

BELONGING, BEING AND BECOMING ACTIVE CITIZENS

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Abstract

One of the long-term goals of the mandated early childhood curriculum document *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework* [EYLF] (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2009) is to incite independent learners who will contribute to the development of their country. A vision of this framework is that “all children have the best start in life to create a better future for themselves and for the nation” (p. 5). This statement of intent aligns with the underlying aim of the Civics and Citizenship learning area of the Humanities and Social Sciences [HASS] learning area situated within the mandated Australian Curriculum for years F-10 (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA], 2017). Civics and Citizenship encourages students to value their *belonging* to a diverse society and to positively contribute locally, nationally and globally (ACARA, 2017). This paper will explore the direct association of these two curricula by explicitly analysing the two documents from an integrated perspective. A discussion follows on how the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and Civics and Citizenship (ACARA, 2014) can be referenced simultaneously to achieve both the short term and the long-term goal of producing informed, active, citizens in accordance with Goal Two of the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young People [Melbourne Declaration] (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs [MCEETYA], 2008).

Keywords: Active Citizenship, Curriculum, Early Years, Being; Belonging, Becoming.

1. Introduction

The concept of placing the ongoing health and future survival of Australian democracy in the hands of five-year olds is somewhat daunting, but, in essence, that is what early childhood educators in settings across the nation are required to do. Current early childhood curriculum documents expect that teachers offer young children opportunities to engage with such concepts. The informing document of this mandated curriculum is the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008) which places young people at its centre. Its underpinning belief states that through the improvement of educational outcomes for young people, Australia’s social and economic capital will prosper and this improvement will empower these young citizens to live “fulfilling, productive and responsible lives” (p. 7). Specifically, Goal Two of the Melbourne Declaration states the ambition that “All young Australians become successful learners, confident and creative individuals, [and] active and informed citizens” (MCEETYA, 2008, p.7). This goal clearly links with outcomes from both the EYLF and the Civics and Citizenship learning area of the Australian Curriculum.

It seems a natural fit to encourage very young children to investigate their world whilst teaching them how to be involved in the decision making and laws of that world (Kemple, 2016). Educators can work towards equipping young children with the skills and knowledge to be active participants in their communities; however the challenge is to ensure that the interpretation of these documents encourages and provides opportunities for young children

to be able to accrue essential knowledge and skills through appropriate practice across the schooling sectors. Guiding frameworks need to accommodate and reflect the vast and swift developmental changes experienced by children in early childhood (Santrock, 2014). The EYLF and Civics and Citizenship curricula, guided by the Melbourne Declaration (2008) support this concept development.

This is a discussion about the importance of encouraging very young children to belong, to be and to become 'informed and active citizens'. In particular, it will demonstrate the relationships between Outcome Two of the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) and the Civics and Citizenship learning area of the Australian Curriculum; as informed by Goal Two of the Melbourne Declaration (MCEETYA, 2008).

2. Definitions

The Melbourne Declaration

The Melbourne Declaration (2008) was designed to prepare students for the 21st century. It was deemed that in order for young people to successfully take advantage of opportunities and be able to face challenges confidently, students will require the knowledge, skills and values to compete in the global economy (MCEETYA 2008). The Melbourne Declaration, acknowledges that improving educational outcomes is central to the “nation’s social and economic prosperity and will position young people to live fulfilling, productive and responsible lives” (MCEETYA, 2008, p. 7-8). The document is based on two goals; Goal One, Australian schooling promotes equity and excellence; and Goal two, all young Australians become, successful learners, confident and creative individuals and active and informed citizens. This paper is mainly concerned with Goal Two, predominantly how young Australians become *active and informed citizens*.

Civics and Citizenship

Civics and citizenship education involves the teaching of political systems and legal responsibilities. The definition also encompasses concepts of social and global citizenship and tackles the issues of equity, human rights and social justice (Reynolds, 2014). Civics is the knowledge and understanding of civic institutions and process which includes the understanding of key concepts relating to processes in Australian democracy, law, national identity, diversity, cohesion and social justice (Reynolds, 2009 p.77). Civics and citizenship encourages children to:

1. know about the formal operations of government
2. know and have the skills to influence events in their school and in the wider community
3. value diversity
4. value and make use of the opportunities provided by democratic processes in their school and classroom (Reynolds, 2009, p.75).

Active citizens

Australia’s constitution demands that young Australians from the age of 18 are registered to vote and voting is compulsory in all Australian states and territories. Federal government and functioning elements of Australian democracy ensure that adults are active citizens, at least in respect to voting (Ailwood, et al., 2011). In children prior to voting age, active citizenship can refer to being a member of a family, class, year level, school, group or community. It requires being involved in democracy and decision-making at all levels. Active citizenship can be one of the most important steps towards a strong and functioning society (Nosko & Szegar 2013). Active citizenship is what citizens do to improve the life experiences of themselves and others. It allows children to develop critical self-awareness in terms of inclusion and understanding diversity (Cipolle, 2010). This includes contributions to social justice and human rights through the actions they take to make a difference in their communities (Passport to democracy, 2015).

The EYLF in relation to civics and citizenship

The aim of the EYLF is to enrich children's lives from birth to five years and through the transition into school (DEEWR, 2009, p.5). This document was developed to assist educators in providing opportunities for children to have the best start in life and contribute to a better life for themselves and their nation. The EYLF is encompassed by three main elements; belonging, being and becoming. The underlying components of these elements are learning outcomes, principles and practices. These mechanisms are designed to assist educators in the practical implementation of equipping young children with the skills to become more efficient learners and engage in their communities. There are five outcomes present in the EYLF. This paper is concerned with Outcome Two: Children are connected with and contribute to their world (DEEWR,2009). This outcome encourages a relationship between very young children and the communities in which they live.

The Civics and Citizenship Learning Area of the Australian Curriculum

The aim of the Australian Civics and Citizenship curriculum is to encourage students to become active citizens who participate in and sustain Australia's democracy. It investigates how Australian citizens choose their level of government and how democracy is protected by vesting people with civic rights and responsibilities; and examines how individuals and groups can influence civic life (ACARA, 2017). The curriculum aims to empower students to have an effect on their communities and to be active political members of their country.

The curriculum recognises that Australia is a secular nation with a multicultural and multi-faith society; thus it promotes the development of inclusivity by developing students' understanding of broader values such as respect, civility, equity, justice and responsibility. This document recognises that to be effective active citizens, students must be cognisant of Australia's diversity and be active in ensuring tolerance and acceptance for all (ACARA, 2017).

3. Literature Review

Connecting the Early Years Learning Framework and the Australian Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship Learning Area

The EYLF (DEEWR, 2009) is a framework developed to support informed curriculum decisions; however, it is not a curriculum in itself. A vision for the education of young children from birth to five, its underpinning principles, practices and learning expectations are expressed as outcomes; and it focuses on learner dispositions, learning processes, and attitudes and values. Educators and children co-construct curriculum relevant to children's experience (DEEWR, 2009, p. 11).By providing environments and facilitating intentional teaching experiences in which children learn to live inter-dependently, educators assist children's connectedness with their world and enable students to value individual ways of *belonging*. This in turn assists children to learn ways of *being* which develops in time to deeper understandings of the "values, traditions and practices" of families and communities (DEEWR, p. 25). This then encourages the development within children of positive dispositions or "enduring habits of mind and action" (Carr, 2001). Dispositions such as empathy, optimism, perseverance and confidence in new situations shown in the here and now are strong foundations from which pre-school children can *be* and *become* 'active and informed citizens'.

The Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2017) is the mandated curriculum document developed to standardise children's progression in schools across Australia. Less of a framework and more of a traditional syllabus in many ways, it is divided into learning areas with specific strands encompassing aims, knowledge, skills and values.

Each of these documents has a similar mission to engender engagement, positive learning habits, creative thought, and confident active and informed citizens.

Within the Australian Curriculum, students are empowered, through explicit teaching experiences, to develop general capabilities which are similar to the learner dispositions espoused in the EYLF (DEEWR, 2009); in the Civics and Citizenship learning area, these general capabilities are: personal and social capability, ethical understanding, and intercultural understanding (ACARA, 2017). Personal and social capability is demonstrated when children develop awareness of themselves and others, and when they manage their relationships and learning more effectively. Further demonstration of this capability involves children recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others, establishing positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams and handling challenging situations constructively. In Outcome Two of the EYLF, children are presented with experiences and opportunities which will allow for the development of a sense of belonging and community. Through experience and project-based learning, they learn about the rights and responsibilities of active community participation (EYLF, 2009, p.26). The general capability of ethical understanding enables students to build a strong ethical outlook that helps students develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others. In Civics and Citizenship, children are exposed to ethical concepts such as equality, perspectives, respect and fairness, which are the foundations of Australia's democracy. The general capability of intercultural understanding is gained as children develop an appreciation of their own and others' cultures, languages and beliefs; and an understanding of how identities diversity and mutual respect are shaped. Similarly, in pre-school settings, Outcome Two the EYLF asks educators to look for examples of children demonstrating respectful responses to diversity. In primary school classes, students explore the consequences of particular decisions, examine shared beliefs and values which support Australian democracy, and explore the rights and responsibilities of citizenship; all of which are built upon the strong foundation laid in pre-school settings through the EYLF.

Both Outcome Two of the EYLF and the Civics and Citizen learning area of the Australian Curriculum encourage and facilitate the development of the notion of young children *belonging* to communities, actively *being* participants within groups and *becoming* more 'active and informed citizens' through explicit teaching of these concepts. Both documents align with each other in that the Civics and Citizenship learning area further develops the EYLF's Outcome Two; expressly that "children are connected with and contribute to their world" (DEEWR, 2009, p. 25). The broad learning outcomes of the EYLF clearly present a strong base for the development of the general capabilities outlined as essential learning dispositions in the Civics and Citizenship learning area; for example: Outcome Two of the EYLF provides a critical foundation for the development of the general capabilities of 'Personal and social competence', 'Ethical behaviour' and 'Intercultural understanding' (ACARA, 2009). Through intentional teaching, responsiveness and respect for diversity, (EYLF,2009, p. 13) early childhood educators can assist students to understand that children: have a right to belong to many communities (p. 26); that they are entitled to express opinions about matters which affect them; and that they broaden their understanding of the world in which they live (p.26). Teachers in later years can build on these complex concepts through the Civics and Citizenship learning area which aims to ensure learners develop an enduring sense of belonging and affiliation with civic life as active and informed citizens'; students who can demonstrate, through specific learning opportunities, appropriate capacities and dispositions required to be active in communities at a local, regional and global level (ACARA, 2017).One of the fundamental ideas underpinning the EYLF is the notion that young children are regarded as being and existing in the 'here and now' and that their current experiences and views are valued for and of themselves. While the EYLF expresses that learning and development at each stage form the foundation for the next stage, young children are not regarded as pupae or blueprints for potential future humans. The title of the document *Belonging, Being, Becoming* gives a clue as to the interconnectedness of each stage and the importance placed on valuing each stage

of children's life experiences be they in the past, present or future. Early childhood educators view children as very capable and constructors of their own experience and early years pedagogy is deliberate, intentional and holistic. Children are empowered to exit pre-school settings with a sense of identity and purpose; and particularly regarding Outcome Two, they are given many opportunities to be self-determining, to experience diversity and to show empathy. However, once they enter primary school, they are not formally offered these opportunities until Year Three as a Civics and Citizenship curriculum for Foundation to Year Two has not been developed. Thus, the challenge for teachers in the transitional years (F-2) is to assist children retain the understandings and practices of active citizenship they developed in Kindergarten.

4. Implications for Practitioners

Given that each of the three mandated documents which guide Australian pedagogical practice from 0-Year 10 emphasise the critical importance of empowering children to become 'active and informed citizens', it is interesting to note that over the transition years from pre-school to primary school, there is no formal provision for this to be taught. It is at this stage of child development that educators have a window of opportunity to nurture values such as empathy and notions of identity and connection (Santrock, 2014). Transition year teachers should develop opportunities to assist children to retain the understandings of civics and citizenship they have gained in pre-school settings. Educators need to value the experiences and learnings which have previously occurred across all settings (family, community and pre-school/care); acknowledging that children transitioning to primary school have rich and varied lives and have been considered as powerful protagonists of their own experience (DEEWR, 2009). Children should not have to relinquish this accomplishment as they 'begin' school. Connecting mandated learning experiences from the Australian Curriculum to children's life out of school will assist connections and maximise engagement and will assist with the retention of socio-cultural understandings developed in pre-school settings.

Continuing on the work begun by early childhood educators, teachers of F-2 need to create and nurture strong reciprocal relationships with families in order to facilitate a continuance of understandings of community and culture.

By providing inquiry/project based learning opportunities for F-2 children with a focus on enduring global and local understandings, teachers will be able to integrate ideas from the civics and citizenship strand into everyday learning experiences despite no formal provision being made in the curriculum.

Collaboration across the sectors of early year education is essential. It would be beneficial if educators teaching in years F-2 and those in pre-school settings are enabled by leaders and policy makers to form collaborative networks in which they can share information about child capability and knowledge. Although educators' pedagogies across these years are mandated by two different documents and are informed by changing stages of child development, collaboration with professional local networks, families and communities will assist teachers to develop essential practice in regards to providing opportunities for children to express their citizenship.

Conclusion

In pre-schools across Australia, five year old children are taught that their active participation in communities is essential and valuable. They are respected as constructors of their worlds and are appreciated as active protagonists whose voices and opinions on matters which affect them have a right to be heard and acted upon. These children then transition to primary schools at which there is no formal curriculum provision in foundation to year two for the continuation of this understanding and they must wait until year three to reacquaint themselves about their roles, rights and responsibilities as Australian citizens. It is essential that this critical learning pathway be continued and that children be recognised and valued as 'active and informed citizens' across the educational settings. There is a clear

connection between the EYLF Outcome Two which guides early childhood education and the Civics and Citizenship learning area of the Australian Curriculum which informs education from Years F-10. There is a large body of extant literature that outlines the benefits and importance of considering very young children as ‘active and informed citizens’. Literature supports the inclusion of a civics and citizenship curriculum in the beginning years of primary school. The EYLF and the Australian Curriculum are based on the aspirations of the Melbourne Declaration (2008) which mandated that all children be given the opportunity to be ‘active and informed citizens’. As such, the key recommendation from this paper is that the knowledge, skills and understandings begun in pre-schools should continue and be built upon in foundation to year two classes.



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