How has the teaching of civics and citizenship in the 5/6 classroom changed in the last 20 years?

“Citizenship education gives students an understanding of why and how society works” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 137). Reynolds (2012) argues citizenship education should be at the centre of “educational endeavours”, conveying how to be a “valued and productive citizen” (p. 137). Citizenship education encourages students to learn about Australia’s democracy, values, cultures and a relationship with their country in connection with ‘communication and harmonious living within their community’ (Reynolds, 2012, p. 27).

This paper delves into the discussion of the Primary SOSE student within today’s society in relation to Citizenship Education. It discusses its importance, effective teaching and learning strategies, resources and will reflect on how far citizenship education has come in the last twenty years.

In the 1990’s it was said that many students were ‘ignorant about politics and government processes and well as their roles as a citizen’ (Print & Gray, 2000, p. 5; Krinks, 1999, p. 1).

Centenary of Federation was looming, many educators, politicians and government bodies felt it necessary to revisit Civics and Citizenship education. This also drew attention to their concern for students as they didn’t know a lot about citizenship and the government (Print & Gray, 2000, p. 5; Tucci, Mitchell & Goddard cited in Gilbert & Hoepper, 2011, p. 10).

In 1994 the Federal Government established the Civics Expert Group (CEG), who reported issues of concern facing educators, government, politicians and the lack of support and knowledge of this from the ‘wider community’. Australia’s reflection upon the changing international scene contributed to the concern for civics and citizenship education (Print & Gray, 2000, p. 5). Media awareness, political opinions, Indigenous peoples addressing issues of identity and the public debate of changing Australia to a republic further raised concern (Print & Gray, 2000, p. 6; Krinks, 1999, p. 1; Landis, 2012, p. 1).

Several reports were conducted and the Federal Government concluded that something must be changed within the educational system to include Civics and Citizenship education. “Discovering Democracy” was born in 1997 which provided teachers with educational resources, professional
development opportunities and an outline of what and how to teach Citizenship education. However with a change of government this outline was put on hold for fourteen months and funding was cut short, resulting in the slow change within schools (Print & Gray, 2000, p. 6).

Walsh and Black (2011) argue that schools ten years ago were “imperfect models of democracy” and that little improvement occurred over a four year period (p. 73).

Walsh and Black (2011) argue that today little has changed since that period, as students remain unmotivated to learn about civics and citizenship. They highlight that “we are still waiting for signs that conditions will be different”, as “young people remain excluded from participation” (p. 73).

The Victorian Assessment and Reporting Authority, VCAA (2014) argues in 2014 the curriculum provides students with the “knowledge, skills and opportunities to understand and practise what it means to be a citizen in a democracy” (p. 20). Students in today’s society require knowledge and understandings of “civic institutions, skills and willingness to participate within society, knowledge of political and legal systems and processes and the history that underpins them”. Students need to be able to identify and understand their rights and responsibilities and be taught the “democratic values” and “principles” so that they can make “informed decisions” (VCAA, 2014, p. 20).

The effective teaching of SOSE and in particular civics and citizenship has been at the centre point of arguments for many educators over the last twenty years. Many have argued that there is already a heavily crowded curriculum, and that much of it needs to be integrated into other disciplines throughout the year to save time and to effectively teach everything in the curriculum (Reynolds, 2012, p. 262, 20; Gilbert & Hoepper, 2011, p. 14; Marsh, 2010, pp. 11, 13).

The Australian Curriculum Reporting Authority, ACARA (2012) states effective teaching of civics and citizenship takes place in many forms, teaching inside and outside of the classroom. Walsh and Black (2011) argue that SOSE needs to be taught in a democratic way, through “inquiry based constructivist approaches”, where students are at the centre of decision making, connect to student lives and communities (p. 76).
Experiential learning takes place externally to the classroom in the form of “community activities, parliamentary education programs, civic institution visits and electoral commission programs” (p. 6). They also argue that civics and citizenship needs to be integrated into the whole school approach, as they can prepare the students from the beginning of school, aided with classroom and whole school activities to form deep connections with becoming an active citizen (ACARA, 2012, p. 6; Holdsworth, England, Carson, Stokes & Tyler, 2000, p. 10; Walsh & Black, 2011, p. 76).

Providing teachers with variety and the opportunities to connect with the local community, the curriculum suggests to use a “context approach” as it “will assist in linking Civics and Citizenship learning with other learning areas and subjects but requires rigorous consideration of essential content and appropriate contexts” (ACARA, 2012, p 9; Walsh & Black, 2011, p. 76).

The Principles of Learning and Teaching (POLT) offer guidance to teachers to highlight good practise within the classroom (Reynolds, 2012, p. 32). Five POLT guidelines are united within the teaching of SOSE and civics and citizenship (Reynolds, 2012, p. 32). The promotion of independence and interdependence comes through investigation and research used to study the different topics associated with civics and citizenship. Student backgrounds and perspectives are highlighted through the study of different values and beliefs, and through inquiry projects based on a variety of topics. Students will be challenged and supported to develop deeper thinking through the learning and teaching of all aspects of civics and citizenship. Assessment practises are linked to all aspects of the curriculum including SOSE and civics and citizenship to inform the teacher and student where they are and what they need to work on. The sixth POLT guideline links in with SOSE and civics and citizenship as a variety of learning can occur outside of the classroom and based on real life situations (Reynolds, 2012, p. 32).

The Discovering Democracy document has been used widely in schools since its creation in 1997. Research suggests when the document is used it can be “quite successful”, as it has a strong focus on the civics aspects of citizenship education. It provides teachers with resources for students to grasp an
“understanding of the historical background to government, government processes” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 143).


The advancement of computers and the internet in the last twenty years has made the teaching of SOSE more effective as teachers are more up to date with the “wider world” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 272). ICT has allowed for advancement in the SOSE student today as the curriculum offers the “ability to critically evaluate large amounts of information, critical inquiry skills, reflection, accessibility to quality resources, collaboration, simulations, interaction, and for communication skills” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 272; VCAA, 2014). Students also have opportunities to “develop social skills, problem solving, cultural interaction, and provide a range of motivating activities” (Reynolds, 2012, p. 213).

SOSE teachers have begun to take an inquiry based approach within their lessons as it allows the students to become active in their learning and form more meaningful links (Reynolds, 2012, p. 33; Walsh & Black, 2011, p. 76; Marsh, 2010, pp. 11, 13). SOSE is an active engagement with the world in which we live, through inquiry based activities students are able to ‘locate, organise and analyse evidence, evaluate, synthesise and report conclusions they have made’ (Reynolds, 2012, p. 67; Walsh & Black, 2011, p.76; VCAA, 2014).

The changes to citizenship education have advanced in the last five to ten years, as the curriculum now highlights its importance to teachers (VCAA, 2014). Integration is the best way to teach SOSE within the primary setting (Walsh & Black, 2011, p. 76). Walsh and Black (2011) argue that if you ‘provide an environment where students have the opportunity to participate in democratic decision making processes, identify values, reflect on experiences from inside and out of the classroom,
opportunities to debate social and political issues and engage in arenas of participation students can
enjoy “presence, power and agency” and will most likely to flourish in their learning of civics and
citizenship and on into the future (Walsh & Black, 2011, p. 76).
References

Australian Assessment and Reporting Authority [ACARA]. (2012). The Shape of the Curriculum: Civics and Citizenship. ACARA: Sydney, NSW.


