Driving home from work one night with the radio on the ABC, I drifted in and out of really listening until I heard ‘social studies’ mentioned and became alert. Listening now, the conversation was about young people’s knowledge of voting, parliament and our political system. The ABC broadcaster, Derek Guille commented that: “it’s a pity they no longer teach social studies in schools because that’s where I learnt about politics, voting and all that related information”. This prompted my thinking to again confirm the importance of civics and citizenship education in schools and teachers’ commitment to this area. It is interesting the perception held by Derek Guille on that evening is an absence of the subject social studies aligned to teaching civics and citizenship education in schools.

There was also uncertainty around a subject to replace social studies. It is a truism to note social studies does not appear as a subject in education systems and schools across Victoria and Australia. The Humanities, Social Education, Geography and History have by and large replaced ‘social studies’ in the curriculum. However, this should not mean that the teaching of civics and citizenship education is no longer taught in schools. It appears that Derek Guille’s perceptions of school students now not having knowledge in civics and citizenship education is partially correct. The national testing of civics and citizenship education revealed a disappointing levels of civic knowledge and understanding with little improvement from 2004 to 2007.

Current national curriculum initiatives do not hold a lot of promise to strengthen civic knowledge and understanding. The National Curriculum areas of English, Mathematics, Science and History mean an initial absence of Civics and Citizenship Education although an intention to embed it across the History curriculum area has been noted.

Further evidence of the marginalisation of civics and citizenship education programs is the federal government not continuing funding to the Electoral Education centres. A letter to the editor of The Age (21/5/09) from students at Xavier College, Brighton commented that the centre in Melbourne provides ‘brilliant interactive learning sessions that taught us in a fun and exciting way about the houses of parliament, different parties, the voting process and many other interesting topics.... Even in tough times, education about democracy is a necessity’. The programs offered by Electoral Education centres provide, through technology, opportunities for students to engage in ‘hands-on’ learning of the responsibilities of being a citizen. The closure of Electoral Education centres signals an absence of sustained commitment to CCE funding and contributes to the lack of civic knowledge held by students.

Dr Libby Tudball, in this edition of Ethos, traces the shifting sands of civics and citizenship education in Australian schools from the 1990s to the present day. The place of civics and citizenship education in current education policy seems uncertain despite a number of concerted programs in professional development and resources. Libby articulates and sets out principles for moving forward for schools to embed this in not only curriculum, but as a whole school approach. There are many support organisations, programs and websites that can inform and build such an approach in schools. Social Education Victoria is strongly committed to leadership in civics and citizenship education in Victoria and in building school and teacher confidence in civics and citizenship education.

This edition of Ethos also features two other articles that focus on citizenship issues. The first, from Pam Dudgeon, Abbotsford Primary School, explores, through the collation of student responses to questions on citizenship, their understanding of citizenship issues. In the second article Warren Prior, a Project Officer at Amnesty International, highlights the importance of human rights and global citizenship.

There are two practical explorations of teaching VELS from teacher education students at Deakin University and RMIT University. Issues of sustainability and peace building are provided in these articles and have a strong alignment to VELS. Anna Louise Simpson outlines how the Global Financial crisis is aligned to the VCE International Studies curriculum.

The Social Educators’ Association of Australia (SEAA) national conference will be held in Adelaide in February 2010. The conference program, with its strong sustainability theme, will provide an important meeting place for social educators across Australia and we hope many SEV members will attend. I hope this edition of Ethos encourages you in your work as Social Educators in the classroom, school and community.