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COMBATING CRISIS AND DESPAIR

Voice, choice, and agency for active, resilient citizenship

Fiona Longmuir

Introduction

Understanding the nature of citizenship goals within school settings is influenced by whether one believes that children and young people are capable of acting as citizens within a community or rather that they should be learning about citizenship in preparation for a future role (Smith, 2015). This distinction determines if students are passive recipients of knowledge and wisdom imparted by experienced citizens (i.e., the adults around them) or if they are active agents that have valuable knowledge, ideas, and perspectives that can contribute to the social good. Evolving notions of childhood have seen a cultural shift that espouses the active view, but in many ways, traditions and customs in combination with social and economic arrangements constrain to the passive view. This tension is evident in school settings but an emerging focus on student voice has strengthen the view of students as active and knowledgeable participants in their own lives and the communities around them.

In pursuing an active stance, through the positioning of children and young people as capable citizens, this chapter argues that there are many benefits to individual and communal wellbeing if students engage in settings that amplify their voices, choices, and agency so that they might engage in increasing complex and demanding societies in productive and resilient ways. After considering some ways that education falls short of meeting the citizenship needs of a liberal democratic society, student voice will be explored to show potential for enhanced citizenship both for now and the future.

Citizenship is a complex construct that encompasses geographic, social, and cultural components that shape an individuals' interactions within communities and nations. Theorisations of citizenship consider the rights and entitlements of individuals based on the location of their birth or their residence along

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with social participation responsibilities (for example as required in laws and regulations) and voluntary actions that individuals engage in through a sense of obligation to their communities and/or more altruistic desires (Coady, 2015). Expressions of citizenship are varied but successful societies rely on the active participation and productive interaction of individuals. Although normatively constructed, there are those whose who are seen as more active than others and therefore nominally more beneficial to collective goals. This chapter is less interested in debating definitions of inclusion and exclusion criteria (such as age, gender, and race) as it is with how a disposition to behave and interact in a more active and involved "citizen-like" way might be developed. As well this chapter suggests that advancing student voice in schools is an avenue for the improvement of schooling experiences in order that students may engage in an education where they feel a sense of belonging and are empowered to influence their own and others experiences.

An exemplary citizen

Many nations have developed ways to identify and value desired expressions of citizenship. Awards and acknowledgements take many forms but share a purpose to advance understanding of the desired enactments of national citizenship. In Australia, the annual Australian of the Year Award is such an acknowledgement. It aims to highlight exemplary citizenship and is bestowed upon an individual whose contributions to the nation have been significant in the year prior, as well as throughout their lives. Selection criteria include that the awardee be a role model for the Australian community (National Australia Day Council, 2021) suggesting that the awardee represents ideals of citizenship. Commissioner Shane Fitzsimmons was an Australian of the Year finalist for the year of 2020. The following examination of Commissioner Fitzsimmons' exemplary citizenship serves two purposes for this chapter. The first is as a demonstration of both active and resilient citizenship during crisis as Shane's significant contribution was in leading the emergency services during the catastrophic bushfire season that ravaged much of Australia over the summer of 2019–2020. The second reason is that Shane's story offers provocations around the place of education in the development of such citizenship dispositions as he is a self-confessed failure of the schooling system.

The 2019–2020 bushfires were experienced as an unprecedented crisis in Australia. The fires impacted over 17 million hectares of land (an area equivalent to the size of Florida, USA, and 70% of the land area of the United Kingdom) and the smoke haze blanketed most of the eastern part of the country. Shane is credited with leading the response that protected over 15,000 homes and saved many hundreds of lives. He was widely acknowledged for his commitment, compassion, and leadership throughout the crisis. In a media interview, he described his orientations to community and citizenship, "Absolutely I am driven by trying to make a difference for everybody. Everybody who goes out

and volunteers does extraordinary work for their community and deserves to go home to their families" (Australian Broadcasting Corporation [ABC], 2020). In the same interview, Shane described his childhood and adolescence as "troubled" due to domestic violence and family breakdown. He was described by teachers, family, and friends as "difficult in school," "aimless," "disengaged" and "likely to end up in prison" (ABC, 2020). With little interest in, or success at school Shane joined his local volunteer fire brigade at the age of 15. He described it as a place where he belonged and felt empowered,

> I was a bit troubled but found in my teenage years joining up the volunteer fire service gave me a sense of *belonging*. There was a lot of mentoring. There were people to give you a clip around the ears when you were being a bit too cheeky or doing the wrong thing. But you were also *empowered* with some really serious and important things to do and deliver on. I am confident that I am better for it. I could have certainly gone down a different path and ended up right off the rails.
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> *(emphasis added) (ABC, 2020)*

From starting as a volunteer at the age of 15 to being among the awardees of country's highest citizenship honour, Shane's story shows how the connection, community, belonging, and opportunities to feel empowered and valued, were crucial to his exemplary citizenship in later life. Shane's story further highlights that, these important experiences are not always found in schools.

Crisis, young people, and unproductive citizenship

During the same year of the devastating bushfire crisis when Shane displayed his award-winning citizenship, many young people across Australia were reported to be struggling with feelings of despair and despondency (Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, 2020). The year 2020 saw more turbulence across the globe than has been experienced in living memory. However, crises and turbulence in economic, environmental, social, and political spheres are not new. Stories and images of environmental catastrophe, political unrest, and social disharmony are regularly in the consciousness of global citizens thanks to the immediacy of modern media (Petrie et al., 2020). The liberal democratic foundations of the global order which have generally been stable since the early 20th century have shown signs of fragility and deterioration that for most people seemed unthinkable prior to recent years (Mounk, 2018; Riddle & Apple, 2019). Young people are affected by the arrangements of their societies in a variety of ways and often more susceptible to the impacts of disruption and instability than other generations. For example, youth employment rates are the first to fall during economically difficult times (Walsh, 2016). It is understandable then that young people might believe their future to be precarious and that many suffer from a resulting sense of despondency and despair (Walsh & Gleeson, 2021).

Preparing children for productive citizenship is a crucial purpose of schools. For example, in Australia, education systems should be guided by the national education goal which includes that "All young Australians become… active and informed members of the community" (Education Council, 2019). In reality, achievement of this goal is challenging. Many young people move to adulthood having had negative interactions with schoolsand their educational experiences have not supported them to become active and resilient citizens in ways that support liberal democratic values. Disconnects between experiences that students see as valuable and purposeful and those that they are experiencing are occurring for a complex variety of reasons. One well documented influence on contemporary education arrangements is the pressure of neo-liberal policy settings (Reid, 2019). In many ways these have perverted the espoused democratic citizenship purposes to make education increasingly focused on narrow, competitive, measurable objectives (Schostak, 2020; Sellar & Lingard, 2018). A further and interrelated factor that contributes to disenfranchisement is the undemocratic, hierarchical, often authoritarian relational structures between young people and adults (Reimer & Longmuir, 2021). Schools are pervaded by arrangements that are designed to control. Many of these are historical legacies that have proven difficult to dismantle, except in the most progressive and experimental of settings (Longmuir, 2019; Tyack & Tobin, 1994).

In considering goals of democratic citizenship, the dynamics of power and agency between students and adults, and the systemic arrangements that moderate them are rarely consciously reviewed or considered by those busily working in educational environments. Teachers, school leaders, and parents report the impacts that modern schooling demands have on students (Heffernan et al., 2019), but considering how dysfunctions of power and agency impact on engaging young people as citizens in their schools and for the future requires deeper attention. Although it is beyond the scope of this chapter to deeply analyse and consider the breadth of outcomes of school experiences in terms of citizenship, there are indications that concern is warranted. I will highlight two specific areas here and reflect on their troubling presence as damaging to liberal democratic citizenship.

The first is the rise of mental health concerns for young people. Mental health is of course complex and challenging and there is no suggestion that schools are solely responsible for the epidemic of the past decades (Twenge et al., 2019) which has been further exacerbated by the crises of 2020 (Headspace, 2020; Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, 2020). However, it is clear that schools can be sites that mitigate or exacerbate the feelings of stress, anxiety, and despair that are increasingly common as young people engage with the social, political, environmental, and health crises in their lives. Schools where relationships, belonging, and emotional safety are prioritised are known to support the resilience and coping capacities of young people (Allen, 2020; Waters et al., 2021). Young people who develop into socially and emotionally resilient adults are likely to engage in productive citizenship (O'Connor et al., 2011).

The second area of concern is the increase in social and political polarisation (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Riddle & Heffernan, 2018) with extremist groups and anti-democratic movements attracting the attention of young people at alarming levels. We have seen the influence of, in particular, alt-"right" groups, become more visible and more destructive in recent times. For example, in the "storming of the capital" on January 6, 2021, in the USA, and in Australia, the blatant and aggressive gathering of a white supremist group in the Victorian regional town of Halls Gap over the 2021 Australia Day weekend. Young people that are attracted to such groups are recent graduates of our schooling systems and it is concerning that they are finding fellowship with groups that are counter to liberal democratic ideals.

Although this section has highlighted negative outcomes of young people's political and social motivations, there are many positive instances of actions and movements that are strengthened by the involvement of young people. The question for education and other youth focused organisations, is how positive citizenship is encouraged.

Student voice research

In the discussion to follow, I will draw from two research projects that have considered how student voice was related to the development of active and resilient citizens within the education settings.

Project 1—was a case study of a school with a commitment to student voice in their journey of improvement. The school is a public secondary school in a suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. Following a period of decline in performance and enrolments, the school was recommended for closure before new and innovative student voice approaches were implemented which contributed to the re-building and improvement the school. The participants in this study included students, parents, teachers, and leaders. Data were collected through interviews with these participants and observations of school activities (for more information see: Longmuir, 2017; Longmuir, 2019).

Project 2—was a case study of ways that student voice contributed to the leadership of an alternative education setting in an outer suburb of Melbourne, Victoria. The alternative education program catered for students who had left local mainstream secondary schools after being disenfranchised by the traditional arrangements and practices. In this setting, students' voices were integral to the personalised approaches that drew them back to learning and reconnected them to community. Data were collected through interviews with students, teachers, social workers, and leaders and observations of school activities (for more information see: Reimer & Longmuir, 2021).

Common to these two projects was a focus on understanding how students contributed to their own learning experiences, and more broadly how their agency and influence shaped the arrangements of their settings. The following sections discuss how a focus on student voice, choice, and agency enhanced the

belonging and empowerment that elevated students' participation as active and engaged citizens within their school communities.

Amplified student voice

In 1989, the United Nations developed the Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) enshrining the rights of children and young people to express their opinions on matters that affect them and to have these opinions considered (United Nations, 1989). Following the UNCRC, attention to student voice has grown in popularity in the field of education (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2019). The term "student voice" is somewhat ambiguous (Graham et al., 2018) with notions, such as student agency, student participation, student choice, student empowerment, and student leadership all falling within a broad conceptual umbrella (Longmuir, 2020). For the purpose of this discussion I will use the term "student voice" to cover particularly the notions of the right to be heard, as well as have choice in, and agency over, experiences. This conceptualisation of student voice adopts the view that the enhanced position and influence of students within their learning environments is a democratising practice (Finneran et al., 2021) and has potential to transform the educative experiences of individuals in the present and to enhance democratic dispositions and capabilities for individuals and communities in the future.

Across the two cases, it was evident that there were particular arrangements and practices that supported students to have greater contribution and agency in the ways that they interacted with their education. Students had significant levels of control over their learning experiences through individualised programs that were driven by student interest and choice. "It's very individualised so there's no set thing you have to do or don't have to do. You get a say in everything." (Student, Alternative Setting). Boundaries of age-based grade levels were blurred and students were supported to access subject choices that met their learning needs. Further, there were opportunities for students to go beyond the curriculum that was offered. Students co-created learning, and often co-taught. At the secondary school, students were employed by the school whenever there was a suitable role. This student's explanation of these arrangements illustrates how meaningful they were,

> We get to teach other people. We get to be tutors and we get to do work in the school. It's really different to a traditional school where only teacher teach you. We get to cooperate with other year levels, see them, have classes with them, get to know their experiences. All those little things… make it a great experience…knowing that the school supports you in what you want to do its really great. It's a big advantage.
>
> *(Student, Secondary school)*

In both settings, student voice extended out of the classrooms in ways that were inclusive. Leadership and management processes were open and transparent to

students and they were invited to contribute to the growth and improvement of the schools. Students were included in decision-making committees and processes such as staff appointments, and were consulted in broad and inclusive ways about changes.

Belonging

In a meta-analysis, Allen et al. (2018) suggest that school belonging has been most consistently defined as "the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 70). Along with benefits, such as increasing school completion, positive academic attitudes and achievement, and reducing absenteeism and misconduct, psychosocial outcomes were also strongly associated with school belonging. These included higher levels of happiness and self-esteem and reduced incidence of emotional distress and disruptive behaviour (Allen et al., 2018). Further, the meta-analysis found that school belonging facilitated successful transition to adulthood. One project (O'Connor et al., 2011) found that students' sense of belonging at school "significantly related to social competence, life satisfaction, trusting others in the community, trust in authority and taking on civic responsibilities" (Allen et al., 2018, p. 3).

In modern times, notions of community have moved away from concrete connection to place and more are considered as "a sense of belonging to a shared reality, creation of spaces where individuals can recognize themselves and define shared goals in order to become an active audience" (Pulcini, 2010). The range of tangible spaces where personal relationships develop into community have diminished with social and technological developments. The institution of the "school" remains one of the few stable, concrete social sites where "people from diverse backgrounds are forced to negotiate with each other and are sometimes enabled to transcend cultural boundaries" (Ho, 2011, p. 604). This amplifies the stakes for schools in terms of providing opportunity for deep and meaningful connection where students feel that they belong and that they have a meaningful role within that social space. Schooling experiences are significantly preparatory for citizenship.

In the research sites belonging was important to the connection that students felt with the school community. Sentiments such as "I've always loved it here, it's very communal. It's more like a second home. It's supportive, it's engaging and it's very individualized" (Student, Secondary school) capture the comfort and safety that students felt. Connections were facilitated by relationships and a sense of being welcome to express their voices, "I feel safe at this school which I never did at other schools. And you feel that you can say what is on your mind without being instantly being shot down. They listen to what you have to say" (Student, Alternative setting). Arrangements that dismantled boundaries between different groups in the settings were also appreciated by students as contributing to their feelings of belonging and connection, "We get to call the teachers by their first name and I think that helps you feel more comfortable. It

is sort of a symbolic thing, helping you feel like you have got more of a connection" (Student, Secondary school).

Enhancing positive experiences of schools as community spaces where students feel that they belong and that they are valued is a focus of a wide range of wellbeing and social skills programs. The crucial part of these initiatives is always relationships and connection.

Empowerment

Ideas of student empowerment have been entangled with notions of student voice in the recent policy and practice focuses within education. As the UNCRC (1989) indicated, not only do student have the right to be heard, that is to speak and be to listened to, but they also have the right to have their opinions considered. This suggests that children and young people should have influence on the arrangements and practices that shape their experiences. In interaction with belonging, my research suggests that the empowerment of students in school settings has the potential to not only to support active citizenship but also the potential to inform improved practices of schooling through attention to the novel and insightful ideas of those who are most intimately effected by the success or failure of current arrangements (Gurr et al., 2020; Longmuir, 2017, 2019, 2020). This recognises that students are expert informants on their own lives and experiences and are capable of positive collaborative action for the benefit of the school.

Empowerment of students by its essence it demands attention to the power relationships that exist between young people and adults in school communities. When student voice extends beyond the walls of the classroom to the arrangements and structures of their school, the agency, and influence of students is enabled and constrained by the adults that facilitate them. Power in schools has been increasing centralised though system governance as part of the competitive globalisation of education (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler, 2019). Ultimately power over student experiences is situated with adults and often, these adults have little control over expectations that govern them. It is challenging to resist such governmentalities (Longmuir, 2019) and where performative pressures and the inertia of tradition are prominent, student voice has been found to be relegated to tokenistic practices that only invites in voices that comply with the established arrangements (Stoecklin, 2012).

In the research sites, there were indications of how empowered the students felt in their relationship with the school. Many of them were able to consider their capacity to be agentic and have influence within the school in comparison to experiences in prior school settings which were more traditional. Arrangements that underpinned the empowerment of students centred on developing more equitable and democratic environments. For example, the use of space in each setting was shared. Staff only spaces were minimised and this saw students and staff together at all times of the day, sharing not only learning experiences but

also social experiences during break times. This conversation between students in an interview group about their connection with the Secondary school principal, illustrates the connections that these arrangements facilitated,

STUDENT 2: [The principal] knows everyone by name and if he doesn't yet he will by next week. Because all he does, if he's not in a meeting, he walks around the school talking to students.

STUDENT 1: I just walked past him the other day and I said "hey can I sit down and talk." We went into the resource centre and just sat down for 15–20 min and spoke. Where at my old school they'd be like no I've got a meeting. They are always busy, where he just walks around, he's really kicked back.

STUDENT 2: I remember last year after school one day and I was lying on a couch with my feet dangling cause I was really tired after studying for two hours and he just came in and laid down on the couch opposite and just talked to me for 10 min. He's just really chilled.

These connections helped to, bring the practices of leading, teaching, and learning closer in proximity, break down traditional role divisions, and enhance shared responsibility for the success of the community. These student comments illustrate these impacts, "It's very hands on, it's very interactive with the students. There's no hierarchy we are all on the same level" (Student, Secondary school) and "The environment is happier here. Like you can talk to anyone, everyone just has their own opinion and they can express it really freely" (Student, Alternative setting). Another symbolic indication of the equity that underpinned the amplification of students' position within the community included that across all of the sites, given names were used for all community members and at the alternative school, there was no school uniform which was appreciated by students and acknowledged for the contribution to breaking down traditional barriers. Within these equitable and democratic foundations students were able to engage in voice, choice, and agency as described earlier in empowered ways.

Possibilities and potential of voice, choice, and agency for active, resilient citizenship

Prevalence and scale of crises have increased in recent times with climate change responsible for significant shifts in shared beliefs about how the future may unfold. Children and young people are inheriting a world that is on a precarious and uncertain path where crises are an inevitable part of life. At the time of writing, the crisis of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is permeating every corner of the globe and every facet of people's lives. In the face of this crisis, as with any crisis, we see acts of communal good as well as acts of individual advancement. This chapter suggests that as significant and large-scale crises become more common, as the Australian 2019–2020 bushfires and the

global pandemic have illustrated, skills, attitudes, and knowledges will need to be bought together in communal ways on a scale that has not been achieved ever before in order for the children and young people of today to thrive in the changing world. Current educational arrangements seem to be failing in developing the resilient and innovative citizens that can respond to these unprecedented challenges. Calls for a greater focus on education for democracy have long been made and the trend of enhancing student voice has gained ground in recent decades, particularly in terms of learning.. The cases presented in this chapter show that bringing students perspectives, insights, and ideas to the fore is promising. Firstly, a more radical level of student voice, choice, and agency may spark the disruption needed to overcome traditional constrains that limit schooling arrangements. Secondly, such approaches have the potential to arm today's students with the active and resilient citizenship capabilities that they will need. Through student voice approaches, students experience belonging and empowerment that may protect them from personal and community challenges and position them to be the engaged, and resilient citizens that will be needed for our uncertain future.

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