

SUBMISSION 57

From: Richard Lenn
Sent: Friday, 2 June 2006 5:19 PM
To: Committee, EM (REPS)
Subject: submission for the "Inquiry into civics and electoral education" Enquiry

Good day,

My name is Richard Lenn, I am currently 29 and reside in Sydney. I have been involved in the children, youth and community services field for over a decade and this year have started a Primary Education degree at university.

In this submission, I briefly look at the overall themes of the Enquiry, as well as looking a suggested path forward.

I would first like to briefly discuss the opening statements of the terms of Enquiry. To understand what you are trying to achieve with this enquiry, you first need to look at the broader picture. Electoral education is simply one small part of a much wider issue.

“A healthy democracy needs citizens who are **informed** ...[of] the various elements of our representative democracy.”

Informed of what? In terms of this enquiry, how to vote in an election? It's easy; you rock up to the polling place, get your name crossed off a list and tick some boxes, based on whatever information you might know or beliefs you might have. I suspect most young people know this; that is a not a difficult thing to teach. Maybe the reason for this enquiry is because this approach isn't working; yet through my experiences and understandings, that is much of the outcome of formal electoral education, along with a basic knowledge of “how things are”.

Being truly informed (and in turn able to understand) the “various elements of our representative democracy” is a much wider discussion than the one aspect of voting in an election.

“A healthy democracy needs citizens who ...**appreciate** ...the various elements of our representative democracy.”

I am not comfortable with using the word “appreciate” so broadly. Is simply turning up to a ballot box once every four years and ticking some boxes, showing appreciation that you live in a “representative democracy”?

What about going out to protest about environmental or education issues every month; is that appreciation? What about people of all ages who lodge a protest vote when voting; is that sending some kind of message? There is very little genuine recognition given to any young or new voices in broader society; when this does happen it is often very tokenistic or simply cast aside.

Appreciation is a process where you come to understand the importance, relevance and perhaps uniqueness of something. It's something that you feel that you connect to and understand, not simply something that is just there.

“A healthy democracy needs citizens who ... **participate in** the various elements of our representative democracy.”

Again, in terms of this enquiry, participation comes under the umbrella of voting. This is a right that anyone under 18 doesn't even have. It's very difficult to get across an educational message, when you can't act upon it.

More than just voting, young people participate in a new and far wider range of activities that fall under “representative democracy”. This is not really understood or given any validity by current political leaders.

As above, is going out to protest about environmental or education issues every month, not participation in a healthy democracy? What about people of all ages who lodge a protest vote when voting; is that sending some kind of message? A vast number of young people are disconnected from the traditional political system and voting is just one part of an overall picture.

There is a much greater need for new and various types of participation to be recognised; signifying a mature and tolerant society.

Just because something exists, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's understood. Without understanding the reasoning behind young people and their involvement in a wider democratic society, you will be having this enquiry again in another decade.

To the second sentence.

“Civics education, including electoral education, is a key part of this goal and helps to ensure that citizens are adequately informed and able to participate effectively.”

Yes, electoral education plays a key role in helping young people learning about their society. But again, is teaching someone to vote really ensuring that “citizens are adequately informed and able to participate effectively”? And informed about what; voting or a democratic society?

Students are taught throughout school and from a young age the importance of voting, but in all reality this is not something they can actually do until they have left school. The connection is just so strained by the time they leave high school.

Similarly, civics education often simply reinforces the reality of knowing the current processes of voting and parliament, rather than a deeper understanding of the wider role of people and their participation in society.

For a school setting, what is a path forward? How could we restart “civic and citizen education” and make it more relevant, practical and useful for young people?

Let's for a moment, put aside all our current programs on civic education, values education, electoral education and look at a something much simpler, more comprehensive and more overarching - human rights.

Human rights allow us to look at entire themes of humanity, education, children, etc. and it can all be both subtly and directly inserted into any teachings at school.

In terms of school aged children, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child is most relevant; Australia being a signatory. The principles governing the Convention on the Rights of the Child include:

- **Universality and non-discrimination**
All children regardless of race, colour, sex, disability, language, religion, political or other opinion, or national or social origin should have access to the rights outlined.
- **Best interests of the child**
Decisions are made with an awareness of their impact on children and recognising the increasing ability of children (under 18 years) to be independent.
- **Indivisibility and interdependence of children's rights**
The CRC is seen as a total package - all children should have access to all the rights outlined.
- **Accountability**
An international committee reviews the regular reports that governments submit outlining their progress towards improving the access of children to their rights.

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The themes covered by the Convention:

- **Survival**
All children have the right to life through the provision of basic needs - water, food, shelter and health care.
- **Development**
All children should be able to grow to their full potential through quality education, leisure and play, cultural activities, access to information, freedom of thought and religion, and freedom from discrimination.
- **Protection from harmful influences, abuse and exploitation**
All children should be safeguarded against all forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation, and are entitled to live in a safe and caring environment. Children need protection in armed conflict, within the justice system, from situations such as child labour, and from the sale and trafficking of individuals. Special care is necessary for girls, children with a disability and refugees
- **Participation fully in family, cultural and social life**
All children should have the right to express their views freely on all matters affecting them by taking an active role in their families, communities and nations. This encompasses the freedom to express opinions, to have a say in

matters affecting their own lives, to join associations and to assemble peacefully.

The more we know about rights, the more we are able to ensure that everyone has access to them.

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Katerina Frantzi notes in her work, <http://ehlt.flinders.edu.au/education/iej/articles/v5n1/Frantzi/paper.pdf>, that “Human rights education is important for the existence of human society in the modern globalising era. Education can function as a unifying factor and produce informed and active citizens of an interdependent world. It can provide the tools for advocacy and resolution of conflict that are necessary for the maintenance of peace between nations and people.”

Continuing on, Katerina says that “Human rights education is an effective mean to educate children from a very young age to develop respect for self, for other people and humanity, appreciation of diversity, valuing of freedom, equality, and justice, determination, intelligent inquiry and a critical independent mind for reflective citizenship, upon global, moral, civic, and multicultural concerns; all of which compose the basis of a democratic society and humane citizenry.”

According to Eva Dobozy, <http://www.lib.murdoch.edu.au/adt/browse/view/adt-MU20050310.92906>, “...there is a widespread acceptance of the need for democratic education also referred to as civics and citizenship education. The perceived lack of public understanding of democratic principles and practices has, in the last decade, led various Australian governments to commit significant resources (\$ 31.6 million) to civics and citizenship education programmes such as Discovering Democracy (DD).”

Eva goes on to argue “... that political engagement and civic learning is most effective when schools commit themselves to deliberately embedding a set of democratic educational principles in everyday practices ... in contrast to traditional approaches to citizenship education that tend to focus on the operational aspects of representative governments, institutions and history...”

Perhaps one of the most useful guides I have come across is the “Human Rights Education Series” from the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. They can be found in the lower section of <http://www.ohchr.org/english/about/publications/training.htm>. One particular section to point out is “ABC - Teaching Human Rights: Practical activities for primary and secondary schools”.

These documents are a comprehensive, easy to use and understand view of exploring human rights in an educational setting. It notes that “Ideally, a human rights culture should be built into the whole curriculum (yet in practice, particularly at secondary level, it is usually treated piecemeal, as part of the established curriculum in the social and economic sciences and the humanities).” They call for “A sustainable (in the long term), comprehensive and effective national strategy for infusing human rights

education into educational systems...” Please refer to these documents for far more fascinating insights.

Within a much broader human rights framework of learning and understanding, the importance and necessity of voting can easily be slotted into an older child’s democratic understandings.

Thankyou for your consideration.

Richard Lenn