

THE ETHICS AND POLITICS OF VALUES EDUCATION*

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INTRODUCTION:

I originally thought of calling this address “No body would be good, for nothing.” But decided that a published title should indicate at least in broad terms what the talk is about, which “no body would be good for nothing’ would not do. I do think though that now that I have the opportunity to explain it, it serves as a very useful introduction to an address on the ethics and politics of values education. The quotation comes from a remark by a Christchurch schoolboy on public television last year. The programme was telling viewers about a new school programme in “values” in which students are rewarded with privileges if they do good things such as be gentle and kind and helpful and refrain from the actions which are bad: bullying, cheating and the like. Asked if he thought it right for the school to give rewards for good behaviour, this future citizen said that of course this was the right thing to do because, self evidently, “no body would be good, for nothing.”

This sheds light on my theme in two ways. The boy’s conviction, though it has often been supported, stands in stark contrast to major streams of our traditions, both secular and religious. In the Aristotelian tradition, taken up by the Catholic Church, the moral life is one which in and of itself is worth pursuing for the task is to acquire human excellence and so become a “good person.” Similarly, in the Kantian tradition the sole reason for doing what is right is not that is pleasant or attractive but because it is the right thing to do; because it is my duty. There are strong overtones of a Protestant position in this. Thus, in discussing values education, we are thrown right into the heart of the philosophical discussion of ethics. This has always been recognised in New Zealand schools and it is one reason why explicit teaching or morality has been avoided. It was realised that the bases of all moral codes are deeply divisive on key issues of human life and human existence and the schools of a pluralistic society should take care in such matters. Recently, however, the view has been put about that there are very clearcut values which everyone shares and there is, at last, no problem in teaching those values to the young. It is my contention that this view is itself a biased and political one.

The political nature of values education is also raised in the quotation I am considering: “No body would be good, for nothing.” For it reveals an attitude which, many teachers, pastors, parents and others believe has become more prominent in recent years. A month or two ago, a reporter for the Catholic paper **Tui Motu Interislanders** (Hill, 2000) took a stroll around the university campus in Dunedin, and asked some students and staff a few interesting questions. “We spoke to students, to parents, to a professor, and a college warden to chaplains and to parents: those at the centre of this strange,

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artificial, yet exhilarating life, and those watching and supporting from the outside.” A professor finds less dash, less willingness to be different, less willingness to challenge the system. “The revolutionary spark” he says “glows dimly in this present generation. Their ideals have shrunk and contracted to *personal* ideals rather than attempts to change the world.” A chaplain remarks: “ I think the students see social issues as a luxury in their lives....they have become very insular.” Yet several of the chaplains express the view that with all their focus on self and study they have a spiritual hunger and a willingness (often induced by the suicide or depression of those close to them) to ask deeper questions about the meaning of life. The students interviewed (a unrepresentative sample of fairly committed Christians to be sure) are very frank; “We’re a selfish and materialistic generation.” And they tend to blame the parents whom they see as the children of the sixties who rebelled against rules and authority and brought up their children to be “free.”

Running through all the comments: from students, staff, chaplains was the burden of debt and the damage this has done to genuine study and genuine social commitment. This has led them to take subjects which they would rather not take, with an eye to a job. This also leads to a kind of cynicism. One chaplain says: “Whereas 40 years ago we emerged from university with a sense of an open world before us, now I see a sort of hardening, which easily leads to cynicism and scepticism.”

One might say that this is merely anecdotal and reflective of the slant of a religious paper and the people it chose to interview. But here is another source:

There is a new generation coming through (Gen X) which is self centred and acquisitional, even hedonistic. These New Zealanders accept competition and thrive on the values of survival of the fittest. They often delay leaving home and starting families, and have relatively high disposable income which they seek to spend on exciting leisure opportunities. The driving question for them is: what’s in it for me?

The author of these interpretations of our young is not the Salvation Army or some other group interested in moral and spiritual values for their own sake. It comes from a recent publication of the respected Hillary Commission and they go on to draw the conclusion “We should reflect emerging values by presenting volunteerism as a self interest, not an altruistic activity...think commercial models, not community models. As participants they expect high levels of service and value for money. (Hillary Commission 2000 p 12). What’s in it for me?” Or as the school boy put it: “no body would be good, for nothing.”

THE POLITICS OF VALUES EDUCATION

It is well known that values education was an important theme in the 1970's and I shall return to that later on. What is frequently said (indeed I think I have said it myself) is that in the 1980's and 1990's values education disappeared off the educational agenda to be put back on only quite recently. But, I am convinced that this is the wrong way to look at it. In fact, I want to say, the decade from the middle of the 1980's to the present is a time of the most obvious, cunning and effective values education ever seen in our country. The young boy in Christchurch, the respondents in Tui Motu and the statement of the Hillary Commission strongly suggest that what has taken place is a change of value system and outlook right through a generation of young people; and what else is values education but the systematic change of the attitudes and values of young people in accordance with some version of reality. The trouble is, of course, that the values which have been pushed are those which fly in the face of the lessons of the past and the values of our secular and religious traditions. To those of us with humanistic and/or religious perspectives this is a tragic outcome. And I want to suggest, as part of my theme, that those who so consciously promoted this values education are themselves beginning to recognise the social and personal monsters they have created; and **they want values education in the schools to fix it up**. There is a major irony in this, of course, since these are the very people who have vilified teachers, tried to de-skill them and attacked their professionalism at every turn.

The agenda of the 1990's was clearly stated for those who had ears to hear it. In introducing her 1991 Budget, Ruth Richardson said: "Tonight's announcements are not just about how much money the government will spend this year and how much it will take in tax. They are about the sort of society we will become a generation into the future." (Richardson, 1991 p 5). Is this not an explicit declaration of a new approach to values education?— One which would take place throughout all the institutions of the nation. As a result of the policies, universities and polytechnics were transformed from communities of scholars into businesses; academic leadership and collegiality were replaced by management and hierarchy; students with commitment to knowledge and service were changed into apprentices for industry, shackled with debt and unable to think outside themselves. We were all encouraged to look out for ourselves and idealism became a sick joke. The leadership in selfishness was provided by our business and community leaders as they sought ever increasing financial rewards for themselves and for those who followed their lead. The education community was cynically divided by policies of choice and competition and by bulk funding in particular. That divisiveness is still being fostered—just read recent letters to Education Review.

So the agenda was announced, it was followed slavishly and, if the evidence from the Hillary Commission and others is believed it worked! A generation with selfish values was deliberately created.

It is worth reminding ourselves of a little history. In the 1970's there was a strong demand that the schools do more for the moral education of the young.

This plea was supported by the then Department of Education, by thoughtful members of the community, and by academics in Education departments. Older people here will remember the Ross Report and the Johnson Report, both of which suggested a strong values approach to education in our schools. They were strongly opposed by many (but not all) churches, by business people (such as the Employers' Federation) and by groups (like the Concerned Parents Association) which claimed to speak for parents.

In the early 1980's while the Labour Government was beginning the economic and social revolution which Ms Richardson was to further, Russell Marshall tried again to make the schools more receptive to the values dimension. Once again the same sort of groups gathered to oppose it. On the face of it, it is quite puzzling to notice that at the end of their social reforms **some of the very people who so bitterly opposed values education are now to the fore in promoting it.** There are, I believe three interconnected explanations for this "change of heart."

1. The first is a genuine recognition, though no full acknowledgement, that the reforms of the past ten or so years have wrought havoc in the sphere of social morality. It is indeed a belated recognition of the other strand in Adam Smith. We are familiar with his economic view that each entrepreneur acts and must act selfishly but because of the Hidden Hand this in fact benefits all. Through each pursuing her or his own ends, all of us are made better off. Unnoticed however is Smith's moral position: that this is possible and sustainable only against a common background of shared community values and mutual trust. Without that, said Smith, wealth might grow but so would violence and anti social behaviour. It is clear to all that over the past 15 years, life in our society has become for many much nastier; the income gap has opened faster than in any other developed country; crime, delinquency and youth suicide have increased enormously. No one can prove any causal connection between social policies and social ills. But in the light of Smith's careful analysis, made a long time before our society existed, it is highly plausible. The Code of Social Responsibility proposed by the previous government and Mr Bolger's rather obscure talk of Social Capital can be taken as a sign that, despite the reforms, they thought that all was not well in our society
2. The second, and less flattering, interpretation is that among these people there is the growing awareness that a revolution cannot be sustained unless it is constantly renewed in the hearts of the young. On this account, the new support for values education is a call for a politically biased school system which will reinforce the revolution. On the face of it values such as loyalty, responsibility, duty, obedience and honesty are **domesticating values.** They serve to reinforce the status quo and the power structures which serve the interests of the dominant group. We need only reflect for a moment on how the values of "loyalty and submission" and even "love" have served the oppression of women by men while generations of South Africans and African Americans were schooled to know their place and be loyal to their exploiters.

3. The third and most cynical interpretation is that the campaign for values education comes from those whose personal and ideological interests lie in the denigration of state schools and the promotion of private schools which (it is alleged without evidence) do a better job of values education. Thus it is a continuation of the privatisation drive for which recent governments have been noted. It is important to recognise that in the ideology which has ruled our lives since 1984 there is no place for the state in education. Roger Douglas and Ruth Richardson, ideological architects of the revolution, both make this clear in their books. Richardson sees the end point of the policies: "the state will divest itself of all the schools it owns." I ask today if some of these extreme views lie beneath the current promotion of values education by private schools, the Catholic Education Office, and the world of business.

What I am arguing is that all programmes of values education are dependent on political judgements. The ideas being promoted in the 1970's and 1980's presumed an open, democratic, pluralistic society, which was to be non racist and non sexist. Those opposed to such a society were consistent in opposing the values education which pre-supposed it. For them the immediate task was not the creation of communal values; on the contrary, schools had to be won over to individualism and selfishness by policies which set parents against teachers, schools against schools, teachers against teachers and principal against staff. Not for nothing did the Employers' federation savagely attack the Johnson Report for neglecting "the real world of work" as they put it. Not for nothing were the "reforms" heralded by an attack on the standards of state schools. Not for nothing were the Picot safeguards of community participation such as Education Forums and the Parents' Advocacy Council, cut off in their prime. We meet today in an institution in which a huge percentage of staff are alienated from the administrators and from the true role of the university. This is not an unwelcome side effect; such alienation and destruction of the university ideal was fully intended in the "reforms" themselves.

THE NATURE OF MORAL PRINCIPLES

In case I am misunderstood, I believe that values education has to be supported but it must be liberated from those who seek to cure the ills by more doses of the medicine which caused them. There are no easy answers but this must involve a greater sense of community, more emphasis on social criticism and a deeper understanding of justice in society. In the education system moral ideas should be discussed not imposed. There must be a place for the disparity of views which mark a pluralistic society. Current proponents are fond of talking of the values which we all share. More important are the values which divide us; it is conflict, not consensus which marks the values domain: young people in schools should confront these conflicts and learn to handle them rationally and tolerantly.

It is easy to say that we all agree on (for example) obedience, kindness and fairness. But this is true only at the most abstract of levels. The Nuremberg trials demonstrated dramatically that obedience is sometimes a vice. The history of the past few decades in New Zealand also shows that certain forms of disobedience may be legitimate and even morally necessary. It is now generally recognised that those who protested against the Vietnam War were probably right and they may have saved many lives. A similar point can be made about those who refused to obey state and police over the Springbok tours of New Zealand and All Black tours of South Africa.

And loyalty - surely we should be loyal only to those who deserve it? It is debatable whether citizens should be loyal to governments that break their word once elected. Should students be loyal to a school that treats them unjustly? Should ethnic minorities be loyal to institutions that have grossly discriminated against them? Should a woman be loyal to the man who abuses her? Should staff be loyal to educational institutions which have rejected the basic values of the academic life?

At face value, fairness seems to be an important virtue. But what does it mean to be fair in a society where many people are treated unfairly? Is it fair, for example, that some people are paid more than 1000 dollars per day while others don't earn that in a month? Is it fair that most New Zealanders eat well while millions in other parts of the world die of starvation? (It can be argued, forcefully, that these are directly related: others starve because we eat well.) We can all support fairness but differ strongly about pay parity for women and equal rights for homosexual couples. Some proponents of private schools ask for "fairness in funding." What this means is that they think that a private school with huge resources and fees of \$7000 per year should receive the same government subsidy as a struggling state school, with less than a third the overall income of the private one. To many of us this would seem **the very opposite of fair**. Similar points can be made about the other virtues that many seem to find "unproblematic". After the Second World War, we executed people who had been obedient to Hitler. The lesson is that one should be obedient only to worthy authorities. We have to ask if our "democratic" governments of recent years have been worthy of our obedience since they have ignored the policies which we elected them on. Yes, kindness is good

but both the ACT and the Alliance parties believe that their policies are kind to those on benefits; one tries to be kind by cutting benefits back and even eliminating them, the other wants to be kind by extending them. And so it is through all the virtues which, so they say, we all can share. My point is that we can share them in the abstract but fall to blows as soon as they are made concrete. The task of moral education is to make them concrete; otherwise they are meaningless.

And this is not primarily a political point but an ethical one. Justice, freedom, responsibility, loyalty and the rest are not moral **rules**: they are moral **principles**. That is to say they draw attention to considerations (eg. is it fair?) which are highly relevant to the moral life but they do not tell us what to do. We should promote people's freedom but there are limits; we should be kind but how and when and where? The working out of these principles in practice constitutes the heart of morality and should form the heart of moral education too. Those who think that the application of moral principles is an easy matter have already foreclosed on the options by embracing a political version of them.

To sum up my message so far:

1. Values education in the past decade has brought about a new kind of person, one motivated by self interest. If we agree on the need for values education which encourages generosity, altruism and community we must realise that we start even further back than we were at the time of the Johnson Report.
2. Values education is inevitably political, and many current proposals are shot through with political motivation and political content.
3. Virtues such as truth telling, freedom, justice and kindness are general moral principles; they cannot be taught in isolation from their application in daily life. These applications will be highly controversial but cannot be avoided. To pretend otherwise is to reveal an ideological commitment.

I turn now more directly to values education in schools.

VALUES IN SCHOOLS

Values education occurs in schools in five main ways:

1. The decisions of Boards of Trustees (BOT), principals and the policies agreed on constitute powerful moral lessons. When schools chose bulk funding because “we could not turn the money down” they were announcing their moral stance. When school principals promote their school on the basis of exam results, they are being dishonest; as professionals they must have read the literature which shows that almost all the variance between schools on public exams is explained by the kind of students who go there; a powerful lesson about honesty. When schools poach students who are talented and decline to enrol their share of children with special needs they are shouting their values from the school tops. When they accept business sponsorship they pronounce that money is more important than the impartiality which is necessary for good education. A school interested in values should start at the top.
2. The power relations in schools and the way these are handled constitute daily lessons in values. They show how the principal views her staff, how teachers view each other, how teachers view students, how the school views parents. Pious exhortations on kindness and fairness will be perceived by students (and rightly) as further examples of adult hypocrisy unless the relationships are benign, professional and consultative.
3. The rules of the school are themselves models of what the school values. Rational rules necessary for the smooth running of the school have to be distinguished from those which violate the students civil rights (eg. by searches of lockers and the like) and those which merely reflect the narrow mindedness of the community. Here I think of rules about hair length, jewellery and the like. Rules which affect students every day are teaching powerful lessons about morality.
4. There are some moral values which must be accepted and unchallenged in the school for they safeguard persons as moral agents. Thus, no school can tolerate racism, sexism, “hate speech”, violent behaviour, harassment, bullying or theft. Although some of these may be debated at the highest level of philosophical argument they cannot be tolerated in practice in the school since each child has to be seen as a person with equal rights and the school as a moral community which acknowledges these rights.
5. For the rest, I think the role of the school is to promote critical reflection on morality. Programmes of values education, linked to classroom subjects or assemblies, should not be forms of indoctrination into one set of values since this is a democratic and pluralistic society. And this I believe is true also of church based schools. It is a major irony that while Christianity preaches the dignity of the person, that dignity has often been violated by Christian educators who have indoctrinated their students. To indoctrinate is to try to by pass rational acceptance and thus to violate human dignity.

In the QPEC material, we suggest that if a school intends to enter into values education it should undergo a process which may culminate in the school devising a programme of its own, or selecting one that is commercially produced. I have already suggested that some programmes are so politically biased that they would involve not education but mis-education. I want, as I move to conclude, to suggest a way of interrogating any programme to see if it is worthy of your school. Teachers should ask four main questions:

- (1) Is there any reference to social justice? The demand for social justice is not only a universal value but is particularly relevant in our society at this time when it is clear to anyone who looks that some people have fared very well and some have fared very badly from the economic and social policies of the past decade or so. It is, therefore, the surest sign of political bias if social justice is not at the heart of the programme. Catholic schools in particular are called to model and teach social justice. The official Vatican document on Catholic education states:

“The catholic school is particularly sensitive to the call from every part of the world for a more just society, and it tries to make its own contribution towards it. It does not stop at the courageous teaching the demands of justice even in the face of local opposition, but tries to put these demands into the practice...in the daily life of the school.” It goes on to say that Catholic schools must never reinforce the privileges of the wealthy but rather must provide a service for “the poor or those who are deprived of family help and affection or those who are far from the faith.” (44-45) I am not convinced that this is an accurate picture of Catholic schools in this country.

- (2) Is there any examination of the economic and social policies which shape society? As I have pointed out earlier, nothing is more value laden than the sort of individualist policies which have marked our recent history. But at any time, the policies of the government and the actions of local government and communities exert a profound effect on the values systems of people. A so called “values education” programme which simply deals with school matters as if the school were not a full part of the society must sell students short and prepare them badly for the life outside the school walls. A programme which does not encourage such examination is a politically biased one telling students either that state policies are not to be morally examined or that these policies are morally good ones.
- (3) Is there any criticism of the world of advertising and the media which so clearly influences young people? It is almost a truism that the television and its standards and the advertising world which surrounds young people have a profound effect on their values. Look at the programme; does it acknowledge this truism? If it does not, it is clearly an ideological programme which, by neglecting these aspects, conveys the message that there is nothing wrong with them.

- (4) Is there any attempt to examine the policies of schools, their leadership styles, their “marketing” or “poaching” strategies, their rules and punishment regimes? Programmes about which the answers are “no” are simply tools for producing passive conformists.

I urge teachers to review any programmes carefully with these questions in mind.

Parents too should be on the alert if their schools proposes to go into ‘values education’ in a specific way. They should ask:

1. Is the school itself to be asked to change its policies in accordance with good values eg to have more concern with ethnic and other minorities or children with special needs? Is the BOT to be held accountable for the lessons taught under its policies? Is the BOT or the Principal involved in “marketing” the school with little concern for other schools? How can such a school talk about integrity, fairness, or community concern? Business subsidies to schools constitute a real problem; business is a pressure group with its own interests. It should have no privileged access to schools. If it has, the values programme will probably be warped from the outset.
2. Are the children to be taught that this is a pluralistic society—one in which there is a variety of viewpoints about most moral and social matters? It is important that our young people come to recognise the variety of views in our society and are not subtly led towards those of some interest group under the pretence that they are “neutral.”
3. Is the programme calculated to promote criticism of unjust policies of the government or the activities of pressure groups? Are the students to be encouraged to look at the imbalances of wealth and power between nations and within our own country and to examine the rival viewpoints on employment relations, housing and hunger? Is the programme intellectually honest in relation to the complexity of morality?

If there are negative answers to all or most of these questions, parents must conclude that what is proposed is not values education but indoctrination in the views of some interest groups within the society. Who, they might well ask, is sponsoring these programmes and for what purpose? They might conclude that having no programme at all is a better policy than having a biased one.

CONCLUSION

I have had the privilege of giving the final keynote, taking part in workshops and talking to many individuals. I believe that something important is happening this weekend and I hope it will continue and become a vital part of the debates which are going to occur throughout the country, in schools and in the wider community.

Some twenty three years ago, Colin McGeorge and I wrote a book for the department of education called "More than Talk; Moral Education in New Zealand." I recently re read it and asked myself if my views had changed over those years. I think they have in two ways:

1. I think that adults must take a stronger stand on values than we advocated then. It was a time when we thought that rational discussion would carry the day. Events over the past years have indicated that they do not. What wins out is not rational argument but power and money. There is now need for much more robust debate in schools and in the community than perhaps I thought then. We cannot afford to be backward.
2. I now think that traditions are more important than we recognised. We, true liberals, thought one could start from scratch so to speak. It is now realised that all morality is embedded in traditions secular or religious. Liberalism is itself a tradition. One of the strengths of this conference and of QPEC itself is that people from different traditions and different types of schools have been able to have a dialogue. No tradition has a monopoly on moral truth and every tradition has elements, theoretical and practical, of which it must be ashamed. The pope gave everyone a lesson when last year he apologised for the terrible things done by and in the name of his church. And many of these occurred not through bad people but through **bad principles**. A pluralistic society is not one which ignores traditions but one which recognises them, respects them and then tries to move beyond them working to revise them in the light of changing circumstances and more inclusive understandings.

Despite these, the final sentence in the book (slightly amended) can still be the final sentence in my address:

"The demand for moral education is not a plea for a few talks on drugs, sex and respect for authority. It is a revolutionary demand that cannot be met without the transformation of the school." I would now add "and of the society which it serves."

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