Paper Presented at the AARE Annual
Conference, Parramatta 2005

Power to the Students: *Eva Dobozy*
Contributing to Debates on Effective   *Edith Cowan University*
Learning about Civic Engagement

Power to the Students:
Contributing to Debates on Effective Learning about Civic Engagement

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Manuscript prepared for presentation as a fully refereed paper at the
Australian Association for Research in Education Conference, Sydney, NSW,
November 2005

Paper Code: **DOB 05053**

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss some research findings regarding the characteristics that democratic schools appear to have in common. These commonalities seem to have contributed to their status as being seen as reputable democratic schools. For the purposes of the reported study, schools that were diverse in their philosophical approaches to education and socio-economic composition were selected as case study schools. A specific selection criterion was that these schools had a reputation for nurturing the critical capabilities of students within an explicit 'citizenship framework'. Students were not seen as 'objects to be acted upon', but rather were trusted to be subjects of rights and responsibilities within the school community in some form or other.
The research included analysis of interview, observation and document data. Three major corresponding features were identified: a) the principals perceived their schools to be 'out of the ordinary', b) all four case study sites had carefully developed school rules as statements of principles rather than an extensive list of do's and don'ts, and c) three of the four schools seem to employ differential treatment practices rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the discipline of students.
The findings suggest that it is possible for schools to educate effectively in and for democracy by ways of day-to-day educational practices that inspire some aspects of political and moral student empowerment.

Introduction

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> Practices of pedagogy that work against systems of
> oppression are more, not less, needed in a world marked
> by growing global misdistribution of power and resources.
>
> Patti Lather, 1991, p. 131

Is it possible to educate tomorrow's citizens to create a more democratic society without simultaneously democratising the processes of education? How real are the experiences of students to practise the exercise of democratic decision-making at school? How are students encouraged to be active citizens of their school? It has been widely agreed that schools and teachers play an important role in preparing individuals for democratic citizenship (Kennedy, 2001; Kennedy et al., 2001, Sachs, 2001). Schools and teachers provide one of the first opportunities to introduce children to democratic principles and practices. Primary school children may be encouraged to draw on their lived experiences when grappling with ideas of constructing their personal understanding of these rather abstract concepts.

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A primary mandate of Australian education is believed to be the facilitation of students' understanding of the value of social justice and the rule of law. However, as issues of democracy and human rights are again gaining precedence, the debates about the nature and purpose of Australian education are resurfacing amongst politicians, educators and the general public. It is a sign of good health of our democratic system that various parties are renewing their focus on the future direction of society and democratic value development in Australian school children. In other words, the renewed urgency to foster democratic values in schools resurfaced in recent years as awareness increased about the general lack of democratic attitudes and understandings among Australia's youth. It also ignited the debate about the general nature and purpose of Australian education and its future direction.

In this paper I argue that there is a greater need for awareness of the close relationship between two distinct although interrelated issues: the *education for Democracy and Human Rights* on the one hand, and *Democracy and Human Rights in education* on the other hand. These interrelated concepts are referred to here as 'education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights'. Focusing attention on the unique effects of educational principles and practices (democracy and human rights *in* education) enables the facilitation of political and moral literacy (education *for* democracy and human rights) as children's experiences are more closely associated with the abstract concepts of democracy and human rights. In other words, it is not enough to teach students about the Australian political system and expected moral and political obligations of Australian citizens. Educational practices such as the canvassing of student opinions on special issues or the operation of student councils in schools need to mirror the aims of specific curricula, while simultaneously ensuring rights to freedom of expression (CRC, Article 13), rights to freedom of association

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(CRC, Article 15) or rights to freedom of participation in decisions and exercising the right to be heard (CRC, Article 12) (United Nations Centre for Human Rights, 2001).

Brief Historical Overview

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A 1994 national civics survey found that there exists a "widespread ignorance and misconception about the structure and function of Australia's system of government" (Civics Expert Group, 1994, p. 5). In the following years, the perceived lack of public understanding of democratic principles and practices has led the various Australian governments to allocate substantial monetary resources to remedy this problem. In June 1994 a Civics Expert Group (CEG) was established by the then Prime Minister Paul Keating with the aim to "recommend a non-partisan program to enable all Australians to participate more fully and effectively in the civic life of our country and thereby promote good citizenship" (Civic Expert Group, 1994, p. 2).

The report by the Civic Expert Group (CEG), which was entitled: *Whereas the people[1] ... Civics and Citizenship Education,* suggested comprehensive curriculum materials. In 1995 some $25 million was directed to support the CEG's recommendations, with the majority of funding targeted specifically for school initiatives. Further federal investments of $31.6 million over eight years were made available by the successive Howard governments to alleviate the problem of political illiteracy among young Australians. In 1998 a comprehensive civics and citizenship education programme called *Discovering Democracy (DD)* was launched that was based on the CEG's findings and recommendations. This new curriculum programme was seen as the answer to the problem of 'civic apathy' and a general lack of democratic attitudes and understandings amongst Australia's youth (Civics Expert Group, 1994). The renewed desire of the Australian government to motivate students

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[1] These are the beginning words of the Australian constitution, acknowledging the democratic basis of the Australian governmental system.

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to learn and understand the history and operation of the Australian democratic system of government and law is understandable and highly commendable (The Commonwealth of Australia, 1999).

Although there seems to be widespread agreement on the value of democratic education (Civic Expert Group, 1994; Commonwealth of Australia, 1998a, Kennedy et al. 2001), what a democratic education is and what strategies may preferably be used to facilitate the teaching and learning of democratic citizenship seems far from clear. Geoff Clayton, a primary school teacher, contends:

> Call it what you will – 'discovering democracy', 'active citizenship' or 'civics and citizenship education' – the fact of the matter is that in a lot of schools this area of study has not been actively addressed for some years. So how do we motivate students to learn about it, and teachers to include it in an already crowded curriculum? The answer to this question is compounded for many teachers because their students feel isolated from the democratic system of Australia. (1999, p. 11)

Despite the current Federal Government's generous funding of more than 31 million dollars for a national civics and citizenship education program, recent research (The Erebus Consulting Group, 1999; Kennedy et. al, 2001) has shown that its effects may not have been as dramatic as anticipated. It may be time for a sea change. Schools are unable to educate tomorrow's citizens adequately in acquiring necessary attitudes and skills to function successfully and to appreciate our democratic system of government without simultaneously democratising schools themselves. Experiencing democracy and human rights in their schools on a sustainable basis, in a variety of situations and on a number of levels (whole school and classroom) may enable students more effectively to learn to value the meaning and advantages of the rule of law and open and fair decision-making processes within and outside school contexts than a new curriculum program that has not been received as enthusiastically by teachers as initially envisioned. Learning about civic engagement entails an understanding of the nature and purpose of this engagement.

Thus, the focus of the reported study was on students' experiences of democracy in their day-to-day school life. My aim was to investigate in depth the

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issue of what might constitute a democratic education both at a philosophical level and through empirical research.

The research question of my project was as follows:

> How is the goal of educating students to be responsible citizens through democratic school practices achieved at a whole school level and a classroom level in schools that are noted as places of explicit democratic practice?

There are some apparent limitations of the reported study. Given the relatively small sample size of the study, causal inferences cannot be drawn. There may be a number of public and private schools in Western Australia and elsewhere that employ explicit democratic educational principles and practices that were not part of this study but would have been able to provide valuable case examples. A follow-up study that is based on a random sample of local schools will be needed to confirm some of the findings of this study.

The Search for Democratic Schools
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Learning about democratic civic life and political engagement does not occur only in formal civics and citizenship education classes where students are invited to think about the relevance of concepts such as democracy and human rights. I content that, instead of 'role-playing' parliamentary sittings and political decision-making on an abstract and often detached level, political engagement and civic learning can effectively be achieved through democratic educational practices in schools that model democratic attitudes. This means that a school's contexts and culture must be taken into consideration when proposing educational change. Educational innovations, such as the national initiative *Discovering Democracy* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999)*,* which is a comprehensive program complete with multi-media resources, are unable to take the social organisation of specific schools and the everyday life of individual students and teachers into consideration.

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It is within this framework that this research project considered the role of education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights in Western Australia. By focusing on schools in which a democratic pedagogy is preferred, the study investigated the effectiveness of their educational practices for the learning of civic engagement. Reflecting on and practising democratic attitudes, understandings and skills regularly in a number of different contexts will enhance the level of moral and political literacy in students. The study explored some aspects of democratic pedagogy that highlight the interconnectedness of the learning of engaged citizenship and everyday school and classroom pedagogy. It also analysed the significant similarities and differences that exist in school sites that were identified as places of explicit democratic practice. For this reason, the over-riding concern when selecting target schools was to choose those that were practising 'active citizenship', in the sense that their students seem to have opportunities to practices civic rights and freedoms as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Articles 12, 13 and 15) and thus are given some form of agency. Looking at the potential effect of pedagogy on the development of civic proficiency and democratic values is important, especially in the light of growing 'civic apathy' among young Australians.

The Selection Process
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For purposes of the study, schools that had a reputation as places of explicit democratic educational practices, which valued diversity and that were diverse in their philosophical approaches to education and socio-economic composition were selected as 'model democratic schools'. The specific selection criterion was that these schools had a reputation for nurturing the critical capabilities of students within an explicit 'citizenship framework', where students were not seen as 'objects to be acted upon', but rather were trusted to be subjects of rights and responsibilities within the school community as set out in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

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Social Class and School's SES Scores

The Howard government recognises that the socio-economic status of Australians is largely dependent on occupation and educational qualifications inasmuch as its market power is based. In 1999 the Australian government introduced the 'SES index' (Kemp, 1999), which is a new approach to assessing a school's socio-economic status (SES). The SES index is used to establish the level of Commonwealth education funding per student and took effect in 2001 (Kemp, 1999). It assessed students' SES by connecting their addresses with current Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data. The SES score of a school is established by indexing household income, education and occupation of parents and ranges from 85 to 130. Studies undertaken by the Australian Council of Education Research (ACER) confirm the correlation between postal code, occupation and education dimensions of parents (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). The lower the school's SES rating, the less well educated and affluent is the parent base at a particular school. Equally, the higher a school's SES score, the better educated and more affluent is its parent base. Table 1 summarises the differing characteristics of the four case study schools.

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Table 1: Participating Case Study Schools

School	Name*	Location	Type	Size	Social Class	SES Score
School A	Abernethy Primary School	underprivileged area of Perth	government school	small to medium, app. 260 students	working class (mainly unskilled labour or unemployed)	85
School B	Bolton Country School	country school, app. 200 km inland from Perth	government school	medium, app. 500 students	marginal middle class (mainly manual occupations)	97
School C**	Crystal Montessori School	well-to-do area of Perth	private and independent school	small, app. 130 students	affluent middle class (non-manual occupations, mainly middle managerial positions)	110
School D	Deanmoor Independent School	affluent area of Perth	private and independent school	small, no more than 100 students	elite class (mainly upper managerial positions)	124

*   All names of schools and persons are pseudonyms.

School A, Abernethy Primary School, is a small government school located in an underprivileged area of Perth, Western Australia that is marked by high unemployment, a large ethnic community and related social problems. School B, Bolton Country School, is a medium-sized, government school located approximately 200 km east of Perth, the capital city of Western Australia, with an SES score of 97. School C, Crystal Montessori School, is a small independent school located on the edge of a light industrial area of Perth, Western Australia. The parents are from a diverse ethnic background, relatively affluent and well educated. The school's SES score of 110 reflects this fact. School D, Deanmoor Independent School, is a small independent school located in one of the most affluent areas of Perth, Western Australia and the parents are mainly professionals, politicians and foreign business people. The school is "*rated as the second most affluent school in Western Australia with an SES scores of 124*" explains Debbi, principal of the school (Principal-Interview, 13.11.2000, School D).

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Despite their philosophical and socio-economic differences, all the sites are known to be schools of explicit democratic practice. They present themselves as strong cultural settings that appear to be successful in cultivating a culture in which students, parents and teachers feel that their basic human rights are respected and they are able to voice their concerns. Although it goes without saying that there exist stark differences among the educational practices of the four investigated schools, nevertheless I was able to find some common characteristics that are shared among the schools. Moreover, the findings also suggest that there exists a relationship among social class, more democratic educational practices and students' ability to learn effectively about civic engagement and thus to increase significantly their proficiency rate of political (and moral) literacy. The finding about the interrelationship between economic wealth and capacity for civic engagement within the researched schools further problematises the status quo. This study contributes to the number of recent studies (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000; Lloyd and Turale, 2001; Singh, Nicolson, & Exley, 2001) that are able to further our understanding of the processes of social and cultural reproduction in contemporary Australian primary schools overall. In that context, the identification of common features among this diverse group of schools is a significant finding and warrants explicit discussion.

The School Cultures in Comparison
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Similarities

All four model schools were perceived to be open and friendly. They were generally lively, bustling places. The five principals' comments to two main interview questions are summarised in the following Table.

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Table 2:   Principal's Comments in Comparison

	Question: *If you had to describe this school to a new child, what would you tell her/him about it?*	Question: *What about the rules, what are children allowed or not allowed to do?*
School A	A multicultural school. The right of reply. Some participation in resolving issues.	School code of behaviour.
School B	Very friendly, very caring	A charter of rights.
School C* – P1	Very friendly. The teachers are called by their first name.	Four basic ideas.
School C* – P2	Very friendly. Children's classroom.	Organic.
School D	They will like it.	A code of behaviour. There are only four rules.

*This school employed two principals (outgoing and incoming) during the course of the study. Both agreed to take part in the study and thus there are 5 principals overall taking part in the study.

In the exploration of the responses of these five principals to two central questions pertaining to day-to-day educational principles and practices, it became apparent that there are striking similarities as well as differences between the way these schools are portrayed by the principals and how student bodies and minds seem to be governed. Although there are identifiable differences, at this point, I am particularly interested in sharing the similarities among the four case schools as they pertain to the schools' cultural attributes and philosophical approaches.

Based on interview, observation and official school document data, I identified *three major corresponding features* at the four case schools. Firstly, the principals perceive their schools to be *no 'ordinary' school* as they see their schools to be distinctively different from traditional schools. Secondly, all four sites have carefully developed school rules as statements of principles rather than an extensive list of do's and don'ts. School rules as *statements of principles* are thus kept to a small number, usually to no more than four rules. Thirdly, three of the four schools seem to

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employ *differential treatment practices* rather than a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to the discipline of students.

No 'Ordinary' School

All five principals perceive their schools to be distinctively different from traditional schooling. Therefore, they seem to view themselves as an exceptional educational environment that cannot be compared to 'ordinary' schools. These principals generally perceived their schools to be friendly and caring places where "children are important" (School C), "have a right to reply" (School A) and are respected as individuals with their personal histories and needs. These schools seem to be concerned *"always [to] look for the deeper aspects of the child and what is going on there, because there is always depth and each case is different"*, explains Cathy (Principal Interview, 27.02.2001, School C).

What seems to make these schools different in the eyes of the principals is a particular focus on children's rights to dignity, authority figures' accessibility and children's rights to participate in decision-making processes. As a consequence of promoting children's rights to dignity and fair treatment, the two public schools (School A and School B) have engaged in the process of seriously reviewing student behaviour policies operating at their schools and have made some major adjustments to the rules in their schools. For example, the 'resolution room' was scraped in School A and the 'school bell' was abandoned in School B. Further, all four case schools seem to have developed specific ways to increase students' awareness of the significance of 'rules' that inform the regulation of people's conduct within a community. Rules, as technologies of internal and external control, are vital to a functioning democratic community to uphold social order and ensure equality of rights and opportunity among the student body. Therefore, the development of a gradual understanding in students of the functioning of the schools' rules to enable the protection of people's rights was seen to be high on the agenda of the

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participating principals. A particular aim was to focus on underlying values that find expression in school rules. The study found that, within the four case schools, there was a high regard for rules as functioning technologies that informed the vision of a democratically organised school community which does not necessarily mirror the social injustices of society or the local community. This was illustrated particularly well in School A, where a central aim of the principal was to models an internal social order where social justice is enforced, individual responsibility expected and basic human rights respected and protected.

In summary, the principals of the four schools seem to share the view that school rules although often used to uphold hierarchies of control and surveillance are valued differently in their respective schools. In the four case study schools, school rules are important. They are seen and communicated as positive social technologies that structure daily school life in a way that is conducive to either the formation (as in Schools A and B) and/or the preservation (as in Schools C and D) of a democratic social order within the four case schools where teachers and students can feel safe and know that their rights and dignity are respected.

Statements of Principles

All the four case schools seem to have deliberately developed a small number of school rules as statements of principles that inform democratic order. These are used as guidelines to inform 'respectful conduct' which are seen as more effective than traditional school rules that are more often than not drawn out lists of rules that are to be followed by everybody equally and are relicts of the Enlightenment and the factory model of schooling. As Betty (School B), Debbie (School D), and Cathy (School C) note:

Betty: We sought to be realistic. There [are] a lot of things that comes under
              "respect". So our rule is that everyone is having respect for each other ... a
              very big part of a teacher program is [to] be descriptive about what respect
              means" (Principal interview, 23.11.2000, School B).

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Debbie: We keep it [school rules] down to simple ideas ... so that the children start out with a simple understanding of the concept and then develop a more complex one as they go through [school] (Principal interview, 13.11.2000, School D).

Cathy: The whole notion of rules – they are not allowed to hurt other people and they are not allowed to be disrespectful of other people. ... "We don't like what you do, but we like you anyway" – you know, those sorts of comments to help other children ... to see that they could be empowering in helping someone to resolve something (Principal interview, 27.02.2001, School C).

These examples illustrate that these three principals believe that learning interpersonal concepts, such as 'respect', 'tolerance' and 'equal rights', is a slow and complex process. First, the children need to develop an understanding of what 'respectful conduct' might mean and that requires time, adequate modelling, practice and maturity. Further, these principals believe that the developmental process of understanding and acting respectfully may not be supported with an extensive list of do's and don'ts. Rather, as stated above, students in these case schools are invited to reflect on their beliefs and actions and gradually develop understandings of the ethical dimensions of purposeful and respectful conduct that connects the rights of others with their personal responsibilities.

Differential Treatment of Students

The schools' philosophical approaches, which can loosely be described as social constructivist and child-centred, allow the employment of socialising practices which are child and context dependent. Thus differential treatment of students and situations are common practice. Four of the five participating principals mentioned the significance of differential treatment for the benefit of all students. Alex (School A) observes: *"Everyone is different ... I state that upfront to the child and the parents and that gets around this discipline issue where kids aren't treated the same. So that's day one, it's made very clear to them that we treat students in different ways"* (Principal Interview, 14.11.2000, School A). Similarly, Carl (School C) explains that the children are not treated the same and *"we say that upfront"* (Principal Interview, 7.08.2000) to all the children at the school. Alex (School A), Debbie (School D) and

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Cathy (School C) provided explicit examples that are worth re-visiting here to illustrate the significance of these situations for the teaching and learning of democracy and human rights. Alex mentions an incident where he would hesitate to suspend a child for breaking a window, if this child would be an Aboriginal or Vietnamese student. Although, the students may have had different reasons for their violence, as in the case of the Vietnamese student, the anger may be a cause of something that occurred at the school, whereas, in the case of the Aboriginal student, the anger may often not have anything to do with the school. Instead of 'simple rule following' and thus suspending a child for a grave infringement of school rules, Alex explained that he would wait until the child *"cools down and then work out what the issue is"*. Alex's explanation and reaction can be compared to a point made by Debbie in the rubber-throwing incident. Instead of punishing a student who kept throwing rubbers around the classroom to annoy the teacher and his fellow students, Debbi, the principal, decided to choose a different path and enquire about the needs of this student. Both of these principals are interested primarily in the student's welfare and attempt to act in a way that takes the best interest of the child a primary consideration (Article 3 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child). Rather than focus on punitive measures and act with anger such as: *"You know that you don't throw rubbers in school",* the teacher asked: *"What is happening for you when you throw the rubber around the classroom?."* This question resulted in a lengthy discussion about the emotional upset felt by the student about some issues at home. Debbie (School D), as well as Alex (School A), strives to find the cause of unacceptable and antisocial behaviour. Debbie illustrates this by asking: *"Wait a minute, what's the problem?"*, while Alex explains:

> *Suspending an Aboriginal child for smashing the window when it's a big issue at home ... means sending them home again to the situation that's made them angry in the first place. So I wouldn't suspend them". (Principal-Interview, 14.11.2001, School A)*

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In much the same way, Debbie contends: *"So you're basically asking them for the reasons that they are doing something wrong and as often as possible the teacher will then negotiate what they should do" (Principal Interview, 13.11.2000, School D).* Hence, both principals seem to agree that focusing on punitive measures and, for example, suspending the Aboriginal child or punishing the rubber-throwing student would not be in the best interest of that child. These principals seem to share the view that punishing "punishable" or antisocial behaviour may not necessarily aid in the development of safer and more considered behaviour on the part of both students.

Likewise, Cathy (School C) relates a story where a child kept stealing stationery materials from other children. Rather than punishing the student, Cathy explained that she was committed to finding out what the cause of this unusual behaviour was. "*We recognised that this was his way of saying: 'Hey, I'm really stuck. Something is going on in my life that I really don't like' and then we would be able to help him deal with that"* (27.02.2001), Cathy explained. These principals acknowledge that their practices are open to contestation, as Alex notes: *"I know that this causes problems as far as consistency but you know..."* (14.11.2000). Nevertheless, they believe that these are practices that aid the personal development of these students. Hence, Cathy concludes that the experience of the stationery-stealing student: "*was empowering for him ... so it will help him personally"* (27.02.2000).

The examples provided in this paper illustrate that these principals do not advocate that children's misbehaviour should not be punished; rather they exemplify serious attempts that illustrate the shifting perceptions of children as bearers of rights and the corresponding responsibilities of adults to acknowledge this view of children and to adjust outdated principles and educational practices. The participating principals display an understanding of the status of children that recognises

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children's rights and dignity. Except for Betty, (School B), the principals note that the children's personal contexts should be considered when trying to resolve the issue at hand and they seem to display a certainty that a 'one-size-fits-all' rule-bound approach to, or the consequential punishment (such as suspension) of disrespectful behaviours displayed in the above examples would not necessarily be in the best interest of the student and may even exacerbate the problem. Considering the children's background and history, the principals devised different strategies to aid students' awareness of their responsibilities towards themselves and others in a democratically organised community.

Other children were undoubtedly affected to varying degrees by the above-mentioned incidents (window-smashing, rubber-throwing, stationery-stealing) as they may have felt anguish and resentment towards the non-rule-abiding children who seem to disrupt the social order of the school and who may not even have to face equal consequential treatment. *"It's a two-way thing. I didn't want [the offending child] to feel that he was a victim. ... Ownership without pointing fingers"* (27.02.2001) was Cathy's and the other principals' central aim. A precondition for a school community as a functioning democracy is a solid understanding that students as citizens with rights and responsibilities constitute a situated source of agency.

Changed Child-Image

Some of the commonalities among these four very different sites were identified that seem to have contributed to their status as being reputable democratic schools. The identification of common features among this diverse group of schools is a significant finding. The identified similarity is important in validating the hypothesis that everyday educational principles and practices that model democratic attitudes and skills are effective ways of teaching and learning democracy and human rights. One feature that is shared among the four schools is their view of themselves as being 'out of the ordinary' schools. They see themselves as

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progressive educational institutions where children's dignity is acknowledged. They share in the belief that in their respective schools children's rights are observed to a greater extent than is commonly understood to be the case in comparative educational settings. To this extent, the principals have used their leadership position in all the four case study sites to reflect on governance issues within their schools. The re-evaluation of school rules and discipline procedures which at some of the schools resulted in the initiation of substantial adjustments, particularly in the two government schools (School A and School B) is a reflection of the principal's child-image. This changed child-image, where students are not primarily seen as objects of control and correction but instead as subjects of rights and responsibilities, is shared among all the five participating principals. This finding is central to an understanding of the importance of education *in* and *for* democracy and human rights as the value of democracy and human rights can only effectively be taught, if it is genuinely experienced.

By granting students greater participation rights, they are not primarily perceived as objects of care and protection but instead are recognised as social and political subjects with rights and responsibilities. Concluding from an analysis of the data, it seems that all five participating principals from the four case schools share a similar child-image and genuinely believe that the students in their schools are enfranchised. This finding suggests that these schools seem to embrace the notion of greater student participation in decision-making processes, as there no longer seems a need to exclude students from formal power. Further, these principals seem to believe that it is precisely this changed conception of children as social agents that sets them apart from other schools and makes them friendlier places. The changed conception of children enables the granting of participation rights to students in the ways that it is practised in their schools. In other words, these principals seem to argue that the ways in which adults in these schools behave in relation to children, is

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what makes these schools special and friendlier places as children's experiences are seemingly validated and the children are received with a respectfulness that is traditionally denied to them. Moreover, these principals seem convinced that their investment in the development of a micro-cosmos of democracy, as practised in their schools, has overall positive effects for both the school culture and the individual student. They report that the educational implications of these democratic experiences and non-traditional policies and practices generally enhance communication, lower behavioural problems and lead to the development of social and political empowerment of students.

Understanding Social Justice and Fairness

The principals from three of the four sites have purposely decided to mention to a prospective new student that the school is not necessarily treating all students equally but rather as individuals with special needs and would take their personal backgrounds and developmental stages into account. Another theme that emerges from the analysis of the commonalities shared among the four schools is that a progressive, liberal, child development model of education is underlying all the school's policy guidelines. In this way, students' right to self-determination and participation in political processes at the whole school and the classroom level seems dependent on their age and cognitive/emotional development.

All the same, these findings point out that even young students are encouraged to think through their understandings of social justice and fairness. The teaching and learning through lived experiences seem prioritised as students' social realities are presented at three of the four schools as unique, complex and ambiguous and as warranting differential consideration and actions. Why should it be fair that this non-Caucasian girl or boy does not seem to be treated the same way as I am? This and similar questions may be fostering impressions that unequal powers in society do exist and are played out on a daily basis within and outside school

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contexts. Ethnic, class, sex, age and other forms of group dominance are not natural but rather social constructs, which need to be interrogated, confronted and challenged. The struggle for equality of individual and collective rights, of access and opportunity as a liberal democratic ideal needs to be kept alive through local practices as exemplified in these case schools which inform the development of attitudes, values and processes that are vital to a socially just and responsive community.

Conclusion: The Move from Rhetoric to Reality
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This study suggested that it is possible for schools to educate effectively *in* and *for* democracy by ways of day-to-day educational practices that inspire some aspects of political and moral empowerment. Instead of simply implementing compulsory new civics and citizenship, human rights or multicultural education programs, schools might start questioning what consensus there is in the local community/society on the idea of basic human rights for all. What is meant by the notions of 'democracy' and 'human rights' what do we understand as the 'basic' human rights of school children? What are the attitudes and abilities that are thought of when we talk of human rights? Clarification of these issues would further people's capacity for meaningful cooperation both to promote what is agreed upon and to pursue dialogue on issues of difference. Such processes can be highly empowering, especially for the underprivileged and marginalised.

It is not enough for (school) children to have internationally agreed upon basic human rights; students have a right to know that they have such rights and educators have a duty to ensure that students are adequately informed about their basic human rights inside and outside of school contexts. There are choices to be made and it is up to the individual person to act according to moral principles and to encourage those in power to do the same. This paper is a testimony to a growing effort in the struggle

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towards the democratisation of schools and the development of the 'good' citizen.

Social change efforts remain well within the grasp of individual schools. Democracy

and human rights in contemporary Australian education is then not just a dream to be

enjoyed but a vision to be pursued.

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