Research article

A vote for Australian democratic consciousness: teaching civics through history

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How to cite

Peer review
This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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History Education Research Journal is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

This article aims to contribute a framework for how historical consciousness can be guided by moral consciousness. It argues that through adopting a goal of cultivating democratic consciousness and implementing a dynamic pedagogy, teachers and students can meaningfully engage with mis- and disinformation to challenge the suppositions they bring with them. These approaches work against the virulent effects of misinformation, which was a prime factor in the failure of Australia's Referendum on the Voice to Parliament, as well as national elections in 2024 which produced victories for authoritarian or populist candidates. The first section briefly reviews how the descriptions of Civics and Citizenship Education have shifted in Australian curricula, from the issue of the Hobart

Declaration (1989) to the present, to respond to cultural and social developments. A second section examines the key challenges and opportunities for democratic renewal, particularly in relation to how teachers can instruct students to plan for effective political participation at school so as to more authentically engage with their communities. This focus includes what can be learned from the ineffectiveness of in-school programmes such as *Discovering Democracy* (1997–2007) and the entrenched positioning of Indigenous peoples within a Western, colonialist understanding of cultures, place and time. Lastly, several suggestions are made for how educators can shift within their local contexts to cultivate democratic consciousness as part of their teaching of history.

Keywords democratic consciousness; history teaching; democratic education; pedagogy; curriculum

Introduction

Australian debates about historical narratives have largely resulted from political agitation in response to curriculum reforms (Heggart et al., 2024). These debates have taken place in part due to frustrations with selections in the evidence base (Eacott, 2017; Ladwig, 2018), hegemonic authority structures in education authorities influencing the nature of curriculum implementation (Wescott, 2022) and misinformation being difficult to police in digital modes of communication (Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Nally, 2024). Taken together, these circumstances often leave teachers feeling disempowered from the processes that directly affect their work (Heggart and Kolber, 2022; Kolber, 2022) and unable to fulfil their role in helping students to become 'active and informed members of the community', as noted in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration and the Australian Curriculum (Version 9.0).

This article aims to demonstrate how historical consciousness can be cultivated in tandem with moral consciousness so that learning opportunities in schools can more authentically suit the characteristics of localised Australian contexts (Edling et al., 2020). It does this by applying a speculative case study methodology to two clear case studies: sustainability and climate change action, and teaching the 'Voice to Parliament' referendum of 2023. This development might then provide a more holistic engagement with the Civics and Citizenship descriptors in the curriculum. For example, this might be done by more thoughtfully and thoroughly including First Nations voices, perspectives and truth-telling processes with the intent of developing a more inclusive democratic consciousness as part of the teaching of history. Here we propose ways that civics and citizenship education can be used as a lever to further amplify the effectiveness of the history curriculum, taking this focus as just one possible way that these two curricula can be combined in meaningful ways.

The significance of these ideas is evident in the context in which this article was written: misinformation and polarised national stories contributed directly to the failure of Australia's Referendum on the Voice to Parliament (Carson et al., 2024) and to the outcomes of national elections in more than 50 democracies in 2024 (Ashby, 2024; Ecker et al., 2024; Shukla and Tripathi, 2024). The social disruption caused by the dissemination of such information has the potential to significantly disrupt social cohesion and the everyday work of school teachers (Nygren et al., 2022; Sayed, 2016). Through adopting a goal of cultivating democratic consciousness with a dynamic pedagogy, teachers and students can meaningfully engage with mis- and disinformation and challenge the suppositions each group brings with it.

Literature review

What are forms of democratic, historical and moral consciousness?

At the heart of this article is the interplay between three forms of consciousness: democratic, historical and moral. These are discussed at length later in the article, but as a starting point this section provides an overview of how different forms of consciousness work by connecting meaning across different contexts. This review uses the following definitions to explore how these concepts have developed

in the literature. Democratic consciousness involves all the dispositions and capacities of a democratic citizen, such as engagement with civic issues and a sense of being involved in community matters (Edling et al., 2025; Nally and Sharp, 2025). Historical consciousness is a sense that the past, present and future are interconnected and an understanding that the past can be used as a guide for actions taken in the present day (Nordgren, 2019; Nally, 2025). Moral consciousness is connected with framing moral judgements, in relation to the application of ideas, by people and groups, and willingness to act in line with moral principles (Edling et al., 2021).

Each of these three forms of consciousness is considered a part of history education, and there is an expectation that they will be developed by the time students leave compulsory schooling. For the purposes of this article, the literature review briefly sketches debates about how moral consciousness has previously been a feature that has existed alongside historical consciousness in guiding the development of democratic consciousness. Since the independent articulation of democratic values is an exit criterion of history curricula at national, state and territory levels in Australia, the review turns first to a discussion of the conditions within which democratic consciousness has developed in recent decades.

Australian history is characterised by significant divisions which are drawn along economic, ethnic, gendered and educational lines, and the degrees of exclusion experienced by Indigenous perspectives in particular have given rise to controversy about how representative shared pasts have been. Such an un-democratic principle undermines the espousing of more egalitarian values which have been promoted by a 'three cheers,' celebratory version of Australian history. The discussion then turns to how theories of historical consciousness might be used to better understand how to operationalise the debates about democratic consciousness in educational contexts (Nordgren, 2019; Popa, 2022). Lastly, as there is a narrower scope of debate about moral consciousness, the article addresses how this latter concept can guide the development of a more representative historical and democratic consciousness by distinguishing which shared understandings, values and judgements might be framed as priorities in Australian history education. More specific examples of these are explored in case studies in later sections. The intended outcome of this approach is to show how democratic consciousness can work to create coherence between the ways that the Australian Curriculum (version 9) configures individual, regional and national contexts.

Equity and equality are consistently named as central values in curriculum documents alongside democratic values. These central principles work to frame how educational leaders and teachers might foster sociopolitical cohesion and empower individuals within Australian societies as part of their practice (see, for example, Gonski et al., 2018). At the regional level, active participation is characterised by calls for clarity of understanding and mutual respect as a starting point for developing independent skills of inquiry and negotiation (Boomer, 1992; Doecke and Huo, 2024). While such conditions were first described in terms of active citizenship in the Hobart Declaration (1989), more recently these have been revised to focus on active members of the community in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2019). These capacities are essential for effectively collaborating with others, developing a concept of ideals such as a common good, and all members of a school community viewing the curriculum as preparing students for life in society. Such conceptual binding can be reinforced by a performative element where students gradually realise the value of behaviours which demonstrate active citizenship for their own development as moral agents and are therefore more likely to perpetuate them (Celio et al., 2011; Heggart et al., 2019). As these intentions underpin the documents which became catalysts for the current national curriculum, they suggest that the style of democratic consciousness that needs to be cultivated entails educators providing and modelling a more explicit awareness of relationships between individuals and their political contexts.

In the Australian context, there is significant debate about the role of curriculum in ensuring equity of access and provision, equality of educational opportunity in education, as well as how to retain democratic values in spite of discourses emphasising power and control. The contexts of these relationships are perhaps most succinctly articulated in James Ladwig's *Academic Distinctions* (1996), which he developed while working on the Queensland School Reform Longitudinal Survey (1998–2001) and which was the basis for Queensland's *Productive Pedagogies* framework, which in turn contributed to the *Quality Teaching* model he developed with Jenny Gore and colleagues at the University of Newcastle (Gore, 2021; Gore et al., 2002). The series of considerations he puts forward early on set the scope for contextualising the enablers of and constrictions on the current Australian Curriculum:

1. That the inhabitable planet has been divided into entities called nation-states, and this fact, in itself, represents the development of a world-cultural system.
2. That within most of the planet's nation-states, formal educational systems have been constructed.
3. That these educational systems are demonstrably quite similar and thereby mark a further advance of a world-culture.
4. That these modern educational systems, in every instance, are demonstrably associated with social inequality.
5. That schooling is demonstrably intertwined in the processes of producing each nation-state's societal inequality.
6. That a basic medium by which schools produce social inequality is knowledge, most obviously embodied in official and hidden curriculum.
7. That underlying the educational production of social inequality is the relationship between power and curriculum. (Ladwig, 1996, p. 10)

These tensions are borne out in more recent education reforms, including the Australian Productivity Commission recommending a more consistent evidence base for justifying educational practices (Productivity Commission, 2016). Further, Ladwig's seventh point might be further elaborated upon by suggesting that if education operates in a society which is characterised by inequalities (which expanded significantly in the aftermath of Covid-19 responses), a key issue is that the system will ultimately develop measures to secure its own future. While the rhetoric may advocate for social justice and other progressive goals, to ensure democratic consciousness is based on constructive relationships it needs to feature shared understandings, which catalyse common goals, to encourage active engagement between different segments of communities (Doecke and Huo, 2024; see also Latour, 2020). The significant difficulty in addressing such issues, however, is that a point of dialogue is required to cultivate more open relationships between different groups and communities in educational contexts (Gonski et al., 2018; Kellner et al., 2023). Such measures work in favour of moderating the impacts of disadvantage on student learning. Within a school, democratic consciousness might be a direct focus through a top-down, hierarchical directive, but the school is unlikely to be considering all members of the school and the broader community and so not actually increasing opportunities to address inequality within the local context.

Such measures can start to address the more global points Ladwig (1996) makes by individual schools acting as 'petri dishes' of sorts to develop discernment and critical thinking, grounded in a needs-based, service ethics and authentic local connections. Notably, efforts to explicitly instruct on this knowledge (such as *Discovering Democracy* 1997–2003; this programme will be elaborated upon later) have not had an enduring impact (EREBUS Consulting Group, 2003; Heggart et al., 2019; Zyngier, 2011). In part this lack of effectiveness was a result of little support being provided beyond train-the-trainer models, which operated largely in isolation from one another. Additionally, in Australia's summative assessment-driven system, the programme added content to teachers' loads (in spite of being the product of high-quality curriculum writing) and did not directly contribute to academic-based outcomes. These observations demonstrate that a democratic consciousness embedded in national curricula needs to be adaptable and transferrable to the challenges, identity and sources of shared understandings in communities at a localised level. For students to integrate these values into their behaviours, there need to be visible consequences for them and their schooling community as part of fostering democratic consciousness.

The democratic consciousness in these experiments is borne out in the polar opposite language used by more centralised, large-scale structures. While the Australian National Ministry for Education has introduced initiatives such as *Strong Beginnings* (Louden et al., 2023), the Australian Education Research Organisation has emphasised that recent reforms provide a knowledge-rich curriculum (AERO, 2024), while in several education systems, there has been a push for the use of Explicit Teaching for teachers, and for the responsibility (and independence) of schools to drive outcomes (for New South Wales, see Gavin and Stacey, 2023; for Western Australia, see Gobby and Niesche, 2019). Supportive networks have therefore operated as bodies of accountability and performance management, dressed in a language of pursuing 'excellence for all' (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2019). This dual-sidedness to the language suggests that in this context, an authentic democratic consciousness will need to be articulated by adapting values to needs which are agreed upon by teachers in their local contexts and then developing processes and opportunities (such as Professional Learning Communities

developed with a democratic ethos; see Tenuto, 2014) to foster relationships which actively maintain trust, respect and open dialogue within a community.

Democratic consciousness therefore operates on several axes, including independent engagement and hierarchically determined roles; social justice and inequality; and national, regional and local forms of shared and polarised identities. It therefore relates to the articulation of political relationships and making meaning out of them. Historical consciousness, meanwhile, refers to 'the ability to make meaning out of the past, present and future' (Löfstrom et al., 2021, p. 242; see also Gadamer, 1975; Harlan, 1989). The next section turns to the question of how moral consciousness and historical consciousness can guide the development of democratic consciousness in the implementation of the Australian Curriculum.

Putting the three together

There is significant debate in the historical consciousness literature about the nature of conditions and relationships which are required to authentically make meaning from the past. Many recent publications take their cues from Jörn Rüsen's (1987) categorisation of historical consciousness into the following four elements:

- recognition of a continuity of tradition
- taking examples from history
- critical deconstruction of the belief in continuity
- a temporalised, genetic view of the transformation of life.

Discussions about their application usually reference Peter Seixas' emphasis on a relational understanding of the past, which relies on individual and collective memory anchored in material objects and places (2004). More recently, reference has been made to the Finnish academic Sirkka Ahonen, who emphasises the need for a restorative, justice-oriented approach to historical practice that attempts to rectify past and current exclusions from 'official' histories (2017; see also Clark and Peck, 2018; Nally, 2021). The need for this restitutive lens is underscored by Rüsen's four categories not easily being applied to Australian Indigenous voices, which have only recently been included in state-based curricula (the first national curriculum was implemented in 2012) (Hogarth, 2022), and even then the focus does not displace settler-colonial narratives that work to exclude Indigenous aspirations for political change (Wolfe, 2006) and ignore or overlook moves towards sovereignty (Keynes et al., 2024). While it is beyond the scope of this article, it must be noted that this movement exists within a broader movement for decolonisation within the curriculum and elsewhere (for Canada, see Coulthard, 2014; for New Zealand, see Smith, 2021).

Moral consciousness figures in discussions about historical consciousness in that Rüsen previously acknowledged the epistemic overlap between the way historical experience takes place and Piaget's model of cognitive and moral development (Rüsen, 2004). The history curriculum does not explicitly name moral consciousness and instead points to a values-based framing by which case studies have been selected for educators and students to engage with national stories. Numerous representations afforded to the ANZACs in the First World War, for instance, embody several aspects of moral consciousness which are noted by Frimannsson (2017) and Löfstrom et al. (2021). These might be summarised in four points as:

- Moral dilemmas and provocations catalyse an active engagement in values of 'good' and 'bad' (Löfstrom et al., 2021, p. 243).
- 'Good' character and citizenship are embodied in 'good' deeds.
- 'Good' deeds embody a sense of duty and morality, which guides behaviour that is undertaken on behalf of others.
- Morality is about relationships with other people and with ourselves.

Moral consciousness therefore involves the ability to evaluate actions, decisions and societal norms based on ethical principles. It integrates emotions and reasoning to foster empathy, fairness and a sense of justice. Theories about moral consciousness can therefore account for the effectiveness of collective decisions and values in terms of their resilience in the face of social and cultural changes over time (Boye, 1998; Latour, 2020).

It can therefore be argued that historical consciousness has been operationalised for cultivating democratic and moral consciousness in a partial, exclusionary manner in Australian curricula to:

- develop specific communal historical bonds

- undertake exercises in nation building
- support the present status quo.

This consistency is crucial for understanding the place of active citizenship and community participation in the Australian Curriculum. Tony Taylor (2004, p. 223), who significantly contributed to the 2000 and 2012 curriculum writing, noted that 'historical consciousness is an absolute prerequisite to be an informed participant in Australian society'. It follows that much recent debate about historical consciousness has pertained to how to operationalise it in history classrooms, with an eye to historical knowledge and fostering active citizenship (Löfstrom et al., 2021; Popa, 2022).

These observations bear out two considerations for future work for integrating Indigenous knowledges in Australian curricula as well as operationalising historical consciousness authentically:

1. An alignment between moral, historical and democratic consciousness may find its starting point in country-based learning (Thorpe et al., 2024), which considers how decolonising the curriculum might occur.
2. This realignment of language paves the way for recalibrating Australian relationships more broadly with social, environmental and political issues so that multiple viewpoints are respected by locating points of cohesion between them.

The next section explores these points about social justice by sketching a trajectory of how citizenship education has developed in the Australian context over time. Taken together, these first two sections provide background for two speculative case studies later in the article, which gesture to potential ways to address imbalances in the forms of democratic consciousness which have thus far been embedded in the context surrounding the Australian Curriculum.

A brief history of civics and citizenship education in Australia

This section briefly reviews how descriptions of civics and citizenship education have shifted in Australian curricula, from the issue of the Hobart Declaration to the present, focusing on the cultural and social developments in Australia which directly impacted the writing of these documents. While there has always been an element of civics and citizenship education in Australia, what is meant by that term has changed as society has changed.

It is not the intention of this article to provide a thorough examination of the history of civics and citizenship education in Australia; other publications have already done so (Davies and Issitt, 2005; Kennedy, 2008). Rather, we highlight these developments to show how civics and citizenship education is intrinsically related to both historical and current events and concerns and has been used to pursue political agendas.

Since the Hobart Declaration, one of the fundamental goals of Australian schooling has been the development of 'active and informed citizens' (1989, p. 187). This remained constant through the Adelaide Declaration (1999) and the Melbourne Declaration (2008) but was modified slightly for the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Declaration (2018), which altered the wording (but, we would argue, retained the meaning) to state that one of the purposes of education was the development of 'active and informed members of the community'. The introduction of the Australian Curriculum in 2010 meant that civics and citizenship had a confirmed place within the key learning areas required in Australian schools (although, of course, states such as New South Wales and Victoria continue to offer their own version of the Australian Curriculum, which has meant that there is some confusion about how civics and citizenship education is integrated in these jurisdictions). Within the Australian Curriculum, civics and citizenship content is delivered within humanities and social sciences (HASS) in Years 3–6, and as its own strand within HASS from Years 7–10.

Despite this, there is little evidence that civics and citizenship education is having an impact among young people in Australia. In 2004, the National Assessment Plan – Civics and Citizenship was instituted, which measured the civic literacy of young people (and, by extension, the efficacy of civics and citizenship education). In the reports released since then, there has been remarkably little change in the poor performance of Australian youth: slightly more than half of Year 6 students reach the expected level of proficiency and less than half of Year 10 students do so.

There are, of course, myriad reasons why this is the case. The most obvious is the lack of prominence of civics and citizenship education in discussions about schools and curriculum. Despite its long-standing

position as part of the Australian Goals for Schooling (via various declarations), civics and citizenship education still lacks a clear place within the school timetable in most jurisdictions, instead being taught as part of other HASS subjects, such as history and geography – and typically towards the end of the school year, further de-emphasising its place. This is in direct contrast to what some other countries have chosen to do; for example, in England, following the Crick review (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 1998), citizenship became a separate subject. While there is value in an integrated approach, such as is common in most jurisdictions in Australia, in that it encourages a greater connection in terms of content and opportunities for student-led action, it can also mean that civics and citizenship content is overlooked. This problem is compounded by the fact that many teachers lack the requisite citizenship knowledge – they have qualifications in areas such as history or geography, but rarely in civics or politics (and this problem is further exacerbated by initial teacher education programmes that focus on history and geography but do not address civics and citizenship). This lack of knowledge means that teachers often seek to rush through the content or engage third parties to deliver it. In some schools, civics and citizenship education is relegated to the Year 6 trip to Canberra, where students can visit Parliament House and the Museum of Australian Democracy – and not much else!

However, perhaps the most significant issue is the nature of the content in civics and citizenship education itself. Civics and citizenship education has been derided as being too focused on learning *about* democratic participation but not actually taking part in it. There is too much attention given to the mechanics and institutions of government and political processes, and too little attention given to the actions that can be undertaken by young people as part of their democratic rights. What opportunities there are for action are curtailed to 'planning' to take action – not actually doing anything. Even more concerningly, in much the same way as the history curriculum (Heggart et al., 2024), civics and citizenship education has become increasingly an area of intense interest for politicians. In recent years, federal education ministers have felt the need to intervene in the content of both areas, indicating that they felt there needed to be more attention paid to topics such as our 'Judeo-Christian heritage' and 'patriotism'. Such interventions ignore the work of expert committees comprised of teachers and academics for short-term political gain and headlines.

Ongoing challenges with embedding the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priority

A consideration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history within the Australian Curriculum has been an ongoing concern, especially among Aboriginal activists, going back as far as 1989 (DEET, 1989). While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content has been in place for more than 20 years (Hogarth, 2022), its inclusion has been the subject of frequent political and public debate (Maxwell et al., 2018). To explore this we must begin with a consideration of the 'history wars' (Fricker et al., 2024; Keynes et al., 2024; Nally and Sharp, 2025), which remain relevant and are considered central to the study of, and teaching of, history. The 'history wars' first began under the John Howard Prime Ministership from 1996 onwards, which, tapping into the rhetorical stylings of historian Geoffrey Blainey's reference to a perceived 'black armband' view of history, claimed that Australian history teaching took a 'too negative' approach to colonial history (Conor and Lydon, 2011). Howard ran with this framing: distancing himself from the previous Keating administration, which had acknowledged the impact of the stolen generation, he took to using the phrase 'black armband history' consistently. This shows the way that Australian political discourse fails to engage with race with any nuance but rather continues the same trite 'black and white' thinking that leads to circular and returning arguments, framed as 'wars'. History teachers in this era were provided with a poster of Simpson and his donkey (a parochial ANZAC symbol of bravery) (Tsolidis, 2010) for their classrooms and were explicitly instructed to teach values.

It can be said that the 'history wars' never ended. In 2014, when the curriculum was being revised, Christopher Pine called for a 'balanced curriculum' that would emphasise 'the benefits of Western Civilisation' (Berryman, 2015). And in 2021, when it was again under review, then Education Minister Alan Tudge also claimed that the proposed history curriculum provided a 'negative view' of Australian history. It is within this tumult that we consider the teaching of history, where broadly speaking the field of history teaching research and scholarship is light years ahead of public discourse and the interventions of politicians (who appear at times to have been raised in a different version of Australia than the rest of us). What we are suggesting throughout this article is that it is crucial to include a close consideration

of 'state-of-the-art' ideas within the curriculum alongside exemplary and contemporary pedagogical approaches to yield the best possible outcome, as will be explored in more detail in the Conclusion.

Amid these ongoing 'history wars', since 2010 teachers' work has been guided by the Australian Professional Standards, and in 2015, standards 1.4 and 2.4 were added. They are:

- Focus Area 1.4: Strategies for teaching Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students
- Focus Area 2.4: Understanding and respecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to promote reconciliation

Since 2010, Australia has had a 'national curriculum' known as the Australian Curriculum, currently in version 9.0. It features 'content descriptors' that teachers are required to teach, and 'elaborations' that are optional illustrations of practice aimed at assisting teachers looking for ideas of 'how to teach' content outlined within the descriptors. The 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures cross-curriculum priorities' were added in 2011 to clearly demarcate the work of inclusion of these perspectives that was taking place (ACARA, 2011; Lowe and Yunkaporta, 2013). It is crucial to note, however, that teachers are famously disconnected from both policy (Kolber, 2022) and curriculum as written. For many teachers their engagement with curriculum occurs largely through curriculum coordinators or heads of learning areas and learning materials sourced online.

It is important to draw a distinction here between the intended curriculum (the curriculum aimed for across broad national and supranational documents), the written curriculum (encoded within the curriculum and committed to textbooks and off-the-shelf resources) and the enacted curriculum (combining what is taught within the classroom and its pedagogy) (Stein et al., 2007). And we know increasingly that teachers are becoming perhaps sourcers and purchasers of off-the-shelf resources alongside being the designers of these materials (Cairns et al., 2024; Mockler and Stacey, 2024; Poulton and Golledge, 2024; Poulton and Mockler, 2024). Overwhelmingly teachers can be said to engage primarily with the written curriculum and lack knowledge of the broader curriculum policies being explored in this article, and this may prove to be part of the solution – empowering teachers to engage in this work within their work hours.

By searching the website of the Australian Curriculum, we have sought to locate examples of Aboriginal and Torres Strait activism framed as moves to sovereignty (Keynes et al., 2024) alongside participation in democratic processes – all of which have significant scholarly coverage. Table 1 outlines examples of the inclusions and exclusions within curriculum dot-points. While far from an exhaustive list, it provides some instructive examples of what might be the common trends among those items included and excluded.

Table 1. List of events that constitute Indigenous forms of activism (which are included, and not included) in Australian Curriculum documents

Included	Not included
1962 Right to vote federally	1870–80s The Coranderrk campaign
1967 Referendum	1963 Yirrkala bark petitions
Reconciliation	1966 Wave Hill Walk-Off
Mabo decision	1972 Tent Embassy
Bringing Them Home report (the Stolen Generations)	1976 Aboriginal Land Rights Act
The Apology	Native title

These cases can be read as examples of a settler-colonial state's 'settler moves to innocence' (Tuck and Yang, 2012) whereby only those examples that fit neatly within the broader national narrative (Thomas et al., 2019) – where no mistakes were ever made – are included within the curriculum. To be clear, it is difficult to identify a clear logic here, as a number of events in the 'included' column are closely tied to those in the 'not included' column.

The convenient democratic actions are those that do not challenge the settler-colonial project or make the nation look bad, as outlined previously, so they do not produce a 'negative viewpoint of

Australia's history'. Clear examples include the Yirrkala bark petitions that, though a truly wonderful enactment of Aboriginal participation in democracy, was met with an underwhelming response from the government of the day. Similarly, while the Tent Embassy is a clear example of self-determination (Keynes et al., 2024; Pearson, 1993) in action and activist democratic work, it was also met with a limited response and prompted 'acute embarrassment' (Foley et al., 2016) from the government of the day. In the following sections we explore how these examples may inform an engagement with our pedagogical and curriculum approaches based upon hypothetical case studies.

A current example of the way that curriculum is too often a lagging indicator is the engagement with the concept of deep time. While the history profession has continued to grapple with the approach and theory of deep time and begun to identify clear approaches to it (McGrath and Jebb, 2015; McGrath et al., 2023), the Australian Curriculum has not yet shown a clear connection to this approach with the language of 'discovery' of, for example, Mungo Man (Way, 2016). The exact phrasing is as follows:

> **Elaboration ACHASSK170**
>
> investigating the discovery of Mungo Woman in 1969 and the use of radiocarbon dating to draw conclusions about the longevity of human occupation at Lake Mungo (ACARA, n.d.)

This example shows no consideration of 'Tjurkurpa time' (James, 2015) but rather is symptomatic of a broader tendency to reinscribe the primacy, first, of the disciplines (such as archaeology) and, second, of the concept of 'discovery' in a new context (in this case reinscribing a kind of 'intellectual nullius') (Gertz, 2020). This indicates that, consistent with Wolfe (2006), the curriculum remains a settler-colonial tool seeking erasure, or at least in this circumstance rejecting alternative epistemologies or perspectives and instead reinscribing a domain-centric viewpoint. More recently, New South Wales's interpretation of the Australian Curriculum has scrapped the inclusion of the 'deep time' study completely (Westaway et al., 2024), further indicating a lack of comfort with this type of content. As outlined, there is a lot of room for improvement in Australia's engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures; applying the model outlined previously could assist with this.

Methodology

To illustrate the connections we are seeking to make between the three concepts of historical consciousness, moral consciousness and democratic consciousness, we have adopted a speculative qualitative methodology (Meskus and Tikka, 2024; Wilkie et al., 2017). This methodology attempts to explore possible futures or scenarios to understand potential outcomes and implications. While not common, this research has some utility, especially in the social sciences, and especially when researchers are seeking to challenge existing assumptions and envision alternate possibilities, which is what we are trying to do in this case.

In most examples of speculative research, researchers create hypothetical scenarios or case studies to explore 'what if' questions. The process of constructing these scenarios and then considering what their effects might be allows us to examine the implications of changes to curriculum and pedagogical processes. Crucially, this can be done in a risk-free space (Folkmann, 2011). Such an approach is useful for our task in this article, where we are seeking to re-envision schooling and its pedagogical and curricular structures. By drawing upon our extensive curriculum experience and working as and alongside teachers, we proceeded backwards from the classroom and outwards to society to consider how this might look 'on the ground'.

The process of speculative research is generally broken into the stages described next. This approach is drawn from Auger (2013) and Dunne and Raby (2013). For each stage, we document how it relates to this particular work.

Defining the research purpose and scope

In our case, the scope of our research was stimulated by a shared interest in the humanities and social sciences, as well as broader issues of social justice, equity and education. More narrowly, we were interested in exploring ways in which the ideas of consciousness, as they apply to history, democracy and morality, might be made more evident in curricula and pedagogy and hence lead to better outcomes in terms of education, especially in these learning areas.

Developing a framework or scenario

In the previous sections, we mapped out our proposed framework in terms of how the different consciousnesses might interact with each other, and with the curriculum, as well as the broader policy space.

Incorporating stakeholder perspectives

Our thoughts on this framework, and the models presented later, were informed by our perspectives as teachers, researchers and school and system leaders. We do not suggest that this work is complete; rather, it is our hope that the case studies might serve as provocations for further thinking and speculating about HASS education in Australia and beyond.

Creating speculative artefacts or models

Our models, such as they are, are presented in the next section as a kind of case study. We present two such case studies: one focusing on young people and climate action, and the second focusing on Indigenous education. In each of these, we reimagine the current state of play for these topics and seek to craft a new model of education by incorporating historical and moral consciousness. Our ultimate aim in these case studies is to more fully meet the proffered goals of Australian schooling – the development of active and informed community members.

Evaluation and reflection

Following the discussion of the case studies, we provide some commentary about what this process has illuminated in terms of the current model of the Australian Curriculum.

Case study 1: translating sustainability in schools to climate change action

The topic of climate change is central to the Australian Curriculum. The most immediately obvious area where it is present is in the Sustainability cross-curriculum priority, which is intended to be taught across all learning areas. In addition, there are significant parts of the geography curriculum which address this area, as well as other learning areas such as science. And it is certainly a topic of interest to a great many students in Australian schools: the mobilisation organised and led by young people in 2018–19 in Australia and across the world as part of the School Strike for Climate indicated as much. In some respects, one might argue that the Australian Curriculum is working: surely, the fact that thousands of young people turned out to campaign for an issue that they felt was important was evidence of them being active and informed members of the community?

The evidence, however, is somewhat contradictory. Not only was the decision by young people to engage in protests roundly denounced by politicians from the two largest political parties in Australia, but there was also some evidence that young people were taking part in these marches despite their experiences with civics and citizenship education, rather than because of it. As discussed previously, civics and citizenship education is often overlooked and rarely goes beyond young people planning action. It certainly does not conceive of the kind of action that characterised the School Strike for Climate.

For this case study, then, we ask, what might such a civics and citizenship education look like? We speculate on the kind of educational programme, comprising both curriculum and pedagogy, that would equip all young people to feel that they could enact their democratic rights in such a way. The answer, we feel, lies in more carefully aligning the learning of civics and citizenship with subjects such as history and geography, to turn learning into actions which have a tangible impact. If one of the key principles being learned about is the notion of democracy giving representation to a variety of voices, then community-based initiatives could – and should – supplement classroom-based learning. A geography class, for example, might investigate how students can participate in a local Clean Up Australia Day (or organise one), which is designed to remove garbage from local areas; a commerce class might complement this focus by evaluating the business models of charities, in terms of which ones are most relevant and effective for addressing local needs, such as Landcare working to restore eroded landscapes; a history cohort could research details about what previous environmental efforts have taken place in an area (such as creating parks or green spaces, and how much these were in line with regional or nation-wide government priorities at the time).

The research required could frame a school initiative such as fundraising via a walkathon (or another event) which aligns with the school's value set. These curriculum overlaps would prospectively boost students' capacity and willingness to engage in democratic action by providing a deeper understanding of how moral consciousness can frame a historical consciousness that is grounded in understandings of citizenship. Correspondingly, these alignments give a meaningful platform for how individual citizens can make a constructive difference in their community, thereby legitimising how democratic consciousness can work to encourage students to critically think about what change they want to see (individually and collectively) in the world, by aligning regional, community and individual values with the intention of addressing a common good. None of these proposals are particularly revolutionary and, indeed, some might suggest that they do not go far enough. However, the key difference we are proposing is that these activities can be enlivened by way of aligning forms of moral, historical and democratic consciousness through careful pedagogical interventions.

Imagine, then, if rather than students in Years 5–6 learning about the institutions of democracy as a separate and often disconnected element mixed in with other, unrelated topics such as the Gold Rush and Federation, they instead learned about models of active citizenship that have evolved over time. One instance is the influence of environmental movements, whose effectiveness has depended on a combination of community-based advocacy and the investment of companies based on sustainable technologies gradually becoming more economically sound (and initiatives such as the widespread adoption of solar power in the Australian Capital Territory). Another is found in the evolution of party-based policies to incorporate country-based, Indigenous knowledges in planning rather than imposing European metropole grid systems onto landscapes as part of colonisation (see, for example, Milroy and Revell, 2013). As part of this thinking, students can also learn about how to recover from failures. The next case study turns to this topic in order to show how movements with aligned interests, but different causes, evolve and emerge contemporaneously.

Case study 2: democratic consciousness and the Voice to Parliament

As outlined previously, only those activist actions that can be said to have 'succeeded' within a narrow definition that does not threaten the colonial state, and its broader project, are able to be included within the curriculum. Here we propose a way in which the model of history teaching elaborated previously can be leveraged to consider the 'Voice to Parliament' referendum. The referendum was a popular vote that sought to amend the Constitution to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament. When given the choice of voting 'yes' or 'no', around 60 per cent of voters opted for the latter, and this pattern was consistent in all states and territories except the Australian Capital Territory. Its failure has been laid at the feet of the system of schooling, and more precisely the Australian Curriculum (Fricker, 2024), where, 'rather than being valued and prioritised by the system, First Nations content depends on teachers' personal commitment and passion' (Hradsky, 2022, p. 154), and admittedly Australian teachers lack either an awareness of the policies that expect them to include First Nations content within their work, or the confidence and expertise to appropriately address forms of cultural knowledge (Thorpe et al., 2024). Teaching the referendum would involve engaging with a range of key historical events. It would mean including examples not currently part of the curriculum, such as the Yirrkala bark petitions, which can be viewed as prompting a minimal response from the government of the day. It might involve reading this petition alongside the Uluru Statement from the Heart and looking for similarities and differences. It could involve listening to Paul Keating's Redfern speech, alongside Kevin Rudd's Apology and perhaps even some of John Howard's commentary on reconciliation. It would certainly involve a close consideration of referendums, the sweeping success of the 1967 referendum and how events transpired differently for the 'Voice' proposal, including the absence of bipartisan support.

Table 2 is a mapping of possibilities for how these case studies might be integrated into student learning, noting that this is only initial thinking and that these ideas may well be contained within future scholarship by this author group.

Table 2. **A potential model for how aspects of democratic consciousness might be consolidated in student learning**

Form of understanding	Aspects of democratic consciousness	Characteristics
Most abstract	*Democratic ideas*	*Purpose*: Clarify definitions of key ideas: laws, rights, freedoms, responsibilities, licence; links made with scope for democratic ideas *Core democratic principles in the Australian Curriculum:* 1.　　Individuals influence civic life. 2.　　Laws and the legal system protect rights. 3.　　The legal system vests people with roles/responsibilities. 4.　　People must become informed about how to advocate for these roles/responsibilities in democratic systems (see also ACARA, 2024). Example: Teacher provides a set of slides which gives statements about each of the definitions. Points relate to understanding (1) the Voice to Parliament result and its impact on Australian democracy, (2) how a relationship with democratic principles requires a collaborative model of communication to work, (3) that forms of propaganda are participatory – people choose to believe them based on their circumstances and context.
	Democratic awareness	*Purpose*: Acquiring, recovering context around sources that will help interpret them more holistically *Exercise of democratic ideas in an active and informed manner. This behaviour involves:* ● 　Personalising and acting on roles/responsibilities. ● 　Measuring quality of evidence (tested, vs rumours and 'just asking questions' rhetoric) (Graham, 2024; Harsin, 2006). ● 　Which interested individuals/groups/locations are involved? ● 　What outcomes result from reasoning being guided by moral consciousness (for example, what is a 'good' citizen?) (Edling et al., 2020)? Examples: Engage in fact-checking exercises to scope out what students' habits are and where they can still refine their skills (e.g., ABC Factchecker and other games; see the work of Sarit Barzilai and colleagues at https://sarit-barzilai.edu.haifa.ac.il/misinformation-game). Class co-constructs two columns: (1) a list of strategies that they already use, and (2) a list of strategies that they have learned about (this second column will grow).
Most concrete/ visible	*Democratic thinking*	*Purpose*: Establish which understandings about democracy are negotiable and which are not; how to respond to 'new' information ● 　Development of an awareness of responsible members of a democratic community. ● 　Practices in classrooms that involve the development of gradual thinking/action in responsibility. ● 　Effectiveness can be suggested by the gradual building of a dynamic relationship with democratic ideas and a change in approach towards peers, schooling and staff (questions shift from 'how do I get the best marks' to understanding an ethos/context, with the assumption that it will pave the way for best practice). Examples: Reflective discussion. What normative conduct would 'good citizens' exhibit to moderate the impact of misinformation? What are some instances of these patterns manifesting (1) at a local level? and (2) in other countries?
	Democratic experience	*Purpose*: Connect in-school environments with community environments; consolidate democratic habits to shape values outside of the subject being studied ● 　Incorporation of community-oriented learning (defining that relationship in local, regional, national or global terms, depending on focus of study). ● 　Action-based outcomes, where students are given/initiate opportunities for articulating democratic ideas across a variety of settings. Examples: Students compile a series of criteria for: (1) what makes an initiative effective, (2) which factors need to be accounted for in setting up an initiative, (3) what measures need to be put in place to ensure that the initiative is responsive to changes in its intended context? As a class/in groups they then begin to design an initiative that can interface with the school or with a local community cause (teacher to get permission to run this beforehand). These relationships might be built by surveying which outreach programmes the school has previously been involved in, or identifying local interest groups and competitions which a local council runs.

Discussion

These ideas require three significant changes or shifts in order to be addressed by teachers, leaders and schools: first, a focus on empowering teachers to engage with these ideas; second, a focus on teacher involvement in curriculum choice, integration and application; and third, a focus on implicating a pedagogical approach that allows for the classroom to become a democratic space where democratic, moral and historical consciousness can be realistically achieved.

Teacher empowerment

The proposed solutions and possible pathways forward all lie with the teachers involved. The first and most important suggestion is that teachers need to be first trusted (Sahlberg and Walker, 2021), and second empowered (Heggart and Kolber, 2022), to be curriculum makers (Carl, 2009).

Teacher empowerment research, despite its implied connotations, mostly focuses on granting teachers small allowances within their own classrooms (see, for example, Lightfoot, 1986) or assumes an external agent (such as a leader) is granted empowerment (see, for example, Darling-Hammond, 1985), while more critical visions of empowerment (see, for example, Apple, 1982) limit teachers' influence to the school level and the community that surrounds it, stopping short of wider society (Melenyzer, 1990). Emerging scholarship has begun to position empowerment in more emancipatory ways, looking at teachers becoming engaged with policy, politics (Berry et al., 2013), activism (Catone, 2014; Sachs, 2003), union work (Cotton, 2022; Gavin, 2022; Santoro, 2021) and many other spheres (Heggart and Kolber, 2022), including places beyond the teaching profession.

It is this latter emancipatory vision of teacher empowerment that is ascribed to here. Our ethos is that teachers' knowledge, ability and skill set can be nurtured as they engage with curriculum, policy and activism to make the changes necessary to see the vision of this article come to fruition. While many of the changes required can take place within a school setting, some of them will require teachers to be outside this sphere to see them realised.

Teachers as curriculum makers

Alongside teacher empowerment, working with curriculum must take place alongside an awareness of teachers' lack of confidence in engaging with policy and curriculum documents as a result of demoralisation (Santoro, 2018, 2021) and disempowerment (Kolber and Heggart, 2022), where they may be required to be reintroduced to these documents to shape their working. This is not an insignificant undertaking but requires a level of empowerment and trust to allow teachers and leaders time to engage with some of the core tools of their trade. Furthermore, amid the rhetoric of teachers being curriculum makers in ways that increase their workload rather than as being core to their work, this action, and teachers' skill at carrying it out, must be re-established.

Greater curriculum integration: written curriculum

Greater curriculum integration will require a whole-school or whole-faculty approach and will begin to engage with some level of inter-, trans- or multidisciplinary curriculum planning and delivery. We as authors do not take a stance on which approach is necessary or appropriate to different school settings; however, the two speculative case studies provided should be illustrative.

Leaving the classroom to engage with the community: enacted curriculum

One of the most pressing challenges facing teachers in the current era are the four walls that form a barrier around their classrooms. Getting students, and the teachers themselves, outside of this confinement is required for engaging with the community in truthful and meaningful ways. As explored within the speculative case studies, there are a range of ways to achieve this.

Including diverse voices and perspectives within history teaching: intended curriculum

As explored previously, a diversity of voices from within the classroom (dialogically including the voices of students), from community members and organisations, and from the selection of multimedia resources, will assist in this approach.

Cultivating a democratic pedagogy

There are multiple ways to instil democratic pedagogies within classrooms, but we propose the model outlined within Kolber (2024). This model proposes the following equation:

Pedagogical practice that is: Accessible + relevant + efficient = democratic.

Accessibility is achieved through assistive technologies, instructional videos and generative artificial intelligence, while relevance is provided by the platforms YouTube and TikTok. Efficiency is achieved through the application of flipped learning, retrieval practice and method of loci for embodied memory. Bringing all these ideas together, the classroom can become democratic through the application of Socratic teaching methods and Socratic circles. Notably, this system brings a great deal of media into the classroom, which makes the next point especially important.

Plan and implement space for student reflection

As part of this, a truly dialogic classroom, where students are engaged in ongoing discussion, requires in-built time for reflection and decompression. These can be built into discussion protocols and made a routine part of classroom life.

Establish a democratic and dialogic classroom

As outlined within Kolber (2022), bringing Socratic circles, or indeed yarning circles, and Socratic methods (Kolber, 2023) into the classroom allows a dialogic space where engagement with complex and challenging ideas can be explored.

These are but some structural changes possible for teachers within classrooms, drawing out the key elements explored within each case study into a practical, lived reality.

Conclusion

Forms of misinformation threaten to disrupt the social cohesion which is encouraged by democratic consciousness in many societies, by threatening to reinforce polarisations, prejudices and forms of inequality. What this article has sketched is how cultivating democratic consciousness must first involve a framing of local schools' identities within their communities, rather than viewing the institutions as sequestered from society. Within this thinking, work aimed at cultivating moral consciousness provides the foundation for a dynamic relationship with ethical thinking and putting ideals into actions for a sense of 'good' (Edling et al., 2020). A key element of this position is the assumption that everyone has agency, and that factors need to be designed which shape, guide and restrict its expressions to socially engineer components of democratic consciousness into students' behaviour and thinking. This phrasing is due (as the first and third sections of the article have indicated) to the schooling environment being designed to work against the economic, educational and political inequalities which are embedded in Australian society more broadly. These disequilibria in particular disrupt students and teachers from viewing themselves as having the ability to address these with their individual actions. In a longer lineage of curriculum theory, this thinking re-articulates a Deweyan prerogative that was later elaborated on in an Australian context by Boomer (1992): that while schooling and curriculum are constrained by the imagination of the present, they should be constructed to orient learning communities towards a just future.

Although we have speculatively provided ideas for how teaching about youth-based climate action and the failed Voice to Parliament might work, several other topical case studies might be pursued in future research to test how democratic consciousness might be cultivated through a platform of aligning moral consciousness and historical consciousness to suit localised needs. At a time of extensive curriculum change in Australia, schools could use surveys and focus groups from students and staff to

evaluate the strategies and materials which are used (following Cairns, 2024) to triangulate learning needs in relation to what social justice concerns exist in the area. Inclusion and representation are two elements of democratic values, but for them to function effectively, there needs to be an ability to collectively envision a more just future, where discrete roles are aligned with tangible impact. From that point, a case study at a local level could explore options to include forms of knowledge which are engaged with by local interest groups and that are core to curriculum changes. Indigenous, LGBTQIA+ and non-human perspectives (such as part of country-based learning) are examples of these. Such shifts would prospectively require a language of reconciliation and recognition of agency to promote democratic inclusion, collective agreement and respect for individual identities and contributions so as to work against languages which perpetuate binaries of settler-coloniser, dominant majority vs excluded minority.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

Not applicable to this article.

Consent for publication statement

Not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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