

## ETHICS AND VALUES IN EDUCATION:

### CAN SCHOOLS TEACH RIGHT AND WRONG?

[Paper by Dan O'Donnell, AARE Conference 1994: Newcastle

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#### ABSTRACT:

Following the presentation of the Wiltshire Report to the Queensland Parliament, there has been much public interest in Values Education and much public disquiet at the alleged discovery that Australian State Schools have never taught Right and Wrong since they have never been equipped professionally to do so. That alleged discovery, it would seem, on the basis of over a century of State-run education in Queensland, is entirely fallacious. The massive evidence extrapolated from Annual Reports of the Queensland Ministers for Education and from Inspection Reports on individual schools, appears to demonstrate beyond dispute that not only were Queensland schools and teachers making vigorous efforts to inculcate socially unacceptable behaviours (such as abstaining from lying, cheating, stealing and murder – to identify but four of many) but that they were required by their employer to do so. Time and again it was reiterated that the development of good citizens was the primary obligation of teachers above all else – including the Three Rs – and the school itself was identified formally from 1875 until Kohlbergian ideas began to dominate Australian education in the 1970s, as a potent instrumentality in the promotion of good citizenship.

A resurgence of interest in moral education – or character development – is manifesting itself as schools grapple with increasingly serious disciplinary problems and the world outside the classrooms appears to be less virtuous than hitherto. In an article last year in *The Australian* (1 Dec. 1993), Professor Lauchlan Chipman (now of Monash University) answered the Socratic query: "Can virtue be taught?" Both Monash and Wollongong Universities, Chipman explained, were embarking on formal programs to inculcate "truthfulness, accuracy, and the highest possible ethical standards in both personal and professional life". It was one fundamental role of universities to teach these values, he argued.

In the same issue, Margot Prior, Professor of Clinical Psychology at La Trobe, asserted bluntly that our schools had to "arrest antisocial behaviour such as defiance, disruptive behaviour, and truancy", adding as well callousness, stealing, vandalism, fighting and property destruction. Both Chipman and Prior brought to the surface an

issue of moment not only to teachers but to all concerned with Australian education: Can schools teach right and wrong?

At the outset, let me declare my position. I speak as a "free, compulsory and secular" teacher whose work-life has been spent in or on the periphery of the state or public classrooms, not Church schools. I argue strenuously that values can and must be taught, formally and informally, as an integral part of daily work, like spelling, mathematical formulae, irregular French verbs, and Japanese Hiragana and Katakana. Inculcating sound and healthy habits of heart and mind and those values prized by the society which employs them is a duty of teachers, even more important than cultivating proficiency in the Three Rs. What is more, success is as assessable as growth in reading, writing, and arithmetical skills.

Inspectors used to make reference to social concepts such as courtesy, cheerfulness, willingness to undertake school tasks, responsiveness to questioning, the "tone" of the classroom, and the relationship between the teacher and his pupils - all vital and telling indicators of the social dynamics of the classroom embodying the values being inculcated. While no two teachers would list an identical set, or place them in the same, precise order of importance, there are common values that all teachers were once expected to hold. They included abstaining from lying, cheating, stealing and murdering, four ground-rules for an orderly society straight from the ancient Mosaic Laws. In my lifetime as a teacher, the temper of the times has changed radically. What was once considered a critically important part of the teacher's daily work appears to have been rejected as outside the domain of the schools. During those heated debates in 1977-78 over the exorbitantly costly Social Education Materials Project (SEMP), even the Ten Commandments were summarily discarded as mere "concrete rules" able to be flouted by those who attained the highest level of moral development - the universal ethical principle orientation - in Lawrence Kohlberg's six-stage classification. Kohlberg glibly passes over Stage 1 (Why is it not arguable that at this very stage, with four and five-year-olds, we have the most pure and uncontaminated expression of human justice?) to Levels 3 and 4 where we ordinarily mortals are encountered, to Level 6 where only the Mother Teresas, the Martin Luther Kings, and Mahatma Gandhis are to be found. At that ultimate stage of moral maturity, there are universal values which are not inculcated, since these morally mature rarities define them for themselves. Despite strong criticism of this theory by eminent psychiatrists, philosophers, historians, poets and sociologists - including his Harvard colleagues, Robert Coles and Carol Gilligan - and despite his own repudiation of his six stage theory some time before his well known suicide educationists in Australia and overseas continue to regard Kohlberg as an authority on moral awareness.

The Queensland Experience

Historically, values have been taught, formally and informally – that is, inculcated – from the beginning of Queensland education. When the present system of public education was evolving to emerge in the Education Act of 1875, there was an exchange of ideas between J.S. Kerr and the Royal Commissioners under Mr. Justice Lilley on 11 September 1874 which established the criteria for character development within schools. Kerr, a former headmaster of Warwick and Fortitude Valley Schools, and at the time Headmaster of the Brisbane Normal School, explained that his approach to moral education amongst his boys was by way of appeals to conscience, example, lessons in the Scriptures and Civics and Morals, and corporal punishment (often generously dispensed).

An examination of the Queensland record for the ensuing century reveals little fundamental shift from the position described by Kerr in 1874. When the so-called "New Curriculum" was introduced in 1905, one of the basic principles enunciated was that in every lesson in State classrooms, teachers were to be mindful that their primary function was to "increase the influence of the school as a agent in the intellectual, moral

and social development of the child". Newman's "seamless robe", with an uncompartimentalized curriculum, springs to mind. There was just one critical proviso emphasized unmistakably in 1905:

"It must be most clearly understood that in teaching morals the instruction must be wholly secular, according to section 5 of the Education Act of 1875."

The fundamental importance of moral education was restated again in 1915

and 1921 when new curricula were introduced. In 1905, David Ewart (Director of Education) had told his Minister that "the influence of the school should be visible on the road to and from school", the ultimate test for schools being the behaviour of pupils in the wider society. In 1914, Reginald H. Roe (Inspector-General) complained that Civics and Morals lessons were often performed "in a perfunctory or indolent spirit", and sometimes even neglected altogether. "No lesson requires more careful preparation than the lesson on morals," he declared, including within its parameters classroom experiences in Justice, Honour, Love, Reverence, Obedience, Duty and Service. "The teacher is the potent factor in the school's influence for good and evil", he argued, "the intemperate, dishonest, or immoral schoolmaster being a plague-spot in the community". Above all else, Roe elevated "duty of service" to the highest rank in a school's priorities.

In 1921, during the incumbency of Andrew S. Kennedy as Director of Education (1920-22), Queensland teachers were unambiguously instructed in the Preface to the new Syllabus that:

"No opportunity of direct teaching or of indirect influence, by which the child's character can be strengthened and purified, should

be neglected; for character formation is the highest part of a teacher's work."

The point was re-iterated in 1926 by District Inspector Earnshaw (in charge of West Moreton). "The lessons in conduct and morals varied with the personality of the teacher, on whose character and conduct the good tone of a class or school depends," Earnshaw advised:

"The actual evidence seen in the punctuality of the attendance, honesty of work, polite conduct, in and out of school, neatness of dress and person etc., is far more important than the best written composition on any one of the subjects."

Such behaviour was learned, Earnshaw maintained, taught by deliberate, systematic instruction bolstered by moral suasion and the undeviating example of the teacher. Two years earlier, Earnshaw had provided a rider to his report on Civics and Morals in the schools of West Moreton as valid today as it was then:

"The mechanical method of trying to inspire noble ideals and to cultivate virtue by compositions compiled or transcribed by the teacher and learnt by the children is to be condemned."

Even by mid-century, yet another "new" Curriculum (1952) reinforced the historic obligation of teachers to fashion and mould character:

"In the moral training of the children, the daily routine of the school and the example of the teacher are probably the most potent influences. The constant example of the teacher's kindness, his determination, his justice, his punctuality and orderliness, his enthusiasm and devotion to his work, will have more effect than any set discourses on these virtues. Yet definite instruction must also be given in morals and civic duties

The very words were identical to those used in the Prefaces of the 1914 and the 1921 Syllabuses.

### A Change in Direction

In 1977-78, the tradition of formal instruction and training in moral values came under intense scrutiny at numerous public meetings. When the social science kit MACOS was dramatically axed by the Queensland Government at the end of 1977, and drastic prohibitions imposed soon afterwards on the social education materials (SEMP) which had been devised by the Curriculum Development Centre in Canberra, opinion appeared

to be polarised. Such was the outcry, both for and against the Government's decision, that a Parliamentary Select Committee was swiftly set up to examine all aspects of Queensland education, including Social Education.

MACOS, for use with Grade V classes, had dispensed entirely with traditional social studies (involving history, geography, civics and

morals) in favour of a year's intensive examination of the social and sexual proclivities of seagulls, salmon, baboons and the Netsilik Eskimos. Some parents were appalled that children of nine and ten (some still believing in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy) were required to make advanced judgements about what makes humans human, and to perform in-depth analyses of the Eskimos' practice of senicide and wife-swapping. Complicating the issue was the fact that when SEMP was banned unceremoniously in February 1978, some Catholic Schools in Queensland were permitted to use the materials, and indeed did so despite Church teaching about the Decalogue and trenchant criticism of portions of the materials by Churchmen of standing. Bishop Leonard Faulkner of the Townsville Catholic Diocese instructed principals and teachers within his Diocese that no part of the Family kit was to be used at all, and that no other part of the total package was to be used without the approval of the school community (comprising teachers, parents and priests) following widely advertised public meetings.

In a period of unprecedented interest in education, one Queensland newspaper provided a version of events which became the orthodox explanation. "One page an issue!" its headline shouted on 24 February 1978: "One quarto-sized page appears to lie at the heart of the debate about SEMP. Curriculum section officers from the State Department yesterday made more than 1000 pages comprising SEMP's Family section - the most controversial - available to the Courier Mail."

The page in question, containing a series of relatively innocuous newspaper articles about homosexuals, was depicted as the ignition for the total opposition to SEMP. Was this what had caused all the fuss, a page about gays? According to the Queensland Teachers' Union at the time, 89 percent of Queensland teachers supported all of the material. Queensland Educators angrily denounced the Cabinet decision to ban the materials, and vigorously rejected the right of Cabinet to make any decision at all about educational materials. Education was their exclusive domain. What about journalistic ethics? Was that one page really an adequate explanation of all the fuss, rather than, say, reams of offensive material which showed the mindset of those directing Australian education at the time? Take the cartoon of the flat-chested teenage girl being offered two lemons to shove up her blouse by her male peer which was offered to resource-starved teachers to use as they would. It was axiomatic in 1977-78 that Australian teachers were all fully professional, fully autonomous freelancers able to introduce and discuss any topic without regard to its moral suitability, without the constraint of public or parental concern, and paradoxically without regard even for their professional colleagues teaching in adjoining classrooms. Indeed, much was made in Queensland (and across its borders) that only in the funny, fuddy-duddy "Deep North" were such antiquated, puritanical constraints imposed on the teaching profession.

A Review Committee (comprising some members of the original SEMP team) was swiftly set up by the Queensland Director-General to examine these

materials now at the centre of a Queensland storm. Some minor flaws were suddenly detected, including that "lemon" cartoon, which, following the public outcry, "could cause embarrassment to sensitive members of the class". But but there was not then or subsequently a single word about the utter unsuitability of much of the material, or about the rationale underlying the total package that all children had to be exposed

to the seamy and the sordid on the ground that everyone should experience "life in the raw". A meeting of the Queensland Chapter of the Australian College of Education, comprising the most senior educators in the State at the time, was informed that children should "learn about life, not a fake or bowdlerised version of life". It evoked not a murmur of dissent even though it ran counter to that historical tradition evident in the Queensland record for the preceding century that the school and its curriculum should elevate, enrich, and ennoble its young charges.

Even at the time, there were pervasive fears of the potentially baneful impact of the Kohlbergian injunction that teachers remain morally neutral. At the bottom of public concern was awareness of the fallacy that all values and all behaviours are equal. They are not, of course. There was also awareness that the philosophy underlying SEMP was seriously defective in maintaining that values cannot be taught. Note the official instructions to the nation's teachers:

"Direct teaching of concepts is impossible and fruitless. A teacher who tries to do this usually accomplishes nothing but empty verbalism, a parrotlike repetition of words by the child, simulating a knowledge of the corresponding concepts but actually covering up a vacuum."

The point was reinforced with the outright assertion that traditional approaches to moral training (such as setting a worthy example, persuading, convincing, limiting of choices, moral suasion, inspiring, establishing rules to follow, engendering an awareness and understanding of cultural and religious principles, and appealing to conscience) had failed. "These traditional approaches to values have not and cannot lead to values in the sense that we are concerned with them," the instructions to teachers ran:

"values that represent the free and thoughtful choices of intelligent humans interacting with complex and changing environments."

Instead, pupils were encouraged to clarify their own values (or devise for themselves their own unique codes of behaviour) in open-ended discussions in which teachers were to avoid moralising, criticising and preaching since all values and behaviours are equal.

In recent years in Queensland, Moral Education has again become topical although it is arguable that it has, as the Curriculum of 1905 asserted,

always been pivotal. On 21 April 1992, Professor Eileen Byrne of the University of Queensland strenuously advocated a return to formal instruction in traditional values. In her words:

"We have almost as active policy in the last twenty years, not taught religion or ethics or morals consciously in schools."

Those who had vigorously promoted the Kohlberg philosophy and the values clarification of Raths, Simon and Harmin had won the day, and our schools. Today, in 1994, the Queensland Parliament is poised to act upon the recommendations of the Wiltshire Committee which appears to favour the introduction of lessons in ethical theory in which children will arrive at a moral philosophy with which they are comfortable and which they will be able to defend. There have been strenuous efforts to promote the new "Ethics" as a "discrete, stand-alone subject" rather than the all-encompassing responsibility of every teacher. Moreover, every school "constituency" - the in-term is to be encouraged to create its own "charter of values": Annerly and Aramac, Brisbane and Biloela, Coolangatta and Caboolture. There has not been a single word about common ingredients in these so-called "charters of values", not a syllable about the

desirability of inculcating in all school pupils across the length and breadth of the State, an abhorrence of lying, cheating, stealing and murder - to mention again four behaviours condemned by civilized societies since the beginning of time. There is, in fact, a conspicuous avoidance of recommendation of any ethical instruction at all. What we shall have, it seems, is pseudo-sophisticated discourse handled by university-trained ethicists. Not experts in right and wrong, mark you, but ethicists equipped to transplant into the classroom the New Moral Theory which empowers each child to cultivate a code of behaviour "with which he is comfortable and which he can defend." Neither Hitler nor Idi Amin could have asked for more. Seven years after Professor Lawrence Kohlberg committed suicide, his flawed six stage taxonomy still appears to dominate Australian education.

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Preface to the 1905 Curriculum, p.52. See also Queensland Times, 15 Oct. 1904, which reported on the "new curriculum": to increase the influence of the school as an agent in the intellectual, moral and social development of the child." Ann. Rep., 1905, p.32.

Ann. Rep., 1914, p.29.

Ann. Rep., 1921, p.10.

Ann. Rep., 1926, p.56

1952 Syllabus, p.4

Ann. Rep., 1924, p.64

From the South Australian kit, Hassles,p.6

From the South Australian kit, To Start You Talking, p.8

Courier Mail, 21 April 1992

Preface to the 1905 Syllabus, p.54.

Syllabus, 1914, p. 10; Syllabus, 1921, p.10. For half a century, ev en the wording of the instructions to teachers was unchanged.

The General Meeting of members was held at the Kelvin Grove C.A.E. on 21 Mar. 1978. Reports of the meeting appeared in Newsletters of the Queensland Chap ter in March and April 1978, and in letters to the Courier Mail on 11, 15, 19 and 26 April 1978. A more detailed coverage of the protracted MACOS-SEMP dispute in Queensland is given in O'Donnell, D., "SEMP: ONE PAGE AN ISSUE?" (1980).

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