

VALUES EDUCATION AND 'DOING WELL' IN SCHOOL

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Values Education is known internationally by a number of names, including Moral Education, Character Education and Ethics Education. Each variant has a slightly different meaning, pointing to one or other distinctive emphasis. Overriding these differences, however, is a common theme born of a growing belief that entering into the world of personal and societal values is a legitimate and increasingly important role for teachers and schools to play. This is not an attempt to supplant the influences of the home but rather to supplement it and, only where necessary, to compensate for it. International research into teaching and schooling effects is overturning earlier beliefs that values were exclusively the preserve of families and religious bodies and that, as a result, schools function best in values neutral mode. This research is not only pointing out the hollowness of such a belief but the potential for it to lead to diminished effects in all realms of student achievement, including academic achievement. Teaching and schooling that function in values-neutral mode do most to undermine the potential effects of other socializing agencies, including families.

As a result of such international insights, since the early 1990s, each state and territory education system in Australia has been actively promoting its system and teachers as inculcators of the essential values that define being Australian. The Australian Government captured this movement well, and put its own seal on it, in its 'Civics Expert Group' report in 1994 (cf. DEETYA, 1994). Be it under the aegis of civics, citizenship or plain values education, it is now commonly accepted that an essential component of public education's responsibilities is to be found in the work of inculcating values in its students. In short, public education is now defined as a comprehensive educator, not just chartered against cognitive and practical skills but as an inculcator of personal morality and cohesive citizenry. Furthermore, curricula related to civics, citizenship and values education have been designed and trialled in a variety of forms, both free-standing and integrated into mainstream syllabuses. The above state of affairs has not been without its critics both from within and beyond the realm of public education. Criticism has come in different forms. One criticism comes from the belief that public schooling was designed essentially as a haven of values-neutrality. Another comes from scepticism about the capacity of any school to manage, and have impact in, an area that is commonly seen as being totally subjective and therefore un-testable. These are both common criticisms that need to be challenged on both theoretical and empirical grounds.

In terms of the appropriateness of public schooling dealing explicitly with a values agenda, some revision of public schooling history is necessary to challenge the dominant mythology that public schools were established on the grounds of values-neutrality. In fact, those responsible for the foundations of public education in Australia were sufficiently pragmatic to know that its success relied on its charter

being in accord with public sentiment. Part of the pragmatism was in convincing those whose main experience of education had been through some form of church-based education that state-based education was capable of meeting the same ends.

Hence, the documents of the 1870s and 1880s that contained the charters of the various state and territory systems witness to a breadth of vision about the scope of education. Beyond the standard goals of literacy and numeracy, education was said to be capable of assuring personal morality for each individual and a suitable citizenry for the soon-to-be new nation. As an instance, the NSW Public Instruction Act of 1880 (cf. NSW, 1912), under the rubric of 'religious teaching', stressed the need for students to be inculcated into the values of their society, including understanding the role that religious values had played in forming that society's legal codes and social ethics. The notion, therefore, that public education is part of a deep and ancient heritage around values neutrality is mistaken and in need of serious revision. The evidence suggests that public education's initial conception was of being the complete educator, not only of young people's minds but of their inner character as well.

If the move to values neutrality in public education was an aberration, then the efforts of the 1990s and early 2000s could be regarded as a corrective. Responding both to community pressure and the realization that values-neutrality is an inappropriate ethic for any agency of formation, every state and territory has re-stated the original view that public education's charter includes responsibility for personal integrity and social justice. This movement has been evident not only in government reports but in academic and professional literature. As an instance, the 2002 Yearbook of the supreme professional body of teachers, the Australian College of Educators, was devoted to values education (cf. Pascoe, 2002). Furthermore, the Australian Government report on values education (2003) represented another important step in overcoming old and entrenched attitudes around the issue. The Executive Summary re-states the positions of the nineteenth-century charters of public education in asserting that values education "... refers to any explicit and/or implicit school-based activity to promote student understanding and knowledge of values, and (emphasis ours) to inculcate the skills and dispositions of students so they can enact particular values as individuals and as members of the wider community." (DEST, 2003:2)

The Government report was initially endorsed by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), a group that represents all state and territory Education ministers in association with the Federal Minister. At the meeting that endorsed its terms of reference, MCEETYA noted the following:

- that education is as much about building character as it is about equipping students with specific skills;
- that values-based education can strengthen students' self-esteem, optimism and commitment to personal fulfilment; and help students exercise ethical judgment and social responsibility; and,
- that parents expect schools to help students understand and develop personal and social responsibilities. (DEST, 2003:10)

The final report was preceded by 50 funded projects designed, in part, to serve as the case study data for the report. While these projects differed markedly from each other and functioned across all systems of education, most of them had in common a focus

on practical behaviour change as an outcome. The report states that, for the most part, “... the 50 final projects (which involved 69 schools) were underpinned by a clear focus on building more positive relationships within the school as a central consideration for implementing values education on a broader scale.” (DEST, 2003:3)

The preamble to the draft principles which were developed as a result of the study states explicitly that “... schools are not value-free or value-neutral zones of social and educational engagement.” (DEST, 2003:12) Among the draft principles is one that speaks of values education as part of the explicit charter of schooling, rather than in any way incidental to its goals. It also makes it clear that it is not designed merely as an intellectual exercise but is aimed at changing behaviour by promoting care, respect and cooperation. Another principle speaks of the need for values education to be managed through a “... developmentally appropriate curriculum that meets the individual needs of students” (DEST, 2003:12), while yet another addresses the need for “... clearly defined and achievable outcomes... (being) evidence-based and ... (using) evaluation to monitor outcomes.” (DEST, 2003:13) The first principle identified above clearly re-establishes the charter for values education as part and parcel of all education.

With the Australian Government report, the aberration of values-neutrality in public education was finally put to rest in complete fashion at the highest and most representative levels of Australian education. Appropriately, the report did not differentiate between public, private and religious systems of schooling, nor did the case study analyses find any substantial difference in the directionality or outcomes of the projects that operated across these systems. On the basis of this evidence at least, public and private education systems were as one in their charter around values education and in their capacity to implement it. At the same time, the report threw down the gauntlet to all education systems to design and implement practical curricular means of effecting and evaluating values education. The gauntlet was strengthened beyond question in the allocation of \$29.7m in the 2004 Federal Budget for a Values Education Program with its rationale against the total purposes of teaching and schooling for all systems in the National Values Education Framework, which states in part: “Values education reflects good practice pedagogy.” (DEST, 2005:7) The Framework rationale furthermore makes explicit reference to the language of quality teaching as both supporting and being enhanced by values education.

The Values Education Program, guided by the National Framework for Values Education (2005), has driven a number of important projects related to best practice in schools, teacher education, parents and other stakeholders, and resources. The first of these, the Values Education Good Practice Schools (VEGPS) project, in particular, has impacted on over 400 Australian schools and has begun to elicit findings that illustrate beyond doubt that values education is part and parcel of quality teaching, best practice pedagogy and effective schooling. Values Education can no longer be seen as a dispensable option, nor even as a mere concomitant of quality teaching. It must now be seen as the ‘missing link’, without which teaching fails to have its full effect, including its best links with the formative work of parents and families (Lovat, 2005; 2006).

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