

OPINION

Education, religion and values: Getting the mix right

Noel Preston, 5 October 2006

Education is an intrinsically ethical enterprise, values ridden, never values free.

Not surprisingly then, Australian schooling has traditionally been a key, socializing and cultural force in our society, though in the past schooling's role in transmitting values was rarely discussed. Moreover, for more than a century, the bulk of Australians had most of their education in state run, secular schools.

But all this is changing. A debate about what values should be taught and how they should be transmitted is now underway. At the same time, there is a shift from state run schools to a plethora of independent, private and religious P-12 schools.

There are predictions that within twenty years more Australian students will attend non-government schools than state schools. This trend represents a massive shift in the social fabric of Australia away from a predominantly egalitarian state run school system supported by a smaller Roman Catholic sector which, at the primary level, was certainly not elitist. Traditionally schooling has been a major instrument of social cohesion in the community while the consensus in Australian politics has been that public money should go overwhelmingly to the schools that are open to everyone, government schools.

And the shift seems to have something to do with the values debate. One suspects that the Howard government (and the same sentiment can be found on the other side of politics) has a value laden view that private schooling is 'better schooling producing better outcomes' and that funding should boost the private schools as an option while parents should have a so called choice about where their children are educated. This funding policy re-inforces the most regularly advanced explanation by parents for the shift to non-government schooling which is "for their children to be more disciplined and to learn values".

This parental hope is likely to prove problematic in many cases because the shifts to larger and larger relatively new private schools requires a demographic shift of teachers, pupils and parents which replicates the plurality of values in the social mainstream, giving these new schools profiles that are not necessarily so different from their state counterparts, even if they have more rigorous uniform policies!

It is a moot point whether the rationale for the rise and rise of independent schooling is justified. There is plenty of evidence that pupils of private schools are not immune from morally challenging social influences. Furthermore private schooling may reinforce individualism in an increasingly socially divided society. Where is the evidence that state-run schools are by comparison amoral? State schools may be comparatively under-resourced but that is a public policy deficiency. They may house more students who struggle with schooling but their diversity may also provide a crucible for learning values that are necessary in a complex world.

However we analyse this shift, the call for more explicit values education in schools across the board is welcome, whatever the motivation of some of its proponents. The National Values in Schools project funded by the Commonwealth is an opportunity to facilitate a conversation in school communities about the values which should be fostered and about the means for doing that. In Queensland there have been significant conferences, workshops, community breakfasts, local school forums and other projects associated with this initiative.

The impact of the Values in Schooling project is dependent on several problematic factors. The following are essential: strong commitment by a school's leadership, married to a capacity to help a school community to construct its own set of values, not just those handed down; adequate training of teaching staff in ethics education; fostering a whole school community which practices what it preaches.

It is also important to match the values project with a curriculum approach that fosters critical thinking. If this emphasis is not there, the impact of introducing an explicit values approach, especially in the middle and senior schools may only be moralistic, disciplinary and one dimensional – something which will do little to contribute to a better world.

And then there's the relationship between values education and religious education. The first thing to say is that no religious believer has a franchise on values or ethical conduct. So, in Australia, values education can and must proceed in a secular, multicultural and pluralist way, while respecting and giving occasion to understanding various faith perspectives.

But that's not all. Schools – even church-run schools – focus on shared values without requiring agreement about beliefs. However, in the end, cultivating the ethical life points to an engagement with the spiritual dimension – that aspect of experience which relates to the human need to act with meaning as an expression of connectedness to other beings and, ultimately, I believe, to what one theologian named 'the ground of our being'.

Yet it remains highly problematic – especially in State schools, though also in faith-based schools – how religious education programs and the whole school values program should be related. I share the concern of many that the right of entry into Primary schools for Religious Education is a messy, sometimes counter-productive way of teaching such a curriculum. How RE in schools can be reformed is an important issue but beyond the scope of this article.

What is important is that schools are careful how they mandate links between values education and the presence of religious representatives in their schools. This is one reason why the proposal to provide public funds to subsidise the employment of school chaplains warrants close scrutiny. It emanated earlier this year from some Federal Government back-benchers, with the reported support of the Prime Minister and the Education Minister. Indeed a cynic might be forgiven for sensing in this move an element of pork-barrelling, wedge politics and even another battle ground for 'the culture wars'.

The idea has been linked explicitly to the need 'to enhance values in schools' and even to the suggestion that government has a responsibility to 'counteract the anti-religious character of certain schools'. This is unfortunate partly because it confuses

the role of chaplains in any school who, if they become the champions of the schools values and code of conduct program, might be slotted into the guise of 'moral policeman' or erroneously represent the fact that to be ethical one must adopt a certain belief stance.

Chaplains are mostly valuable and integral to the school communities where they operate and may have an informal, adjunct role in a values program. Nonetheless, credible, effective whole school ethics education, even in a church school, must equip a school community for living in a multicultural, multi-faith, pluralistic liberal democracy. That is not only a sound educational approach but it fosters a context where theocratic tendencies and the temptation to religious bigotry and indoctrination are minimized. Surely this is a preferred social environment for the proclamation of religious good news while also enhancing the prospect for creating a community where all are included in the ethical conversation.

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