



Shaping citizens: teachers enacting democratic education in the history classroom

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Abstract

The work of history teachers in schools is contentious and often heavily scrutinised, characterised by conflicts between professional and ideological perspectives on the purpose of the work they do (Macintyre & Clark, 2003). History curricula in Australia have been the subject of regular, ongoing political intervention, in particular about the role of history education in constructing and maintaining narratives of Australian democracy and citizenship. Against this landscape, this paper explores how history teachers from New South Wales, Australia conceive of the contemporary role of history curriculum in the development of students' understanding of civics and democracy, and their navigation of the tensions between the written curriculum and the contexts in which they teach. Using both observational and interview data, this paper explores teachers' perceptions of the gap between curriculum "as intention and as reality" (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 2) illuminating the experiences of teachers who interact with and implement the curriculum in their daily work, and highlighting the role that school context plays in determining how civics and citizenship education is enacted in practice. Contrast is offered between the teachers of history in the context of a privileged, urban school community, to that of an Aboriginal teacher working in a regional context - with an exploration of the impact of these contexts in framing the possibilities for democratic and civic engagement in the history classroom. Using the theoretical framework of practice architectures (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008), I explore the role of curriculum as both an enabling and constraining force in the way teachers work to develop student understandings of democracy and civic identity and the complex relationship that emerges from teachers' interaction with curriculum documents and their decision-making in relation to their students and communities.

Keywords History education · Civics and citizenship · Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education · Teaching practice · Practice architectures · Education for democracy

Introduction

The Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (Department of Education, 2019) expresses that one of the fundamental goals of formal education in Australia is the development of "active and informed members of the community who are committed to national values of democracy, equity, justice and participation in civic life" (p.8). The Declaration also articulates the hope that the Australian education system will imbue students with a sense of their "responsibilities as global citizens" (p.6) and "promote a sense of responsible

citizenship" (p.10). The Declaration represents a new iteration of a long-held desire in Australian education policy that schooling be considered a critical means of pursuing civics and citizenship education for students in a very structured and deliberate way. It also raises the ongoing practical questions of where this education is situated within the curriculum. History has a long tradition of being the disciplinary subject area through which these goals of civics and citizenship education are pursued (Innes, 2022) and the means through which the curriculum can provide students with the requisite knowledge and orientation as they develop into future civic actors. The pursuit of improved civics and citizenship education frequently finds expression in curriculum reform, focussed on the role of the humanities in particular, and in the development of specific teaching resources and documents, best exemplified by the Australian Government's national civics education program, *Discovering*

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Democracy introduced in 1997 (Lingard et al., 2013). Comparatively little attention has been paid to the way in which teachers themselves conceive of this wider purpose of history education, nor how it is enacted by teachers in their classroom practice.

This paper presents case study research undertaken as part of a broader study of history teaching in New South Wales, Australia and provides insights into how history teachers understand, interpret and enact civics and citizenship education in the history classroom. Contrast is offered between the teaching of history across two very different schooling contexts - a regional, socially disadvantaged government school and a high fee paying independent school in metropolitan Sydney. Through both interviews and lesson observation data, insight is offered into the role of teacher praxis and contextual understanding in shaping how curriculum objectives of civics and citizenship education are understood and enacted in practice across these diverse sites. Using the lens of practice theory (Kemmis & Grootenboer, 2008), I explore the role of the curriculum, assessment and educational inequity in constraining the pursuit of democratic education in the history classroom. I argue that despite the numerous iterations of curricula and policy documents seeking to formally embed civics and citizenship education in history education over the last several decades, it is the broader social-political, material-economic and cultural discursive conditions of history teachers' practice, in combination with history teachers' own sense of praxis which create and constrain the varying possibilities of meaningful civics and citizenship education for democracy in the history classroom.

Civics, citizenship and democracy in the history classroom

Throughout this paper I refer to the terms civics and citizenship education – and both are frequently referred to in curriculum documents and educational discourse as a collective term. Nevertheless, they have separate but inter-related meanings, and are subject to varied interpretations in different contexts. Civics education concerns the study of democratic structures and institution and processes, whereas citizenship more broadly concerns an understanding of the relationship between government, individuals and the broader community. Within this broad understanding of citizenship, there remains a variety of divergent understandings about the meaning of the term citizen. Traditionally associated with the notion of individuals having a political identity within sovereign nation states, the notion of citizenship has more recently been connected with forms of more 'active' and 'global' citizenship, and the mobilisation of communities around a common cause or identity (Heggart,

2021; Falk, 1993). Central to all these varied understandings of citizenship is the importance of engaged and informed citizens to the health and success of democratic societies. This paper is particularly concerned with how the teaching of history in secondary schools is considered a particular knowledge 'gateway' for developing students' civic knowledge and their orientations as citizens (Collins, 2013; Taylor & Collins, 2012), and the resulting implications for understanding history teaching as a democratic enterprise.

Locating democratic education in the history classroom

Civics and citizenship learning is framed as a standalone curriculum area within the Humanities and Social Sciences by the Australian Curriculum (ACARA, 2024), and considered a key learning 'priority' taught across all disciplinary subjects in New South Wales (NESA, 2024). Nevertheless, there remains a powerful nexus between civics and citizenship and history education in particular. Anxieties amongst our political leaders about the teaching and learning of history in the last decade have had two central but interconnected concerns. The first has been an ideological concern about the imposition of a 'black armband' view of the nation's past too heavily influenced by "political correctness", cultural studies, literary theory and postmodernism (Parkes & Donnelly, 2014). The second relates to evidence about what is said to be an alarming lack of civic knowledge and understanding on behalf of young people (Civics Expert Group, 1994; Clark, 2008; Macintyre & Clark, 2003). A number of political leaders have connected both of these concerns to lament the disengagement of Australian young people from the 'story' of Australia's democracy more generally – evidenced by the inability of students to recall 'foundational' historical dates and facts (Howard, 2012; Pyne, 2012; Visentin & Baker, 2021). From the perspective of political leaders, the purposes of history education are intrinsically entwined with the need to create better informed, better engaged and potentially even 'prouder' future citizens (Clark, 2008). Paradoxically, within this analysis, history teaching is frequently targeted as both the cause of, and the solution to, student ignorance and disengagement from political issues, with history teachers negotiating the difficult professional and ideological terrain that results – most obviously in the way in which they enact a highly politicised curriculum.

Henderson (2019) notes that the nexus between the teaching of history in schools and broader political questions relating to developing citizenship and democratic knowledge are not new, nor confined to the Australian context. Wertsch (2002) contends that one reason for this contestation that the teaching of history in our schools is not only

about conveying a ‘canon’ of knowledge of the nation’s past but is about constructing a context for how that past is remembered today and into the future. In the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom there have been protracted public debates about how complex and highly contested events in these nations’ histories should be remembered and taught in schools (Lowenthal, 1998; Tosh, 2008; VanSledright, 2002), a debate that has been mirrored in Australia by the intermittent revival of the ‘History Wars’ (Clark, 2009; Peterson, 2016; Taylor & Collins, 2012).

The nature of democratic education offered by the learning of an uncomplicated chronological learning of the nation’s story is one that Vromen (2003) identifies as framing the passive ‘good citizen’ – a knowledgeable but not necessarily purposeful or rebellious civic actor. Research also tells us that when it comes to teaching large amounts of content about the narrative of the nation, and also engaging and inspiring students, the two can often be mutually exclusive (Barton & Levstik, 2003; Clark, 2006, 2008, 2009; VanSledright, 2002). Tosh goes one step further to fundamentally challenge the value of an approach to history which attempts to “cover all bases” arguing that “much of the knowledge of history which pupils acquire in school will prove no more durable than their knowledge of information technology or biology, it will rapidly become obsolete” (Tosh, 2008, p. 126). Here, Tosh is pointing to the transient nature of historical facts that once learnt and deployed in an exam or an essay, are often unlikely to be retained by students in the long run without a context that allows for deeper understanding. But far from being a pessimistic view of the value of teaching history to school students, Tosh instead sees strength in an approach to history that acknowledges its capacity to promote critical thinking skills and to activate students’ own sense of civic agency. This plea to use history education as a vehicle for teaching broader thinking skills has received increasing attention through the development of various models that emphasise the meta-practices at work in the doing of history, such as historical thinking and historical consciousness (Parkes & Donnelly, 2014; Seixas, 2017; Wineburg, 2001).

Historical consciousness is more deeply connected to the citizenship-building purpose of history, emerging from the premise that “citizenship is best cultivated when students learn the critical skills of historical investigation and draw their own conclusions” (Cuban, 2002, p. viii). Here, the value of teaching history within a participatory democracy comes from learning the “disciplinary practices by which historians interpret evidence within meaningful narratives” (Sandwell, 2015, p. 83). Civics and citizenship education in Australia today emphasises students developing a sense of global citizenship, rather than a grounding in activist or social justice forms of civic sensibility (Heggart, 2021).

Given the particular civic challenges presented by issues such as digital literacy and ‘post-truth’ politics, it would be fair to consider this limited framing as a missed opportunity to develop a curriculum capable of robustly engaging with contemporary assaults on democracy (Innes, 2022).

The embedding of civics and citizenship within the development of the Australian curriculum reflects broader international trends to “focus on the development of skills for the workplace and the formation of citizens with competencies needed for living in modern, pluralistic and complex democratic societies” (Priestley & Philippou, 2018, p. 152). What remains unacknowledged in much of the debates around embedding civics and citizenship education in curriculum is that for both students and teachers their historical consciousness, and indeed their positioning and framing of citizenship and democracy is unlikely to be formed primarily in relationship to the formal curriculum. By the time students learn history in high school, they have all encountered (to varying degrees and in varying ways) notions of the past, nationhood and citizenship as a dimension of their everyday lives – through their primary school learning as well as their own personal and family histories, within their communities and through popular culture and the media. Teachers bring to their curriculum work a range of understandings about their discipline, the purposes of education and their context which not only mediates the interpretation and implementation of curriculum as social practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Priestley & Philippou, 2018; Stenhouse, 1975), but as I will go on to argue, fundamentally shapes and creates possibilities for embedding democratic values through history teaching as enacted practice.

Theorising teacher practice

Teacher praxis

In arguing for the notion of praxis as a deeply relevant concept in understanding teaching practice more broadly, Kemmis et al. (2014) acknowledge the varied meanings and connotations that can be ascribed to praxis in scholarly work generated from different research traditions and seek to reconcile these varying understandings in their suggestion of the double purpose of education to be that of “living well (in the sense of living appropriately) and helping to create ‘a world worth living in’” (Kemmis, 2012, p. 895). Viewed in this way, educational praxis has at its core the project of not only enriching individual students but is also acknowledgement of a much larger, societal purpose to education as it “provides a moral basis for acting in the world” (Kemmis, 2022, p. 67).

This way of thinking about praxis is useful in considering the actions and decisions of teachers within the history classroom and is particularly relevant when considering the relationship between the practice of history teaching and the pursuit of a democratic values. A *praxis* view of history teaching practice allows for a stance in which we see the object of history education as not only the communication of historical knowledge and development of historical skills in the classroom, but also a broader awareness of the moral purpose of history education in forming conscious and moral citizens with an awareness of how history has shaped and influenced the contemporary world. Acknowledging praxis also recognises the complexity of teachers' decision making as part of their practice, and highlights the role of praxis in weighing and guiding teacher agency in navigating competing interests in the classroom, as Dunne (2005) has noted:

In education, for example, a practitioner or policymaker may face a situation where academic standards, considerations of safety, psychological needs and the demands of social equity, in relation to a diverse set of students and their parents, pull in contrary directions where *some* decision needs to be made. (p. 381)

In the research project outlined below, I specifically engaged history teachers on the question of the purpose of history teaching in schools – a question that many had interestingly never been asked, despite this driving purpose forming a key component of their professional identity and a lens through which they encounter the official curriculum. The answers each teacher gave went to the heart of their sense of history teaching praxis – a reflection not only of their own professional disposition but also of their reconciling of varying (sometimes competing) discourses around their professional work in the classroom. Importantly, the notion of praxis frames the purpose of education as more broad than mere competence in one subject area (Kemmis & Smith, 2008), and draws attention to the broader purpose of history education in the context of education for democracy in contemporary society.

Theory of practice architectures

The theory of practice architectures builds on Schatzki's (Schatzki, 2002; Schatzki et al., 2001) understanding of practice to render more explicitly the characteristic features that *prefigure* and shape particular practices (Kemmis et al., 2014). It is a theoretical stance that recognises the complexity of practice and the range of personal, interpersonal, institutional and cultural influences on practice to allow us to

come to a more holistic understanding of practice than that afforded by other theoretical stances.

Kemmis (2009) sees the circumstances of professional practice as being framed (and at times constrained) by three dimensions of practice; the cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political structures which comprise them. These structures operate as 'practice architectures', or the mediating preconditions for practice to occur. Viewed collectively these dimensions are in constant interplay and determine the way practices unfold in particular contexts, and in this article they are used as an analytical lens for understanding the forces that enable and constrain teachers' pursuit of civics and citizenship education in the history classroom.

The cultural-discursive arrangements of practice are expressed in the "medium of language and in the dimension of *semantic space*" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 32) and concern the way in which language and discourses operate to enable and constrain the particular *sayings* of a practice. In the context of high school history teaching, this relates to the ways in which the language used in the history curriculum operates to construct notions of citizenship and democracy in particular ways.

The material-economic arrangements of practice are expressed in the "medium of *activity and work*, in the dimension of *physical space–time*" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 32) and concern the resources that enable and constrain the *doings* of practice. We see this impact on teacher practice through issues of resourcing and labour within and across school contexts.

The social-political arrangements of practice are expressed in the "medium of *power and solidarity* and in the dimension of *social space*" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 32) and concern the way in which such arrangements enable and constrain the *relatings* of practice. In a school context this social-political dimension plays out in the nature of teacher-student relationships, as well as teachers' relationships to others within the school community.

Approaching an understanding of civics and citizenship education in the history classroom this way can shift focus from merely the content of curriculum or prescribed teaching resources, to understanding teachers' work in the context of educational "meta-practices" (Kemmis & Grotenboer, 2008, p. 58), and can turn our attention to how the 'sayings', 'doings' and 'relatings' of particular practices 'hang together' in ways that enable and/or constrain the possibilities of history education for democracy. It is a way of understanding the tensions that teachers navigate – not merely between the intended and enacted curriculum, but also as they attempt to reconcile their praxis against the broader conditions in which they work.

Research design and methods

Research data in this paper were drawn from a larger, multiple case study project examining the classroom practices of exemplary history teachers across different schooling contexts. A peer nomination process of purposive sampling was used to identify teachers who were considered by their local communities and professional associations to be exemplary teachers of history, and nominated teachers were then invited to participate in the project. This process of community and peer nomination enhanced the validity of some of the latter findings of the study as from the outset the design prioritised the identification of rich, atypical cases (Flyvbjerg, 2004) which I could reliably say were examples of good teaching in that context. From the teachers invited to the project, four secondary teachers consented to participate, and two of those participating teachers are highlighted in this paper.

Case study research was conducted with each participant teacher over a number of weeks and included a minimum of 15 lesson observations and multiple semi-structured interviews with the teachers. The research was designed to develop a rich and detailed understanding of history teaching in practice across a variety of school contexts. Detailed field notes were taken during lesson observations and interviews were transcribed. Data analysis for this project was conducted in the two phases of multiple case study analysis described by Merriam (2009) beginning with within-case and then followed by cross-case analysis. Additionally, the cross-case analysis phase applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) "theoretically informed thematic analysis" seeking to draw together data from across the case studies in ways that interacted with the literature and theories relating to history teaching, teaching practice and the theory of practice architectures.

The research project was approved by the University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee (2016/832) and as per the ethics protocol, participant schools and teachers in this study have been de-identified in the data presented below.

History, civics and citizenship education at Bayview High School

Bayview High School is a Department of Education (public) high school in a regional area of NSW, Australia. Jane, a teacher of Human Society and its Environment (HSIE) subjects, identifies as Aboriginal and has been teaching history in NSW public schools for 30 years, and at Bayview for

the last twelve. Bayview's ICSEA score¹ is below 950 with over 80% of school enrolments coming from the bottom two quartiles of socio-educational advantage, and 12% of students at the school identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023a). Jane talks about Bayview High School with deep commitment and affection, but also does not shy away from being honest about the challenges of teaching in this context. She nominates low attendance and retention rates, problems with violence and anti-social behaviour, a generally poor commitment to academic achievement and the low expectations of her students for their post-school opportunities as some of challenges presented to classroom teachers at the school.

I observed Jane teaching her senior Modern History and History extension classes over the course of one school term. Jane shares with me that she regards the purpose of history as being fundamentally connected to understanding the nature of contemporary society, and her role as a teacher in helping students make connections between the past and present in order to be better informed citizens, telling me: "it doesn't matter what you look at in history, it connects to the modern world. We are all connected to the past". Part of helping students make these connections involves Jane having an awareness of students' existing knowledge and understanding of both historical concepts and ideas and the contemporary world. But for Jane, bridging the gap between her students' historical and contemporary knowledge is made more difficult by the limited frame of reference many of her students have for understanding the broader context of the history they are studying. Jane explains:

As a history teacher, having the kids have a general knowledge is a huge bonus and that is really difficult for us... I am trying to teach them who Mussolini is, but they have no idea who their own Prime Minister is, that's really quite a challenge.

¹ The Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA) score represents one tool available to researchers to understand the relative socio-economic advantage or disadvantage of particular schools. A school's ICSEA score represents the relative educational advantage or disadvantage of the student cohort and incorporates information from school demographic data, parents' occupation and level of education as well as the percentage of Indigenous students and students with a language background other than English enrolled in the school (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023b). A school's ICSEA score is represented against a mean score of 1000 and a standard deviation of 100, with the *My School* site also providing details about the distribution of students across four quartiles representing relative levels of advantage or disadvantage. In the overview of the school contexts in this paper I provide an indication of both the school's ICSEA value (although I refrain from providing the exact score to avoid the possibility of identifying the school) alongside details about the distribution of students at the school across the quartiles.

Because of this, I see Jane's use of careful and deliberate strategies that encourage students' curiosity in exploring historical material, but that also make this material accessible and relatable such as the use of history-related 'memes' around her classroom, and the use of carefully selected analogies when describing historical events. Jane accounts for these particular strategies by telling me "you really need to break it down into their home language otherwise it isn't relatable, it will go over their head". Jane's reference to a 'home language' in her classroom connects to her extensive experience in Aboriginal education and refers here to the colloquial and informal language of students at Bayview High School – a combination of adolescent slang and pop-culture references which Jane uses in a natural and reflexive way in the classroom to engage students in discussion about historical ideas.

For Jane, who is an expert in local Aboriginal history and storytelling, the study of history is a gateway to a form of citizenship not clearly articulated in curriculum documents – one which embraces Aboriginal history, Country and cultural identity and which is framed by truth-telling and the power of narrative. She notes the ways in which the formal curriculum has constrained her capacity to engage deeply in this work:

.... for me, as an Aboriginal and as a history teacher, I have a great belief that our kids will not close the gap until they know their history, until they know their background....I am a strong believer that culture and history are one and the same, you can't have one without the other, you cannot understand one without the other. I teach Aboriginal kids that know nothing about Aboriginal past at all. Nothing. Stolen Generations means nothing to them, let alone anything prior to 1788. They are disaffected and they have no sense of history. And all they get is white history.

Jane is deeply cynical about attempts to formalise civics and citizenship education through mandated knowledge in the history curriculum which she sees as alienating, "boring" and "deeply irrelevant" for her students, but she nevertheless sees her role as one with a direct impact on how students understand and engage with democratic notions:

you can't teach democracy without history, at our level, I guess I'm a little rebel, because I impact change, directly impact change. So yes, teaching history keeps democracy alive and aspiration of kids like ours alive. Other teachers are maintaining the status quo. We are rebellious here. I'm affecting change.

Jane's teaching praxis is one framed by her Aboriginality and her lived experience of intergenerational disadvantage and ongoing struggles for civil and political rights, one which she also recognises in her students. For her, history education is a vehicle for cultivating a disposition towards civic engagement and participation, and notions of inclusive and active citizenship which importantly recognise the history and story of First Nations people, and her own connection to Country in particular. Jane's personal understanding of her role as a history teacher powerfully demonstrates Kemmis et al's dual notion of praxis which "on the side of the individual... concerns the formation of persons; on the side of the social... concerns the formation of communities and societies" (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 27).

History civics and citizenship education at Churchill College

Max has been a teacher in independent secondary schools for ten years and has been in his current position as a history teacher at Churchill College for the last four years. Churchill College is an independent (private) boys school in Sydney with students from Kindergarten to Year 12. Churchill College is a large and well-resourced school with an ICSEA score close to 1200 (approximately two standard deviations above the mean) with 95% of the student cohort in the top two quartiles of socio-educational advantage and less than 5% of students at the school identifying as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander² (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023a).

I observe Max teaching a mixture of junior history and senior ancient history classes over a four-week period. Like Jane, Max sees his role as a history teacher as to help his students make sense of the modern world through looking at the past, telling me:

I say that to the kids all the time, if you don't understand how the world has worked you don't understand how it will work...kids need to know, and I think all people need to know the constructs that make up this world.

Max's own experience of studying history to Masters degree level has had a significant influence in framing the way in which he conceives of the purpose of history, telling me that he sees history as primarily being about "research, not exams". Max's sense of teaching praxis weaves together this understanding of history as a discipline of research, but

² The exact percentage of students identifying as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander is not provided so as to maintain the anonymity of the participant school.

also one which has the opportunity to help foster students' developing sense of citizenship through their knowledge of both past and present society, with particular emphasis on developing students' capacity to take a critical stance and look at events from different perspectives. Of his students, Max remarks that they are "pretty Anglo affluent, they are so sheltered here. They are lovely kids, but they are so sheltered". Max understands his task as being to challenge some of the ways in which his students are 'sheltered' through exposure to challenging content and ideas, but also admits that the primary expectation on him as a teacher of senior students at Churchill College is to get his students the best possible result for their Higher School Certificate examination. For Max, this tension between teaching this underlying purpose of history as he sees it, and meeting the expectations of the school to maximise academic achievement is a constant negotiation of his practice.

Max shows an awareness of the future aspirations and expectations for his Churchill College students, talking a lot about the application and relevance of learning history to their future tertiary study, but also, significantly, about the role of history in fostering a sense of thoughtful and responsible citizenship. Max feels that the stories he teaches in his history classroom "open the door to [my students] developing a genuine social conscience. It's something most other subjects and teachers can't do". Evident in Max's classroom practice is a desire to try and reconcile the varying and at times conflicting purposes of school history and the system within which it is taught – which aims on the one hand to teach students a large amount of historical content knowledge, and yet on the other hand to "pass on to students the intellectual tools they need in order to interpret the changing world around them" (Tosh, 2008, p. 126). Despite being a disciplinary expert with an obvious passion and skill for teaching and learning history, Max clearly at times struggles to smoothly integrate history praxis oriented towards a sense of responsible future citizenship with the practical realities of current history curriculum and assessment framework and the emphasis placed on the latter by Churchill College.

Praxis, practice architectures and possibilities for democratic education in the history classroom

The practice architectures of history teaching for democracy, as explored across these two diverse sites raise significant questions about the challenges presented to history teachers seeking to enact civics and citizenship education in the classroom. Civics and citizenship education as written in the curriculum translates differently across educational sites and contexts, and with different practitioners. For both

Max and Jane, it is their own praxis orientation towards a deeper, social purpose to the teaching of history that enables them to enact civics and citizenship education in the context of their classrooms. But equally, both teachers experience frustrations and constraints in their efforts to communicate this deeper purpose to history education in their pedagogy and practice. I now turn to consider the key constraints to the pursuit of this democratic purpose of history education – curriculum and assessment, and issues of inequity and students' own cultural capital.

Curriculum and assessment

Observing both Jane and Max, it is impossible not to notice the way in which the NSW History Syllabus operates as a dominant discursive frame that dictates many of the 'sayings' of practice in these classrooms, particularly those in the senior years. It is significant to note that parallel to the embedding of explicit civics and citizenship priorities in history curricula, the last two decades of curriculum development in NSW have also seen an increasingly prescriptive and content-heavy history syllabus which tightly frames the core knowledge students are to be taught. This narrowing has resulted in fewer opportunities for teachers to exercise choice and judgement around topics that work for students from a range of backgrounds (History Teachers Association of NSW, 2016). This is particularly apparent in Jane's classroom, where her personal passion and expertise in local Aboriginal history is not accommodated by the prescribed curriculum of senior history, and frustrates her efforts to teach her senior students about themes of social justice and their own Aboriginal heritage and culture.

Despite the promise of including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives as a key curriculum priority in the Australian Curriculum, Euro-centric notions of citizenship continue to dominate the official curriculum in both its narrative form and scope. The Australian Curriculum has been critiqued for its intellectual marginalisation and depoliticisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories – particularly around concepts of colonisation, invasion and *terra nullius* (Lowe & Yunkaporta, 2018; Weuffen, 2022), and for the way in which it entrenches deficit positioning of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as 'other' (Halbert & Salter, 2019; Weuffen, 2022). Jane encounters the practical realities of this framing every day in her practice as she teaches what she calls 'white history'. She describes the difficulty in creating engagement amongst her students when the history topics and themes "don't resonate", particularly for her Aboriginal students:

I wanted to talk about syllabus. Ah, it doesn't suit us, there is no doubt about it. The junior syllabus should

be way more flexible for a school like ours. We could do half the content and do it much more thoroughly. Year 10 and Year 9 I don't even feel like we touch the sides. We do civil rights movement in like 2 weeks, and the worst thing about that is that the kids do like that and they do want to watch things about Martin Luther King, and they do want to talk about the Freedom Rides, and all of that, ...maybe it works in other places, but terrible for us, we just pique their interest and then it's move on, move on.

Here Jane articulates the impact of an increasingly prescriptive curricula, identified by Mockler (2018) as just one of a suite of constraining factors impacting on teachers' curriculum work. It is also a further example of what Kemmis would describe as the decreased "discretionary space" (2006, p. 462) that teachers have to make decisions with regard to curriculum in an increasingly tightly managed and regulated regime of schooling. There is particular irony at the decline in this 'discretionary space' and distrust of teacher professional judgement occurring parallel to ongoing anxieties about declining student engagement with history and knowledge of civics and citizenship education, when the resulting narrowing of curriculum only makes it more difficult for teachers to be responsive to their contexts in ways that support student engagement (Barton & Levstik, 2003). For both Jane and Max, the teaching of historical content is relentless and dominates their classroom practice— and often occurs at the expense of following the flow of student passions and interest. It also de-prioritises the teaching of disciplinary skills such as critical evaluation which are particularly pivotal to contemporary citizenship and the health of democracies in the digital age (Wineburg, 2018).

The possibilities of pursuing a history education rich in civics and citizenship are not merely limited by the curriculum, but also by the interplay of curriculum and high stakes assessment. For students studying Higher School Certificate history courses, there is a direct relationship between syllabus content and the external HSC examination, and thus the language of syllabus outcomes and content areas (or 'dot points'³) become a key driver of both teacher and student talk in these classrooms. The impact of the HSC exam can be observed in Max's practice, as he regularly builds lessons or activities around examination "drills" preparing students to answer exam questions in ways that maximise their opportunities for achievement, and rarely strays into

knowledge or ideas that are not examinable. It is difficult to separate the interplay of the cultural-discursive dimension of Max's practice from the broader material-economic and social-political influences that come from working in a high fee, high stakes academic environment like Churchill College where there are explicit expectations of Max and the results his students will achieve. Max demonstrates a clear awareness of the way in which these pressures shape and constrain his pursuit of praxis in his teaching, telling me his practice is largely determined by his "obligation to the stakeholders" who are the parents of his students. There is an obvious tension here between Max's own passion for history, and well-developed sense of history teaching praxis, and the narrow means-ends discursive framing of history in his senior classrooms which is driven by the syllabus and HSC examination.

Max's sense of the praxis of history teaching relates strongly to his understanding of history as a discipline of research, inquiry and evidence – and an awareness of how these foundational skills can enrich the development of his students as people. For Max, the way in which he teaches history in the senior years – driven by a highly explicit syllabus and assessed partly through an external examination is "not a good education. It's not history. History is research. An exam is not history", highlighting a tension Kemmis (2018) identifies between the concepts of education, on the one hand, and schooling on the other. For both Max and Jane, their practice is an ongoing negotiation of this tension as they pursue their praxis within the constraints of the arrangements that pre-figure the possibilities in each of their contexts.

Inequity and cultural capital

Students' prior understanding of the foundations of history, and by extension their engagement in the deeper civic purpose of history education, is strongly connected to their socio-economic background, family and cultural background and the opportunities they may have had to travel, read widely and engage in activities such as museum visits (Barton & Levstik, 2004). In the plethora of research and commentary on the poverty of civics and citizenship education in Australia, there is surprisingly little attention paid to the role of persistent educational inequity across schools in thwarting the achievement of these curriculum goals, and yet there is a disturbing disparity between the resourcing and material 'set ups' that support the teaching of history at Bayview High School and Churchill College which have a significant impact on the possibilities of practice in both contexts. Not only does Bayview face resourcing restrictions common to many government schools, but they also teach a student population primarily drawn from

³ In NSW Syllabus documents, areas of content to be learnt by students in each school subject area explicitly listed in point form under each topic heading. This presentation of subject content to be taught has led to them being colloquially referred to by teachers and students alike as 'dot points'.

lower socio-economic backgrounds and without active or well-funded parent and community committees. Jane's access to technology, textbooks and materials that support her teaching work is severely limited by what she describes as the "global budgeting" challenges at the school (and that Jane is at pains to point out are faced by all teachers at the school, not just herself). Jane does not have enough up to date textbooks for all her students to use, and is limited to \$120 worth of photocopying per school semester. For senior history which relies heavily on students having access to a variety of historical accounts and perspectives as well as access to past HSC papers and practice materials, such restrictions represent a considerable disadvantage, one Jane is acutely aware is not shared by students in other schools and contexts:

It's not an even playing field. I will get more philosophical and say, forget about 5 swimming pools at [an elite Sydney private school], I don't want a pool, I just want a laptop for the kids or projectors with light bulbs that don't snap and you can't replace... ..I am expected to get my kids good [HSC performance] bands with nothing.

The material-economic constraints of teaching at Bayview are compounded by the circumstances of Jane's students' home lives which are often complex, and make it difficult for students to meet the demands of senior school:

We are battling with kids that don't have wi-fi. We have kids in there who don't have homes... And a couple whose dads had just gone to gaol or just got out of gaol; we have all of it.

For the students in Jane's classroom the language and vocabulary attached to the study of history presents a particular challenge for students who in many cases are studying history in their second language or have low levels of literacy. Jane spends much of her lesson time 'decoding' historical discourses in ways that make history both accessible and engaging to them. There is an obvious contrast here with Max's classroom, where students are much more secure in their foundational understanding of history and much more confident in their engagement with historical language and discourse. Here, the interplay of cultural-discursive and material-economic arrangements lays bare the inequalities in how different cohorts of students in different contexts might approach the study of the same subject matter, and how this impacts on students' capacity and readiness to engage critically with notions of citizenship as framed by the written curriculum. The socio-economic backgrounds of Max's students and the associated 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu, 1990) they bring to the classroom place them at a distinct advantage in the way they encounter and make sense of what it means to be a citizen in the context of history.

The idea that students bring varying levels of socio-cultural familiarity with the discourses and conventions of history to the classroom requires us to consider the relevance of Thomson's (2002) 'virtual schoolbag' to the teaching of civics and citizenship in the history classroom. Comparing 'virtual schoolbags' of students in Jane and Max's classrooms, there is a clear contrast in how their backgrounds and life experience have positioned them to receive and integrate notions of democracy, civics and citizenship that they encounter in the history classroom. When Jane is discussing the challenge of teaching history to students who don't know the name of the Australian Prime Minister, she comments "I'm sure at many schools that would not be a problem. At some schools the name of the Prime Minister is on their honour board". Jane's insight is a telling one, because indeed the honour boards of Churchill College are replete with the names of Australian politicians and other notable individuals. For Max's students their 'virtual historical schoolbag' is full to overflowing with experiences and resources that reinforce their position as privileged citizens within the very 'democratic' history and traditions they are learning about.

Wineburg (2007) famously noted that the discourses of history and the process of historical thinking was 'unnatural' for many students – and he is of course correct that the skills of historical analysis are both unfamiliar and counterintuitive to many students. However the contrast between Jane and Max's classrooms remind us that this type of thinking is more 'unnatural' for some than others, and we would do well to consider the interplay of material-economic disadvantage and cultural-discursive assumptions that underpin the teaching of history for civics and citizenship outcomes, and how 'the good citizen' (Vromen, 2003) has been framed by both the curriculum and the community over time. A key skill for teachers in engaging students in historical learning for democracy is their capacity to recognise the relevant aspects of their students' 'virtual historical schoolbag' and shape the development of historical knowledge and understandings accordingly.

Shaping future citizens: teachers as agents of hope

There is particular urgency to engaging with the question of how to best develop in our students an appreciation for democratic ideals, a valuing of inclusive notions of citizenship and the knowledge and capacity to be empathetic and engaged civic actors – as Riddle and Apple (2019) bleakly warn:

All over the world, there is a tilt to fascist, racist and misogynistic forms of tyranny and oppression. This is to say nothing of the collapsing environmental ecosystems, on which our very existence depends. We are living in dangerous times (p. 1).

Whilst these dangers signal every reason for pessimism, the history classroom presents a space of hope and possibility. Whilst history curricula frequently posit democratic and civic education as core to the project of history teaching, the teachers highlighted in this paper demonstrate that their own understanding of the role and scope of history teaching eclipses the narrow framing of such ideas in the curriculum to also recognise and respond to the lives of their students and the context of their work, which is not merely intellectual but deeply relational and political. Like many other areas of educational policy and reform, the civics and citizenship debate has suffered from a lack of sensitivity to context and a lack of trust in teacher agency. As Kemmis et al. (2014) argue:

In an era of national curricula, national professional standards for teachers and national assessment programs, it is more important to recognise and celebrate the particularity of learners and the particularity of sites in which they are situated (p. 218).

History teachers are well aware of the way in which notions of citizenship and democracy are encoded in the stories they tell in their classrooms, and the way in which these reproduce or challenge particular understandings of the world. The capacity of these teachers to realise and enact their sense of teaching praxis in support of education for democracy includes the way in which the arrangements in both their local school, but also the conditions and meta-practices of education more generally support or constrain the pursuit of those goals. Examining the teaching of civics and citizenship from the perspective of classroom practice raises important questions about how these curriculum aspirations are enacted *in practice*, and should reignite our determination to resist ongoing system-level pressures which limit the capacity for teachers to make appropriate decisions in their own contexts (Poulton & Golledge, 2024).

In the time that has passed since I undertook my research with the participants I have heard from Jane, wanting to update me on some of the students I spent time with during my observations. Jane writes:

One piece of news - you may remember [Lisa] and [Rachel], both characters that I felt had learned very little in history. Obviously their HSC results are best left unmentioned, however, you might be interested to

know that early last year they toured through Europe together and sent a great many photos of the British Museum, Italy, France etc. to me. They enjoyed their cultural awakening so much that they are about to go back again. Of course, I don't think either of these two will ever trouble academia but I bet they will be very keen for their kids to do well at school. Which proves my point. Schools like [Bayview] may not get great results, but we make great people and put them (and their future families) on the path to greater success.

I include Jane's email here in the conclusion of this article because it distils in one short paragraph Jane's hopes and expectations for her students, which eclipse any sort of competence in the discipline of history or retention of 'core' civic knowledge. Whilst the history curriculum frames the citizen and civic life in limited and often highly politicised ways, we see in the practices of teachers their attempts to challenge this framing, and render both citizenship and civic education to be relevant and significant in the future lives of their students and their descendants. We see in Jane's email her hope that her students might understand not only the narrative of history, but also their own place within it.

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Declarations

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