

OPINION

The war for children's minds

Stephen Law 21 August 2007

In both Australia and my native UK faith schools are booming as a direct result of government policy. These schools are popular. British parents have been known to fake religious commitment to get their child into the right school. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has just confirmed that Australian parents are also abandoning public education in favour of the new, government-subsidised faith schools.

This rapid rise in religious schooling has, of course, been accompanied by concerns, not least of which is that faith schools can be deeply socially divisive.

While I share that worry, my greatest concern is that that the smoke generated by the battle over whether religious schools are a good idea has obscured a more fundamental question: a question about the kind of religious education schools offer. To what extent should schools be allowed to encourage deference to authority when it comes to moral and religious matters? To what extent should they be able to suppress independent, critical thought?

Before the 60's, moral and religious education tended to be highly authority-based. Children were typically expected to accept, more or less uncritically, what they were told. Independent critical thought was discouraged. Sometimes the discouragement was subtle, communicated by little more than the reverential tone with which religious ideas were conveyed. Other times it was more overt.

A friend educated in the 60's tells me she was sent to the headmaster simply for asking why the Catholic Church took the position it did on contraception. Many schools had a Big Brother-like obsession with policing not just behaviour, but thought too. The same friend tells me that even today, 35 years after her Catholic education was complete, she still feels guilty if she dares to question a Catholic belief.

During the 60s and 70s, Western societies became far more liberal. Individuals were encouraged to throw off the old traditions and authorities and think and judge for themselves. This shift in emphasis, from deference to external authority to moral autonomy, was reflected in the kind of moral and religious education children received.

So what changed? Some educators simply abandoned moral and religious education altogether. Not a good idea, I think. Others, realising that, when it comes to morality and religion, education doesn't have to mean indoctrination, developed alternative educational strategies that encourage independent critical thought.

Has this been a good thing? I believe it has. In my book, *The War For Children's Minds* I point out the growing empirical evidence that schools that encourage collective philosophical discussion about religious and moral questions don't just raise the IQs of their pupils, they also help to foster emotional and social skills as well.

Still, many social and religious conservatives profoundly resent this liberalisation. They have constructed a complex mythology about it. As they see it, Western civilisation is suffering from a "moral malaise" the blame for which falls squarely on liberals and the 60s (and also on something called "relativism").

Although they are unlikely to put it in so many words, what these conservatives want above all is to bring deference to religious authority back into the classroom. They want a return to uncritical acceptance of moral and religious belief, certainly in the earlier stages of a child's education. It is the increasing influence of these conservatives that worries me most.

Let me be clear that there are some excellent religious schools, schools that dare to educate rather than indoctrinate. But far too many, while officially liberal, are busy applying psychological techniques that, if not quite brainwashing, lie on the same scale.

Some don't even pretend to be liberal. Just the other day I heard the head of a British Islamic school agree that in any good Islamic school, "Islam is a given and never challenged".

Any school that insists its religion should be "a given and never challenged" should no longer even be tolerated, let alone receive government funding.

If you believe that such authority-based religious education is acceptable, then let me leave you with a question. Suppose authoritarian political schools started opening up around the country. A conservative school opens in Sydney, followed by a communist school in Melbourne. These schools select on the basis of parents' political beliefs. Portraits of political leaders beam serenely down from classroom walls. Each day begins with the collective singing of a political anthem. Pupils are expected to defer, more or less unquestioningly, to their school's political authority and its revered political texts. Rarely are children exposed to alternative political points of view, except, perhaps, in a caricatured form, so they can be sweepingly dismissed.

What would be the public's reaction to such schools? Outrage. These schools would be accused of stunting children - of forcing their minds into politically pre-approved moulds.

My question is: if such authoritarian political schools are utterly beyond the pale, why are so many of us prepared to tolerate their religious equivalents?

The answer, I suspect, is inertia. Authoritarian political schools would be a shocking new development. But there have always been authoritarian religious schools, Familiarity, and perhaps a sense of inevitability, has blunted the sense of outrage we might otherwise feel.

I think it high time we got that sense of outrage back.

Stephen Law is senior lecturer in philosophy at Winthrop College, University of London, editor of the Royal Institute of Philosophy journal "Think" and author of a range of influential books including "The War for Children's Minds"

Check out his Blogspot at: <http://stephenlaw.blogspot.com/>