interviewed some 250 young people spread across schools in South Australia's Barossa Valley, the northern regions in the Iron Triangle, the Riverland and the farming districts of the South East. In every case the schools were initially contacted and the study was explained to the principals who were extremely supportive of the work.

With the permission of the teachers and the parents and guardians, the children engaged in discussion groups lasting around 45 minutes. The students were generally in their final year

of primary school (in SA this means year 7) and they were nearly all 12 years of age. The study has thus far included some 400 children - the original 150 from urban schools and the more recent 250 from rural locations. The rural children comprised 124 girls and 130 boys from 14 different schools. In terms of cultural mix there was a definite presence of indigenous children in the groups - one of the schools was 80% indigenous. In certain areas, such as the Riverland and the South East, the children were predominantly non-indigenous Australians whose families had farmed the area for generations. However, this was not a constant feature of these rural children. In other cases there were children from German background in the Barossa Valley and , in the Lower North market gardening districts there were significant numbers of Vietnamese children. There were 47 discussion groups altogether. All interviews had taken place before the atrocities in Bali in which some 80 Australian holidaymakers were killed in the terrorist bombings. The timing of the discussions in mid 2002 was post September 11 and post Tampa, both of which had featured frequently in the television news and were echoed in the children's responses.

All discussions were subsequently transcribed and organised for analysis using the NUD\*IST software package. No actual names of students or schools are reported in this paper. All names are pseudonyms, although the age and general region are identified. During the course of the discussions the researchers sought clarification of key terms or words that the children had used. Probes were often used to ascertain that the meaning was clear. The children were told from the outset that there were no right answers to the questions that initiated the discussions. The researchers were at pains to reiterate that their interest lay in what the students thought about the issue and that all opinions were of interest.

### **The Opening Gambit**

The discussions began with the researcher explaining to the children that the purpose of the study was to explore the notion of what it means to be Australian. Having established that most of them were familiar with the Qantas advertisement showing a group of young choristers singing the song *I Still Call Australia Home*, we described a fictional friend who had said that the advertisement always brought tears to her eyes - in effect it made her cry. The children were asked what they thought about this, how would they explain the response, what sort of feelings were involved. In this way the discussion was brought to a focus on feelings rather than concrete answers or facts and symbols. We then asked about the meanings of home, what it felt like to be going home and so on. From this point we launched into a discussion of what was good about their home territory, how they related it to the big picture of being Australian, where else in the world they would like to visit and what they would miss. The data store thus produced was rich in descriptive accounts of the children's feelings about their own place and the country to which they affirmed a sense of belonging. These accounts are organised under themes and analysed in the following pages.

### **A Prefatory Comment**

It was evident from the outset that we were not asking questions with which the children were familiar. Some explicitly said that they had never been asked to think about these things before. Our informants, though naïve, valiantly attempted to participate openly and honestly in the conversations. There was a lot of hesitation, a good deal of giggling and some shyness in volunteering some very personal and possibly hitherto unavowed feelings about their sense of place and belonging. At times key ideas were taken up sequentially by group members as they developed someone's initial insight in their own fashion. At these times the transcripts show a good deal of repetition.

In the following sections we identify particular elements or themes around which the reports of their feelings cohered. The lead question was: Can you give me two words that describe how you feel about being Australian? Perhaps unsurprisingly the children's responses were on the whole very positive with many responding in terms of *happy*, *lucky*, *fortunate*, *good* and so on. More particular responses clustered around the ideas of *safe*, *proud* and *free*. These themes were heard in over half the group discussions, although in some groups they were pursued more vigorously and for a longer time than in others. Although in many cases the discussions involved all three concepts we have separated them in this paper for the purposes of discussion.

NUD•IST enables the researcher to identify cohort effects and so we interrogated the data for gender, ethnicity and regional differences in the respondents' talk. No gender or ethnicity effects were found. Comparing the rural respondents' talk with those of our urban participants did yield some interesting differences however, and these will be explored in another paper (Gill and Howard, forthcoming)

## Safe

One might have anticipated the words *proud* and *free* to easily spring to children's minds because of their association with the national anthem *Advance Australia Fair*. The word *safe*, however occurred in over half the group responses (24 of the 47 discussion groups) and constituted something of a surprise. In these discussions *safe* emerges as absence of immediate threat or of war rather than a simple state of security or of being looked after and protected.

The children's understanding of the word *safe* often tends to be constructed in opposition to undesirable forces they describe relatively easily - fighting, famine, serial killers, muggings - most of which are perceived to be located in countries other than Australia. As Lionel, an Aboriginal boy from the Mid North and Nathan from the Barossa Valley indicate, bad things happen elsewhere:

Lionel (12): Like over in America they're having big wars and all that ... there's like serial killers in other countries too.

Nathan (12): But like in America and stuff you always hear about murders every second. I'm not sure, because I've never been there or anything, but I don't think they take it as big a deal, not nearly enough as Australia does. If one person dies and gets murdered here it's all over the news and they do everything they can. I don't think they do quite enough in other countries.

Like Nathan, John from the Riverland, believes that, compared with other countries, Australia's criminal justice system is superior in protecting citizens from such violence:

John (12): I feel safe basically because all the murderers and all those people go to jail and the jails are pretty strong and they can't get out easy...

Some of the country children felt particularly safe because of their geographic locality. Whereas many saw undesirable locations as existing in other countries, others, like Tina from the South East and Lisa from the Mid North, see the city as being the place where these undesirable things occur.

Tina (12): It's safe ...like there is good protection because Mum and Dad are in the house and you know you're safe. It's not, what if there is a war tomorrow? Or if there is a sudden attack because we are in Nankivell and we are not in a city. People are not going to say 'Let's go and get Nankivell.' There's no point really. Rather if you lived in Sydney it's a sort of target ...

Lisa (12): Australia makes me feel safe because there's no wars and most of the people are happy most of the time. And there's no real bad ... like, if you were living in the city it would be murders and drugs and drinking and stuff but here it's not.

For some children, like Josie, their sense of being safe resided in what they perceive as Australia's extreme geographical isolation:

Josie (11): Cos we are all the way on the bottom of the globe. Like we're near Antarctica.

Overwhelmingly though, the children gave as their rationale for feeling *safe* the fact that there was an absence of war and oppression in Australia - although the possibility of it in the future was recognised by some like these children from the Barossa Valley:

Hilary (11): I know that I'm safe and all the bombings and stuff are in other places ... like, it can happen here but it hasn't...

Neil (12): We 're not involved in it

Ken (12): You can feel safe when you go to bed at night you know your house isn't going to get bombed or anything.

Tom (from the Barossa Valley) and Tranh (from the Lower North) both explained their feelings of *safe* in terms of an absence of oppression, although ironically, Tom is in fact describing a (probably not so hypothetical) act of oppression in Australia :

Tom (12): You know you are not going to be taken out of your home. Say you were just like an illegal immigrant and you came here and didn't tell anybody ... you might be scared at night that somebody's going to come and tell you that you have to go. So you feel safe that's not going to happen.

Tranh (12): I feel safe because I know that if I want to go outside and play there's not going to be someone sitting there watching me and watching my every move ... and I just feel great, happy to be in such a nice country.

The theme of *safe* as intimately connected to the familiar and the known was echoed by many in these discussions and it was generally in contrast to the *other* - the unfamiliar, the dangerous. It appeared that the children's knowledge of the dangerous unsafe *other* was gleaned from television more than anywhere else.

Int: Peter, when do you get this feeling of proud, safe, happy ... in what situations?

Peter (12): Most of the time when I watch TV, or hear about when wars are going on. When the Twin Towers crashed. It's like we don't know how lucky we are because we could have easily been brought up in another family in another country and we could have been those people that were getting hurt. So mostly when I hear and watch the news.

Int: Alison you used the terms great and safe ... what d'you mean by that?

Alison (12): Great is because ... like, compared to Africa or something they don't have a lot of food and it's great to be here because there's more food. And safe ... because we are a peaceful country, not like Afghanistan or something.

For some there was also a nascent political awareness in their responses:

Int. You said safe ... what lies behind that?

Hung (11): Well we have a land already, we are happy to be here ... like, some other countries they are still fighting wars to get more land. Greed. And since we don't try and get more land, they don't try and get our land ... so we don't get attacked that much.

As noted above, we were surprised that so many of our young informants chose to tell us that feeling safe constituted one of their common responses to what it felt like to be Australian. We were also concerned that for many, this sense of being safe was mobilised as almost a way of rationalising their mistrust of unfamiliar, different ways.

At the same time it should be of concern to educators that these youngsters at times exhibited what can only be called a 'comfort zone' smugness in their sense of the superiority of their place - Australia - compared with other countries. There is surely a role for educators to seek to expand young people's knowledge of the world beyond the sensationalised

messages of the television news and to generate an awareness of other ways of doing life that are different from our own but not necessarily unacceptable.

### **Proud (Theme occurring in 34 of the 43 groups interviewed)**

This theme occurred in 38 of the 47 discussion groups. There was a fair degree of overlap between the rationale way the children explained their of feelings of *proud*, *safe* and *free*. - f For example, one of the things many children identified as an aspect of pride in Australia was our difference from other countries and their perception that Australia was anti- war and pro- peace, dimensions also evidently related to their sense of being safe here. A second strong theme emerging under the '*proud*' heading involved Australian achievements, particularly in the sporting arena. A third theme related to their perceptions of the orderliness of Australian society, for example as one child remarked 'the country works well'.

In the following excerpt, four children from the Barossa Valley combine elements of all three themes. They allude to Australia as being different from other places and Australians as different from other people because of our 'special privileges'. These include the fact that we have no war in Australia; we have many sporting achievements; we have a well-ordered society that provides a tidy environment and a good education system:

Int: How do you feel when you say I'm an Australian?

April(12): Well I feel proud to be in the country because other countries aren't like we are - kind of spoilt. And other countries don't have the things that we have.

Int: So we're a bit special?

April: Yes

Tom (12): Got special privileges.

Int: What particular privileges are you proud of?

Katie (12): Just live a normal life instead of having to go through all those wars and that.

Int: What other things are there to be proud about?

April: Well the Commonwealth Games are on now and Australia has got the most medals. We've got good swimmers and good runners.

Int: Good sport all round.

April: : Yeah. We've got good all rounders. It's a nice country, . It's not got rubbish all over the place. It's like a really nice country. It's got lots of trees and gardens.

Int: So there are open spaces.

Joanna (11): And we've got schooling where some other places haven't. We've got classrooms and they have to sit outside and do their lessons.

Int: So there are things to be grateful for as Australians? You've got it pretty good? Do you agree with that Tom?

Tom: Yes. My family sponsored a kid in Peru and mum Mum used to keep saying 'yYou are lucky you don't have to go and work from the age of five because kids over there do'. And that's one privilege we've also got. We get to do schooling instead of going to work

Australia's difference from other countries is evidenced in the following excerpt from a Mid North group - we are inventive and our well-ordered society provides us with a good health system:

Int: What makes you feel proud Alice?

Alice (12): I think things like Aussie inventions like the Hills hoist and vegemite and them things .. because I'm proud to be Australian because we can like make inventions, inventions like that.

April (12): And we've got the medicines and hospitals. Other countries don't and they have to work for the money to get their medicines.

Again, by contrasting Australia with other countries, this group from the Riverland feels pride in our well-ordered country's ability to provide good jobs and an education system:

Belinda: [I'm proud]Cos we've got good education. You can get better jobs and make more out of life.

Int: Better jobs than where?

Belinda: Than other countries where you have to be a maid or something.

Int: OK what are you proud of Philip?

Philip (12): I'm proud of the good variety of jobs and like say in countries like Africa - here you don't have to walk 14k to school and cart water home and like there some can't afford schooling.

The sense of being different and privileged - of having things that other countries don't have - comes through very clearly in many of the discussions. This forms a rationale for the feeling of pride but, we sense it is also associated with an emerging sense of social responsibility, a concept of social justice. We will see this again below and is something that could well be developed in the classroom.

The fact that Australia is not involved in war was a frequently mentioned source of pride. These Aboriginal children from a mainly Aboriginal school in the Mid North offer the no-war stance as their main reason for taking pride in their country:

Mary (Aboriginal11): : I feel proud because I'm from a country who don't have lots of wars and who aren't going through famine.

Melissa (Aboriginal12): What I reckon is that Australia is the place that doesn't fight.

Students from the South East also claim Australia's no-war status as a source of pride but their greatest sense of pride is reserved for Australia's sporting achievements:

Int: Proud, proud of what?

Jeff (12): About being an Australian.

Int: What does Australia do to make you feel proud?

Roy (12): Winning the rugby match against NZ.

Int: So sport is one thing obviously - anything else you would be proud of?

Leo (11): We don't have heaps of wars and bombers and that.

Int: OK

David: It's just one big country or continent.

Leo: Just states and that.

Jeff: Like happy people, like peacekeepers we help people and stuff like that.

Int: OK anything else you would be proud of?

Sam (12): If we won the world cup!

All: Yeah!

Tessa, an Aboriginal girl from the Iron Triangle area, refers to a sporting event in the form of the Olympic Torch relay. While she did not take an active part in the event, the symbol of Australia's sporting prowess was sufficient to induce the feeling of pride in her:

Tessa (12): I feel proud like the Olympic Games. Like when we had the torch and that come through Port Point Augusta Albert and people, like they brang it to our school.

Int: Oh right.

Tessa: I feel pride about that.

For others the sense of a well-ordered society was the principal reason for them feeling proud of being Australian. Frequently there was a moral, social justice dimension in their rationales for their feelings of pride. Keith from the Riverland expresses pride in his town's civic activity ('good things going on') - activities that he thinks make the town attractive to immigrants. It is noteworthy that Keith's idea takes the positive turn that immigrants come here because they like it rather than the more usual rationale that they come to get away from less desirable places. His logic is impeccable - the newcomers like the good society they find here and that's a reason to feel proud.

Int: Keith, you said you were proud - what's the proud bit for?

Keith (12): Because you hear of all the good things that Australia's doing. Like even little towns like Murray Bridge Rivertown, in the community there's always good things going on ... and there's always other countries coming to live here because they obviously like it ... and you just feel proud about it.

Katie is from the Barossa Valley and her pride lies in her community's capacity to encourage charity to assist those less well-off:

Katie(Barossa12): I feel proud when I see ... , say like if you have clothes that don't fit you or something you take it to the Goodwill Bin and you make like so that someone lese else can make use of them instead of just chucking them out or well just chucking them in rubbish bins.

Children from farming communities in the South East were often quite explicit about their pride in their families' capacity to feed people in distant locations. Here there is a sense of the reciprocal nature of a well-ordered society - different sectors work, in special ways, for the common good:

Steve: (south east12): You also feel proud when your crop is going well and it's ready to harvest and it's all good.

Int: Ok That is something very few city people would feel.

Sally (12): Like you feel proud when you accomplish something that you know is going to help other people in Australia.

Steve: Feeling proud if say a farmer does corn crops and you're feeding all the city and area - you feel proud for doing that.

In the following conversation among children from a small school in the Lower North (which, of all our rural research sites, was closest to the city), they reveal their understanding of the well-ordered society in what seem to be particularly urban terms. In their view, the benefits include orderly shopping, consumer goods, lower taxes and equality:

Tran (12): I'm proud because some countries you go to you see people there and they are living on the streets because of the facilities and the government but here in Australia it's more like laid out properly so you can go down to the shop and get change. We've got computers - in other countries they probably haven't even heard of television or radio.

Int: What are you proud of?

Jill (12): Proud that it's a multicultural country.

Int: That's an accomplishment isn't it?

Jill: We've got people from everywhere around the world.

Int: What else are you proud about?

Jill: Lower taxes because in the medieval times with kings and all that lower people like the serfs got charged more like they worked more than other people

Int: Anything else that people are proud about?

Nguyen (11): People are treated evenly no matter who they are.

Tranhan: You can accomplish whatever you want. If you want to be Prime Minister just go for it!

In this conversation the children also show a ready acceptance of multiculturalism possibly because like Keith earlier they understand people coming to Australia as further evidence of the good life available here. Their perception of the society operating justly and treating

everyone equally is another recurring view expressed by the children as a reason to feel pride in Australia.

## Free

(This theme a theme occurring occurred in 24 of the 47 recorded conversations. )

As with *safe*, the children's sense of feeling *free* appeared to be more to do with freedom from constraint rather than freedom to do things. Their sense of freedom in Australia is constructed around the absence of restrictions they have seen to operate in other countries. The principal indication of restriction for these children appears to be what they understand as oppressive rules surrounding Muslim dress. Once again the images on the TV news appeared to have been the source of their understanding of places in which they perceive people to be not free. Here a group from the Iron Triangle explains their concept of freedom by contrasting Australian society with Muslim society:

Int: You said free. Can you explain that?

Jo (12): Like in other places you have to wear those thingies on your head. And sometimes when they have a war you have to stay home.

Shane (12): Girls have to hide their face away.

Don (12): Yeah they're not allowed to show any of their body.

Another group from the Riverland provides another example of this view:

Int: This word free crops up a lot. Elizabeth you used it as well.

Linda (12): There is no real rules that you can't wear certain clothing.

Int: Elizabeth why did you use the term free?

Eliz (12): Because in some countries women can't go out their door without their face covered and over here they can do that.

Int: OK So all of you would say that one of the good things is that you feel free. What does that mean to you?

Leeane (12): You can do whatever you want without breaking the law.

The basic idea of freedom from oppression and/or surveillance was reiterated in a range of ways. This conversation among Iron Triangle children illustrates a number of them:

Louise (SouthEast12): You feel lucky and free. Like when you go ... I dunno ... you ride your

bike around or something and you don't have to ... like you're not worried about the army coming up and shooting you or something.

Bridie(SouthEast12): Because you have freedom to think what you think and choose if you're Christian and you can basically do what you want to do.

Int: What are you proud of, Damien?

Damian (12): Well we get ... we're practically free to do whatever we want.

Int: In what sense?

Damian: Well we can choose if we want to be Christians or Muslims.

[...]

Anna (12): It's fantastic to be an Australian 'cos you're free of mind basically to do some things that we want to do

As Anna does above, occasionally the children spoke of a sense of freedom in terms of what they can do in terms of their own desires rather than as a reaction to restraints elsewhere, :eg

Minky (11): I feel free cos after work you can go out in the warm sun and when you're by yourself and you run on the oval you feel free..

Int: OK

Minky: You feel a sign of freeness.

In this last contribution, Minky's language - 'a sign of freeness' and Anna's use of 'free of mind' convey the difficulties our young informants experienced as they tried to express themselves about what are essentially abstract issues. There can be no doubt that Minky is describing something pleasurable, a dimension that she associates with her life in Australia. Here 'free of mind' and the 'sign of freeness' are linguistic indicators of the children's efforts to put into words a concept that they are still working out.

In dealing with the idea of feeling *free* the concept of the well-ordered and equal society emerged too. Here is an excerpt from a conversation in the South East:

Tina (12): It's a free country and we respect everyone and let everyone come and join us from other countries. You can only be Australian here.

Int: Can you explain the concept of a free country to me?

Tina: There is no ...you can do what you want and we have our choices and stuff. You can make your own choices.

Int: Choices about?

Tina: Government and what to do when you grow up and stuff.

In general the children's responses were very positive to the question 'How do you feel about being Australian?'. They readily spoke of feeling *good*, feeling *lucky*. *Special* and *unique* were also common responses in terms of the particular features of Australia - usually flora and fauna that they identified as unique to this country. In selecting the concepts of *safe*, *proud* and *free* we deliberately tried to explore the abstract bases of their positive emotions. While in many cases the children offered us concrete reasons for being proud, free and safe there were some indications of principles at work too. The notions of free will, the good well-ordered society, the common good and the ideal of equity were all offered as explanations of their feelings for the country.

The children's responses were on the whole uncritical. Their acceptance of the idea of belonging to this country was unmarked by any cynicism such as we had encountered in discussions of the political system with groups of city children (Howard and Gill 2000). While some of them named places elsewhere in the world they might like to visit (quite a few nominated New Zealand as they explained it would be 'like home') there was a general assumption that Australia was and would always be their home.

### **A Note on Home.**

When asked about home the children were often very literal in their responses - home was a house, a bed, furniture, where you ate your meals. They also identified home as where your parents are, your family. At a more abstract level one child said home was 'where you memories are', responding to the idea of home rather more than the concrete objects or actual people. Feelings associated with home were expressed as *happy*, *comfortable*, *relaxed*, *relieved* and *safe*. Another theme in the responses related to their felt sense of belonging as in a sense of occupation and ownership and familiarity:

John (12) Like it's got your stuff there, not other people's stuff.

It's where I belong.

In a conversation with a group from the Riverland the following exchange was recorded:

Int: What feelings does the word home bring out in you?

Michael(12): Happy

David (11): It's where you belong.

Leah: You feel safe when you're there.

Their responses to home involved their actual physical house but also their feelings evoked by the word home and their sense of the places in which they lived. . (POSS NICE TO LIVE IN THE COUNTRY COMMENTS HERE?)

Interestingly many of the feelings the children associated with the idea of home were similar to the ones they talked about in terms of feelings about being Australian. In other words their felt responses to home mapped onto their responses to Australia in a manner not dissimilar to the phenomenon we had previously identified in terms of children's developing political awareness (Howard and Gill, 2000). The children's responses to 'being Australian' were in some ways amplified responses to the idea of home, especially in terms of being safe and free. This picture fits with Abowitz's proposition about the need for education to develop a sense of attachment to the local, the community then the state and the nation and beyond that the global community. We have again the ever-widening concentric circles as a way of picturing the development of a sense of connectedness to wider worlds.

### **Media**

While it is evident from the children's responses that the media, and in particular television and TV news plays a large role in providing them with ways of thinking about the world beyond their immediate neighbourhood, it is also likely that their responses are affected by those of parents and teachers as well. Of course adults also - and perhaps particularly adults who live in rural communities which suffer from the restricted media typical of rural Australia - rely heavily on television for their nightly dose of information about the wider world. It seems clear from our data that images that children (and probably also adults) see on news reports that feature other countries have the capacity to connect 'trouble' and 'oppression' with irrelevant issues such as 'dress'. The more different the society, the more the socio-cultural differences are seen as being undesirable. It is surely incumbent on all schools but possibly most particularly for rural schools to develop young people's understanding of different societies in ways that promote understanding and engagement rather than fear or disapproval.

### **Conclusions**

Young Australians are aware of a range of dimensions that constitute their reasons for feeling good about living in this country. They are perhaps politically naïve - they are primary children after all! - but they do orient themselves around particular themes that appear to have emerged at this point in time around world events. These dimensions offer a mix of older themes such as sporting heroes and isolationist tendencies (the joy of being far away from strife- torn countries) and newer ones such as pride in a multicultural awareness.

In speaking about their feelings they are operating in an ideal type world of hopes and wishes. The actual mechanisms of government whereby these themes might be rendered realisable appear somewhat beyond the range of responses discussed here. They do offer value-laden ideals and associate these closely with a positive vision of being Australian.

### **And Education?**

In the space created by the demise of civics curriculum it would appear that it would be useful for educators to provide some means of discussing the issues canvassed by this research. Other topics standardly covered by the primary curriculum include the Ggreen

movement Movement and Aboriginal Issues, but these appear in a moral guise about 'right and proper' behaviour rather than set within an understanding of the country as a whole. On the basis of our research we would suggest that it is important that educators recognise the link between TV images and students' perceptions. In particular, they should look at the power of the media's images of the *other* to create unbalanced perceptions in their students' minds.

Many of our informants took the view that they were better off because Australia was not beset by the ills and political strife that the TV news graphically shows them are affecting other countries. This is an understandable position - peace is always preferable to war. However, many of our participants also thought they were better off for reasons based on images of other countries that communicate cultural difference (e.g. dress codes) that presumably were also seen on the news. From an education standpoint it would be good if students were to develop a more nuanced understanding of other societies - learning more perhaps about the bases for economic inequality, about the reasons for poverty, about the history of war-torn countries, about different countries' social and cultural practices. This would seem to offer a sounder basis for becoming global citizens as well as local agents.

Just as in our earlier depiction of the pebble in the pond, we stand alongside Abowitz (2002) who seeks to combine the projects of Martha Nussbaum and Stephen Feinberg in offering a curriculum which both recognises the need for the acknowledgement and celebration of difference at the local level and the recognition of globalised effects and world diversity. Schools are to be key in this important endeavour. It is our hope that this study offers some pointers as to how to begin just such a project.

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