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Fostering thoughtful engagement in the political process through teacher education: an intervention study

Carol Collins, Sue Knight & Tace Vigilante

Abstract

Thoughtful participation in the political process is crucial to the well-being and sustainability of our democratic society. Yet it is estimated that approximately 300 000 Australians aged between eighteen and twenty four years do not exercise their vote in state or federal elections, a phenomenon echoed in many democracies throughout the world (Saha, Edwards & Print, 2007). The question of what motivates young people to become politically engaged features prominently then, in a rapidly expanding body of literature concerned with civics and citizenship education in both schools and tertiary institutions (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich & Torney-Purta, 2006; Saha, Edwards & Print, 2007). Factors shown to be influential in increasing individuals' levels of political interest and participation include developing knowledge and skills associated with political systems and electoral processes, and encouraging participation in civic activities ranging from signing petitions to taking part in demonstrations and contributing to civic organisations (e.g. Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich & Torney-Urta, 2006).

Very little consideration has been given, however, to the notion of 'thoughtful engagement' in the political process; engagement that reflects a willing acceptance of the rights and responsibilities of democratic citizenship: the right to have one's interests counted, and the responsibility to capture the interests of others in the casting of votes. This makes it clear that the choice to engage in the political process is an ethical one and that the act of voting is itself an ethical act. We argue here that the well-being of democratic society depends on individuals' willingness to vote thoughtfully, that is, on the basis of reasoned ethical decision making (Collins, 2005). The paper also describes an intervention conducted within a semester-long teacher education course, the findings of which indicate that participation in dialogue-based ethical inquiry sessions around the topic of civic rights and responsibilities is effective in fostering individuals' interest and thoughtful engagement in the political process.

Keywords: Political engagement, voting, civics and citizenship education, ethical inquiry, dialogic teaching

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Introduction

The idea for this research paper stems from conversations with our students, second year pre-service teachers undertaking a compulsory curriculum course in the area of social and environmental education. Very early in the course we ask students to think through the central aims of the learning area, and while their responses vary slightly from one year to the next, they invariably allude to the role social education should play in developing informed and active citizens who will contribute positively to the democratic society in which they live. We then ask our students to consider what it would take for them, as teachers, to make real progress towards achieving this aim, exploring this question through the topic of 'voting'. We open discussion with the seemingly straightforward question of whether it is enough to know *how to vote* in an election (i.e. how to register on the electoral roll, find the polling booth, fill in the voting card), or whether it is important to also know how to vote well, or more precisely, *thoughtfully* (i.e. to be able to evaluate the policies of different candidates and parties on the basis of reasons and evidence); and we ask students to consider the question in light of their own experience of voting, often for the first time, in state and federal elections. After many years, their almost collective response still manages to amaze and sometimes disturb members of our teaching team:

Well, of course people should know what the policies are and so on, but it's too hard for most people, and that's why I don't really bother thinking about voting – I just do whatever on the day.

I don't care at all about politics and voting. I only vote because I don't want to be fined.

I just vote for the same party as my parents because I'm not interested in politics and they know more about who would be best to get in.

Politicians all tell lies and break their promises, so why bother thinking about who to vote for?

Voting's a hassle on a Saturday and I can't stand all the lead up to elections so I just mark the paper anywhere.

I've never really learnt about politics and I don't even know how to vote properly. Maybe when I'm older and more interested.

While our students *do* participate in the electoral process, it seems they do so with very little interest in the political process. We also meet students who *are* politically engaged and motivated to cast their vote thoughtfully, of course, and these individuals are usually willing to explain to their peers why they invest so much in the electoral process. Still, their numbers are relatively small when compared with students who do not appear to engage thoughtfully in exercising their right to vote. Clearly, this phenomenon is not unique to our pre-service teachers. Indeed, similarly low levels of political engagement among young eligible voters have been identified within the general population of Australia and many other democracies including the United Kingdom, France, the United States and Canada (Saha, Edwards & Print, 2007).

We begin this paper by briefly reviewing the rapidly expanding body of literature concerned with fostering political engagement through citizenship education. We go on, however, to argue that if young people including, crucially, pre-service teachers are to become *thoughtfully* engaged in political processes, they must be afforded opportunities in which to think through the ethical dimension underpinning citizenship education. We support our claim with findings from an intervention study designed to foster thoughtful political engagement in pre-service teachers.

Fostering political engagement through citizenship education

It has long been accepted in the literature concerned with citizenship education that participation in the political process is crucial to the well being and social sustainability of democratic societies. As Edwards, Saha and Print (2006) explain:

Democracies are nurtured and legitimised by participatory citizens. Where groups of citizens do not participate this has implications for the effectiveness and future of ... democratic political system[s]. Of equal concern is that where individuals do not enrol and vote they disenfranchise themselves. (Edwards, Saha & Print, 2006, pp. 2-3)

While voting is often referred to as one marker of political engagement among many, it is also generally acknowledged to be, ‘...a significant indicator of democratic engagement ... [and] a valuable expression of one’s participation in a political entity’ (Print, 2007, p. 328). It is hardly surprising then, that the development of students’ knowledge of democratic structures and electoral procedures has been emphasised in many citizenship education curricula during recent decades. In Australia during the late 1990s, for example, considerable federal funding was committed to producing the ‘Discovering Democracy’ programme and to providing associated professional development (Print, 2007). In spite of this significant educational investment, however, it is estimated that approximately 300 000 Australians aged between 18 and 24 years fail to register on the electoral role, so failing to exercise their right to vote in state or federal elections (Saha, Edwards & Print, 2007).

Surprisingly then, very little research aimed at identifying specific intervention strategies likely to be effective in increasing participation in electoral and political processes has been undertaken, although a couple of recent empirical studies constitute important exceptions. Working within the Australian-based ‘Youth Electoral Study’ (2007), Print and colleagues found that providing opportunities for students to engage in political ‘life’ within educational settings in the form of democratically run organisations appears to increase students’ levels of political interest. In a similar vein, Beaumont and colleagues from the U.S. investigated ‘promising’ college-based teaching approaches to fostering political engagement. Their findings indicate that, ‘...courses that include a focus on promoting political engagement and also include at least one key “pedagogy of engagement” can significantly increase political knowledge, skills, and motivations (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich & Torney-Purta, 2006, p. 265). While Beaumont et al did not specify what could be counted as ‘a focus on promoting political engagement’, they identified in general terms two ‘pedagogies of engagement’ underpinning the courses in their study: firstly, engaging students in extensive discussion of current events and political issues; and secondly, providing opportunities for student interaction with political leaders or activists (Beaumont et al., 2006). Unfortunately, few details regarding the questions used to promote such interaction and discussion have been provided.

Concerned by young people’s disengagement from the political process, researchers have, however, proposed a diverse range of explanatory factors. A focus on dry, boring and seemingly irrelevant curriculum content, and an emphasis on ‘empty’ or ‘forced’ service learning activities in citizenship education programmes are frequently cited to explain the, at best, limited impact current curricula have in addressing the underlying causes of political disengagement. It is suggested that these causes include a persistent lack of knowledge and skills relating to voting and politics among young people; a dislike of controversy and disagreement commonly associated with politics and elections; and a deeply held sense of disillusionment, cynicism or scepticism relating to the performance of politicians. Also cited are ‘generational’ factors such as young adults being driven by consumerism and a desire for instant personal gratification, rather than by a concern for redressing social issues through political processes (Beaumont, Colby, Ehrlich & Torney-Purta, 2006; Crick, 2007; Frazer, 2007; Print, 2007).

We want to propose a different explanation. At least in the context of citizenship education, the notion of citizenship is indisputably an *ethical* one. Citizenship education, after all, is aimed at the

development of the skills and dispositions which make for *good* citizens and political participation is clearly ethical in nature. The act of voting is one which affects not just the voter's interests, but also the interests of others, and this places the action squarely in the moral - as distinct from the non-moral - realm. It confers what is at its most fundamental level a *moral responsibility* upon the voter, so that acts of voting, and more generally, acts of political engagement are governed by the principles of reasoned ethical decision making. We describe an act of political participation which is directed by the processes of reasoned ethical decision making as 'thoughtful engagement'.

Yet, despite attempts to draw attention to the ethical dimension of citizenship by authors such as Crick (2007), Frazer (2007) and Pike (2007), this ethical content is accorded little, if any, emphasis within current curricula; indeed, Pike speaks of its "invisibility". Here we put forward a hypothesis which, at face value, seems plausible: that bringing students to understand the moral responsibility they are charged with when casting their votes provides motivation and indeed an imperative for thoughtful political engagement. In the following sections, we firstly give a brief account of the principles which underlie reasoned ethical decision making. We go on to describe an intervention study designed to investigate the hypothesis that bringing young people to an understanding of both the ethical import of acts of voting *and* the principles of reasoned ethical decision making will serve to foster individuals' sense of responsibility for and thoughtful engagement in the political process.

The principles of reasoned ethical decision making

Although there is continuing philosophical debate over the nature of reasoned ethical decision making, there are strong and widely accepted arguments that rule out certain commonly used approaches to ethical justification. One of these approaches is a simple appeal to moral authority (the law, the Church). For in the absence of independent evidence for the truth or reasonableness of an authority's judgements, such attempts at moral justification are not only logically inadequate, but also dangerous. (Think of Nazism.) A second approach, that of moral relativism is, as is well known, just as logically flawed and just as dangerous. Moral relativism is the view that ethical justification is impossible because there exists no objective evidence on which to base moral judgements. Pointing to obvious and widespread moral disagreement within and across cultures, relativists argue that we must adopt an attitude of tolerance towards ethical standards which differ from ours, and refrain from moral judgement. And while attention to particular examples (different family systems, different food practices, say) makes relativism appear an enlightened attitude, shifting the focus to other examples, such as honour killings and child slavery, makes its dangers clear. In the case of such examples, ethical responsibility demands that judgements be made.

Why do we feel confident that ethical judgement is necessary here? The answer seems to lie in the *significant harm* that such practices bring. Generalising from these examples, it seems plausible to argue that ethics is grounded in wellbeing and suffering; moreover, that human beings, and indeed all sentient beings, share common capacities for suffering and for wellbeing. From these basic principles come the notion of equal human worth, the idea that all human interests count equally, and consequently, the notion of human rights.

Of course this is too simple. Child slavery, whatever the wider costs, might well result in benefit to slave merchants and owners. However, the long lasting harm caused to those enslaved and their families, far outweighs this benefit. It is also necessary to *weigh up* suffering and wellbeing here and to take circumstances into account. These insights provide a set of ethical principles that, we would argue, forms the basis of reasoned ethical justification. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the complex interplay between these elements, we argue (as we have done at length elsewhere) that these are *necessary* features of reasoned ethical decision making (Knight & Collins, 2007; Knight & Collins, 2010).

An empirical study: fostering *thoughtful* political engagement through ethical inquiry

Methodology

The intervention study was conducted within the University of South Australia's School of Education. Approximately 200 second year pre-service teachers located across two urban campuses took part in the study. The median age range of participants was 20 years with the majority falling within the age range of 18-24 years. Participants were enrolled in either a Bachelor of Education (Junior Primary/Primary) or Bachelor of Education (Primary/Middle) degree. The two cohorts were closely matched in relation to previous courses studied and there were no significant differences in initial frequency analysis testing relating to gender, place of birth or ethnicity.

All participants completed a questionnaire during tutorial time designed to identify individuals' levels of political engagement based on research instruments used in the Australian 'Youth Electoral Study' (Print, 2007). Participants were invited to indicate their views on a range of indicators of political engagement, with anonymity and confidentiality assured. Questionnaires were administered immediately prior to and following the intervention. However, only the Junior Primary/Primary cohort (the intervention group) participated in the thirteen week core curriculum course, *Society & Environment Education*, which focuses explicitly on the ethical dimension of citizenship education. In the weeks between administration of the questionnaires, students attended a series of weekly one hour lectures and, in line with Beaumont et al.'s (2006) recommendation for engaging students in extensive dialogue, weekly two hour discussion-based tutorials facilitated by tutors experienced in 'Community of Inquiry' methodology (Lipman, 2003). Importantly, this dialogue-based approach has been consistently well evaluated in terms of its effectiveness in developing ethical reasoning skills (Lyle, 2008; Garcia et al., 2005; Collins, 2005).

The intervention

While the course is primarily designed to equip pre-service teachers with the knowledge and skills required to teach the *Society & Environment* curriculum, here we are specifically concerned with content relating to citizenship education. As indicated earlier, we begin our focus on citizenship by raising the question of what is involved in voting *well*, a question that prompts students to critically reflect on the extent to which they themselves are politically engaged and to consider the reasoning behind their decisions to vote in a particular way or to not vote at all. The ensuing discussion characteristically stimulates further questions relating to what makes a society 'democratic' and whether democracy is worth striving for, alongside the question of what it means to be engaged thoughtfully in political processes. The question of whether one vote can make a genuine difference is also inevitably raised and investigated. Most importantly, however, students are encouraged to think through the fundamental ethical questions of whether they have a moral obligation to be politically engaged, and whether or not they should consider the interests of others, including others they may never know, when exercising their right to vote.

Later in the course, students are introduced to the commonly applied approaches to moral justification noted earlier. Through the use of examples, they are faced with challenging questions pertaining to the difficulties and potential dangers of, for example, failing to consider others' interests when making an ethical decision, of unquestioningly appealing to one moral authority or another, of sliding into moral relativism in order to avoid taking a moral stance. Tutors also work to foster understanding of the fundamental underpinnings of moral decision making; common capacities for suffering and well-being, equal human worth, and the impact of circumstances (Knight & Collins, 2010). Finally, we turn to exploring a range of contemporary issues including climate change, asylum seekers, youth detention and homelessness, and consider how individuals and governments should respond to such challenges.

Findings and discussion

Given that in the pre-test the overwhelming majority (96%) of students in the intervention group indicated that they vote in state and federal elections, our aim in this study was to develop students' sense of responsibility to vote thoughtfully, and to do so via engaging them in dialogue-based ethical inquiry sessions. The preliminary results are encouraging.

As reflected in Table 1, significant development was noted in the intervention group compared with the control group on a number of different indicators of political engagement:

First, beliefs of participants in the intervention group that their vote will make a difference, significantly increased when compared with the control group. In the context of the study, this result is important because an understanding that one's vote makes a difference is a necessary condition for understanding that it matters *widely*, that is, that it matters to others as well as to the voter.

Second, scores significantly decreased for the intervention group compared with the control group on the two items 'voting is boring' and 'voting is a waste of a Saturday', reflecting in the intervention group increased levels of interest in and responsibility for political and electoral processes.

Thirdly, on two items designed to elicit individuals' levels of political engagement, participants in the intervention group demonstrated a significantly greater increase in willingness to attend public demonstrations in support of the rights of disadvantaged minority groups, compared to the control group. Examples used in the items related to the rights of refugees and land rights of Aboriginal Australians. This is encouraging given the enduring and pressing needs of these social groups.

Conclusion

We have argued on theoretical grounds that an understanding of the ethical nature of political engagement, together with a grasp of the principles of reasoned ethical decision making, will serve to foster in individuals a sense of responsibility for thoughtful participation in the political process. And we have described preliminary empirical findings that lend some support to this claim. Further work needs to be done, but the argument seems strong enough to support the contention that the ethical dimension of citizenship ought to be made visible within current curricula. It is also worth pointing to the value of extending civics education to the university sector. Beaumont et al. (2006) make the point that '...colleges are well positioned to promote democratic competencies and participation' (p. 250) given the preponderance of 18-24 year olds in the university student population. Clearly, such education is particularly important for pre-service teachers who are charged with the responsibility of fostering thoughtful political participation in their own students.

Appendix 1

Table 1. Change in levels of political engagement

Item	Time 1 Mean		Time 2 Mean		<i>F</i> (1,154)	Significance	Range
	Control	Intervention	Control	Intervention			
I understand the impact of the preferences expressed in my vote	2.74	2.46	2.54	2.83	11.6	.001	1-4
Voting is boring	2.45	2.50	2.73	2.40	12.3	.001	1-4
Voting is a waste of a Saturday	2.30	1.92	2.27	1.83	5.1	.025	1-4
My vote will not make a difference	2.13	2.01	2.17	1.82	9.0	.003	1-4
How likely would you to attend a public demonstration to promote Free Asylum Seekers/Refugees movement?	2.29	2.26	2.25	2.43	4.5	.037	1-4
How likely would you to attend a public demonstration to promote Aboriginal Land Rights Movement?	2.11	2.20	2.09	2.35	4.6	.033	1-4

Note: A high score on the variables indicates higher levels of agreement. The column labeled *F* refers to the series of ANCOVA tests conducted when the dependent factor on each case was the Time 2 score, using Time 1 data as the covariate.

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