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Conflating religious principles with emotional literacy

Abstract:

This paper considers the value-addedness that notions of emotional literacy give to prestigious schools in Australia. Combining ideas of self-esteem and emotional intelligence, emotional literacy has emerged as a pedagogical project in such schools. Moreover, ideas about emotional literacy are used to sell educational packages in which they sit comfortably with religious principles. Religious principles, in turn, are often reduced to broader and less specific notions of spirituality that are more akin to progressivism than religion. This paper draws on a recent research study of school generated documents in the public domain that represent twenty elite Australian schools. In doing so, the paper considers the truth claims made in such publications as ways of adding value to the 'best' education on offer.

Introduction

Increased federal government funding to the so-called non-government sector has injected renewed fervour and expansion into 'elite'¹ Australian schools in recent times. While noticeable at all levels of non-government education, the top end of the market is an interesting place to observe new tactics and strategies to project images and rhetorical flourishes aimed to attract the 'best' clients. Improvement on a grand scale to school buildings and equipment is only part of the transformation. Change in this sector is more than material. There are discursive shifts in terms of identity formation and self-

¹ Elite schools in this instance refer to non-government schools. Usually affiliated with traditional Christian denominations, they have been historically called 'private'.

presentation which attest to new forms of individual ‘habitus’ (Bourdieu 1984) as well as new articulations of ‘institutional habitus’ (Reay et al. 2001). These shifts place an emphasis on how education, through its purchase at a particular school, can add value to the lives of students.

In this textual analysis of school-generated documents in the public domain from 2000-2004, special attention is given to how education is being sold as a new kind of identity builder. Schools have always built identity – sometimes referred to as ‘scholastic identity’ (Ball 1990) – but there is a newness about how the identity of the successful student is perceived and developed in the corporate school. The paper will investigate how emotional literacy can come to broadly mean ‘spirituality’ with market edge. In doing so it will raise questions about how the current education market is operating.

Setting the scene

Historically in Australia, state schooling has been the dominant form of educational provision with Education Acts passed by all the states to provide non-sectarian education (Goodman 1968). However, for over a century, there have been non-government schools affiliated with religious denominations. These schools, despite government funding since the 1960s, regard themselves as ‘private’. Currently, in Australia, approximately 32 per cent of all students attend non-government schools (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2003). A further division between Catholic and other non-government schools shows that about 65 per cent of these students attend Catholic schools (ABS 2003). Therefore private, non-Catholic schools which are the subjects of this study attract about 19 per cent of Australian students (ABS 2003).

The present enactment of the education marketplace at its top level requires excellence to be publicly displayed. Private schools that command the enviable apex of the market position are the flagships of social and cultural advantage. In their display of wealth and influence the nation’s ‘top’ schools are performing according to the tenets of ‘performativity’ (Lyotard 1979). This task calls for a re-shaping of educational identities in a culture that will build high levels of social and emotional growth through

relationships. Building superior relationships in a performative culture is an exacting and enterprising task as increasingly it is being recognised that *[r]elationships are essential for successful learning* (School P brochure). Through such an emphasis on relationships, the arguments supporting the notion of emotional literacy are made clear. Indeed the 'truth' claims of emotional literacy are spreading. For instance, in one educational area in Britain, '[r]elationships' are becoming the 'Fourth R' as students in 14 secondary and 80 primary schools learn emotional literacy as a core component of their curriculum (Rumbelow 2001, p.13). Accordingly teachers, leading by example, are catalysts for its development. The role of teachers in one school is expressed thus: *[Our] teachers are caring, energetic and professional. Their classroom work is complemented by a commitment to each student's spiritual, emotional and intellectual growth at all levels* (School B, Prospectus).

Value-adding education

Despite a 'fabrication' element which is inherent in displays of performativity (Ball 2003), the promotional pitch of elite private schools does not waver. As Ball (2000) points out, fabrication is neither 'truth' nor 'untruth' but is written into performativity documents in ways that distinguish them from other school materials. Significantly, promotional materials, such as prospectuses, brochures and magazines are visible displays of a school's worth, value and enterprise. Information about schools, their successes and programs is also spread electronically through elaborate websites as well as through the media of newsletters, advertisements in magazines, billboards, editorial comment and articles in newspapers. Given the nature of postmodernist discursive shifts, tradition and enterprise coalesce compatibly, providing a focus for promotional materials. Images on promotional materials juxtapose the past and present, laying claims to future success. Rhetoric is crafted to support the images in a compelling way that leads to choices being made of one school over its competitors.

Cashed-up elite schools are very conscious of their institutional identity or habitus and often employ marketing professionals and spin-doctors to explicitly promote their best qualities in ways that give them market niche as traditional but cutting-edge corporations.

Any paradox here is elided. However while this market is assertively and attractively presented, the truth claims of such schools are difficult, if not impossible, to verify. Despite extravagant advertising and public relations campaigns and displays, it remains difficult, if not impossible, to gauge the value or value-addedness in terms of social and emotional growth for students. One school, for instance, declares that: *Students are encouraged to have a strong sense of self-worth, to develop as life-long learners, to set realistic yet challenging goals and to be tolerant, resourceful and flexible in a complex changing society* (School C, Prospectus). Another school targets parents of daughters by stating: *If she is to be a woman of the world we need to help her dreams be transformed into realities* (School D, Prospectus). The intrinsic value of a superior education is proclaimed as a *gift for life* by another girls' school (School N, billboard advertisement).

Promotional materials increasingly emphasise that the kind of enterprising, market-edge education on offer is one that helps to build self-esteem. This is sometimes explicitly expressed, following Daniel Goleman (1996), as 'emotional intelligence'. Emotional intelligence (EQ) is 'the ability to understand and control our relationship with others' (Buckell 2002, p.35) and as such can matter more than IQ (Goleman 1996). The behaviours through which people express themselves in terms of emotional rapport are a measure of an individual's emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996). In this way, self-esteem and emotional intelligence come together as emotional literacy in performativity documents. Developed through school experiences, emotional literacy is purportedly acquirable in a pedagogical sense. Prospectuses and newsletters almost always address the building of self-esteem in ways which implicitly connote emotional intelligence. It is unusual if this idea, expressed in different ways, is not part of the market spiel. For example, at a boys' school, it is stated that *... students from Year 4 to Year 10 are combining their need for excitement and adventure with opportunities to develop their self-esteem, physical and social skills, and leadership potential ...* (School F, Magazine). Another boys' school encourages *boys to experience all that they can in the pursuit of academic excellence and physical challenge. This gives ... boys the opportunity to experience success and raise their self esteem* (School I, advertisement).

Self-esteem as an integral part of emotional literacy has enjoyed a compelling attraction that powerfully extends into almost every aspect of our lives. While not a new concept in education (Steinem cited in Ward 1996, p.3), in the previous century to the present, self-esteem as a commonly understood idea of personal confidence and success has gained educational and social currency. As one writer argues

Most people in the developed world now seem to believe self-esteem is the key that will unlock their soul. Thousand of books have been published offering readers ways to improve their self-esteem. Self-esteem is the religion of the age, the one sure way to salvation. (Appleyard 2002, p.25)

For over a century in education, progressive education discourses have melded self-esteem to good pedagogy. Bearing in mind that progressivism is both complex and diverse in its emergences in different sites for different reasons, tenets of progressivism should be seen as a set of discourses rather than a discrete philosophy (Meadmore 2003). Certainly progressivism has been taken up and enacted in almost infinite ways. The popularity of progressivism is due to its malleability and its links with educational psychology. Progressive ideas have been both purloined from psychological discourse and wedded to it. The 'psychological complex' (Rose 1985) of expertise and practices has grown in status and power continuing its dominance in pedagogy and school culture. The privileged position that psychology holds in education and in the wider society is largely premised on ideas of self-esteem and how they can be utilised to build and restore people's identities

The 'whole child' of progressive discourse is developed in academic, physical, emotional and spiritual dimensions. Successful development in these 'parts' of the whole child allegedly leads to the achievement of self-esteem. Accordingly self-esteem has become a knowledge object that teachers have endeavoured to produce in their students. Although the contemporary understanding of self-esteem is a socio-cultural 'invention', it nevertheless has the status of a 'truth' accompanied by particular 'truth-effects' (Foucault 1980). Self-esteem has grown from a 'fragile idea used to ground the newly emerging

discipline of psychology to a basic truth about human experience and motivation' (Ward 1996, p.1). .

The focus on the development of self-esteem acts as a normalizing strategy. It creates the 'normal', and the 'other'—those whose self-esteem is 'low' or even negligible. Students appraised as having low self-esteem become both subject and object of intervention strategies for rehabilitation. Educators dare not neglect the building of self-esteem as one of the most important personal attributes. When self-esteem building is positioned as being pivotal to quality teaching and learning, the pedagogical 'truth' is clearly evident in pastoral care programs. Because self-esteem is seen to be crucial to student overall development, pastoral care programs are described as a selling-point in school materials. Students can now *learn* self esteem as part of emotional literacy if given the right opportunities. Often the building of self-esteem is linked to extra-curricular activities, some of which involve retreats at camps where students are exposed to the kind of physically challenging activities that were once outside their educational experience. *Better self-esteem, stronger leadership skills and more effective communication skills are the expected outcomes for boys following the ... expanded outdoor education program* (School F, *Magazine*). Traditionally a preserve of boys' schools, outdoor education is now provided for girls also. Such is the value placed on relationships building through experiences of bonding in camps and retreats that outdoor education has become an essential part of the curriculum in wealthy schools. Through a bonding together with colleagues, new confidences and new alliances are supposedly forged as students become proficient in both physical and emotional skills. In terms of relationship-building, close and positive human interactions are supposed to produce self-esteem, shaping student identity. One boys' school argues that:

People are shaped by experiences and events as much as by what they learn ... These skills include learning to win and lose, forming a commitment to a common goal, relationship skills, team work, being considerate of others, communication skills and developing self-esteem (School F, *Magazine*).

There is the assumption that a transfer of training occurs in terms of self-esteem fostered in outdoor sites to attitudes that will facilitate academic success in the classroom. In our competitive, neo-liberal society (Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996), what happens within the classroom in terms of school success is paramount. However, it cannot be taken for granted that academically able students will 'naturally' have self-esteem, although there is a good chance, given the emphasis on success in examinations in school culture, that they will be in a position to feel good about themselves and build better relationships. But the possibility of academically-able students having low self-esteem is not overlooked in promotional rhetoric, giving increased impetus for the need for *everyone* to develop self-esteem at school. Thus self-esteem as an absolutely critical attribute for *all* students to develop, is expressed thus: *The activities the boys are involved in act as powerful metaphors for real life situations ... the fear that students confront in an outdoor education seeing can be confronted in school life as well. And their self esteem will grow when those fears, which limit the view they have of themselves, are faced and met* (School F, Magazine).

Learning soft skills

Emotions can be harnessed for individual success as well as organisational gain. Termed *soft-skills* (Hatcher 1998), emotions and relationships as emotional literacy become skills to be learned and practised. Developed through training and skilling, the acquisition of soft-skills becomes part of the pedagogical task of the school. Proponents of soft-skilling for ensuring better relationship building argue that the soft skills, the emotions, are harder to master than the hard skills, the technical ones (Hatcher 1998). For instance, in promotional materials, it is not uncommon for private schools to present a case that young men in particular need to develop soft skills in order, not only to prosper as individuals and future leaders, but to survive in a more personal sense. One school, calling on Daniel Goleman, claims that *IQ is no longer a measure of success. It may only count for 20 percent. The remaining 80 percent is attributed to Emotional and Social Intelligences, and luck* (School F, Magazine). Links are made between problems like drug dependency, suicide, loneliness and depression, and the ability for young men to express their emotions (School F, Magazine).

While up-market prospectuses almost always include pictures and collages of handsome young male faces, there is an accompanying sense of vulnerability and concern that boys be given the opportunity to be soft-skilled in terms of emotional development (McWilliam and Brannock 2001). This training might even include points of etiquette and chivalry in terms of how they treat their female friends socially. Emotions such as sensitivity, empathy, altruism and a positive outlook are highly desirable. As one private school puts it: *[I]t is vital that schools like ours, who enjoy the benefit of close and supportive communities, continue to thrive and dedicate themselves to producing the kind of dynamic, sensitive and adaptive leaders that this country so desperately needs* (School F, Magazine). In another school *students ... are encouraged to develop enquiring and flexible minds with a positive self-concept and sense of personal direction, together with respect for others and qualities of self-discipline, motivation and commitment* (School E, Prospectus).

As beliefs in self esteem have been given new potency through the invention of emotional intelligence (Goleman 1996), boosting self-esteem's already acquired cult status (Appleyard 2002, p.26), there is a lot of added confidence in and credibility given to emotional literacy. In a pedagogical sense, advocates of EQ argue that teaching emotional literacy can be achieved relatively easily, using step-by-step activities (Lewkowicz 1999). Techniques for developing and applying self-awareness, managing emotions, self-control, empathy and handling relationships are readily available to develop emotional competence (Lewkowicz 1999). When adopted as individual development, the theory of emotional intelligence has widespread application through do-it-yourself personal development practices and strategies that take a 'holistic approach, looking at all areas of life' ... including partnering and parenting, and finances and transitional loss, when people move out of your life' (Retchford cited in Lawnham, 2001, p.20). EQ theory is seductive in that it purports to help 'people be what they're meant to be ... The personality interacts with abilities. If people can tap into their personalities, they can cope better' (Saragossi cited in Lawnham, 2001, p.20). Indeed one school incorporates social and emotional learning into their program by exploring themes of

‘bullying, discrimination, alienation, body image, abuse, and depression ... to provide students with insight into how they should think about and take control of their own behaviour’ (School F, *Magazine*).

Another component of the discourse of emotional literacy that makes it attractive and useful to education lies in its potential as another risk management strategy. In recent advertisements, schools are promoting the safety aspect of their environment, something that can no longer be taken-for-granted, especially in boarding school situations. For instance a Sydney school *boasts an enviable environment that is safe and secure* while another School focuses on a *secure family environment* (Schools K & L advertisements, 2002). Caring, sharing communities of people with well-developed emotions hold people together through strong and lasting relationships. Such communities make governing societies more manageable, more predictable, and safer for everyone. School prospectuses often bear out this idea of community and its concomitant responsibilities in their pastoral care statements, and in a more general sharing community idea: *One measure of a community’s effectiveness is how closely its members support one another ... [this school] is a very successful community* (School M, *Gazette*). Increasingly ‘community’ is depicted as being the entire school ‘family’, embracing a closeness that displays superior emotions. Emotional literacy becomes a means of managing diversity by promoting a sense of unity borne out in the display of the right emotions. Thus emotional literacy can be seen as a tactic of the ‘art of government’ (Foucault 1991) for mutual benefit. The management of the emotions of oneself and others is therefore central to the achievement of values and behaviours that hold societies and communities together.

When positioned as a strategy of government where government is an ‘art’ (Foucault 1991) emotional intelligence begins to lose some of its transparency as merely soft-skilling for individual achievement. Clearly there are wider, more encompassing and less narcissistic considerations that lie outside the domain of the school as well as within it. The idea of emotional intelligence is persuasive to government because it can be used produce norms. In this way it could be said to be operative in terms of the idea of

‘parergonality’ (Symes and Meadmore 1999, p.5). This idea, following Derrida, is useful in describing and explaining cultural practices that have emerged around education and schooling. They practices are both inside the school but are also outside it too. In the context of education, parergonality is able to explain activities—like the skilling and training in emotional literacy. By drawing cultural practices what was once considered peripheral to the school into its core pedagogical work, norms of emotional literacy can be used in all manner of ways to produce ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault 1977) as good citizens and leaders of the future.

However there are other questions that need to be asked. Not everyone is convinced that the invention of self-esteem and emotional intelligence as emotional literacy are anything more than shaky ideas underpinned by psychological discourse (Ward 1996; McWilliam 1999; Appleyard 2002). Certainly there is an established ‘psy’ industry (Rose 1985) that thrives through professional expertise, practices, and rhetoric which valorise these concepts. As Nicholas Emler points out: ‘Few ideas in the human sciences ... have ever achieved the level of attention that has been lavished on self-esteem’ (cited in Appleyard 2002, p.26). As schools re-produce the ideas attendant with self-esteem and emotional intelligence as a means of pedagogical redemption through the teaching and learning of emotional literacy, some caution is called for. It is simply too easy to assume that students who fail or who exhibit bad behaviour have low self-esteem (Appleyard 2002, p.27). On the contrary, Appleyard asserts that:

Lack of self-esteem does not contribute to the problems of crime, including violent crime, racial prejudice, teenage smoking or child maltreatment. Indeed, racism and violent crime seem to be encouraged by high self-esteem. In the areas of education, alcohol and drug abuse, either there is no proven correlation or there is a very slight influence.

It is not the purpose of this paper to enter into this debate. Suffice to say that if the jury is still out on how emotional literacy works to influence behaviour, then schools need to be cautious in their articulations of emotional growth through pedagogical programs. If there

is only a marginal benefit at best for school children, then a re-thinking of this project is needed.

Making religious principles progressive

In elite schools where high fees are paid by parents, a heightened impetus to produce the emotionally well-rounded young person who exhibits confidence, poise, and a general degree of happiness as well as academic success gives private schools market edge. Yet ‘good’ emotions have not been discovered by emotional literacy advocates, but are human virtues that have been ‘invented’ as constituting emotional intelligence and colonised by its proponents. Certainly these virtues are also ‘owned’ and valorised in other domains, especially including those of religion. Indeed it could be argued that emotional literacy attributes have been recuperated and re-worked from religious sources. In Australia’s elite schools, because they are often affiliated with churches, these are most likely to reflect Christianity in its various denominational beliefs.

Always having offered an alternative to secular state schooling—albeit in a limited way due to their scarcity value—private ‘church’ schools in Australia included in this study have historically played an important role. However, in the current discursive shift to the corporate school in a competitive market, there are new meanings being attached to religious ideals in education. Explicit articulations of religious rhetoric where the spiritual and the emotional are closely relational have become a selling point as emotional literacy. Paradoxically, at a time when church attendance is steadily declining, ‘Christian values’, as promulgated by the schools in this study, are seemingly attractive: *The school provides a first class education in a **Christian environment** for girls from Kindergarten to year 12* (emphasis in text, School J, advertisement). However, as one writer argues, in terms of religious teaching in private education:

[I]f religion is supposed to be the sine qua non of such establishments, in many of them the lip service paid to religion is seen as fraudulent by the more perceptive students and parents. Just take the timetable ... and see the actual time given to

religious instruction, which is always expendable if something more important—like a sports fixture—comes up. (Murray 2004. p. 16)

How Christian values and the emotional literacy coalesce in the development of the soft skills is what matters. Rhetorically these ideas are able to be conflated and articulated as being one and the same: *As an Anglican School, we provide a sound religious training which encompasses the development of important traits including honesty, compassion, leadership and understanding* (School E, Prospectus). Similarly another school advertises that it *aims to develop the **full potential** of each student **spiritually, emotionally, academically and physically** in a **Christian** environment* (emphasis in text, School O, advertisement).

The reiteration and resurgence of explicit Christian values as progressive ideas in promotional materials is significant. Because of their kinship with emotional literacy, such values become agreed-upon virtues of good character that can be harnessed to augment successful life chances. This discursive shift has not been achieved through religious dogma or denominational dominance. Rather new understandings and meanings have required a parallel move to an inclusive and generic culture in terms of religious beliefs. Significantly, such an agenda does not tie particular religious faiths that a school espouses to prospective clients. There is a malleability here that can be utilised by those accessing the market to suit their own needs. For instance, one of Australia's most prestigious schools clearly makes the point in its prospectus that one's religious affiliations do not inhibit attendance: *[School B]... is a coeducational Uniting Church college for girls and boys of whatever faith, race or ability* (School B, Prospectus). In addition to the long-established Church affiliated schools, the new breed of Christian schools in which religious faith is taken seriously (Murray 2004, p.16; English 2004), there are other schools, some of which claim to be ecumenical (School A, Prospectus).

Religious values, then, are now flexible enough to be subsumed by emotional literacy principles or placed in partnership with them. In doing so they achieve a contemporary gloss and market appeal. What a church affiliated school is now able to offer does not

imply a binding faithfulness to a particular version of religious dogma, but a chance to produce a successful graduate and good citizen through an induction into the kind of *spiritual* expression that builds emotional literacy as a desirable human quality. For instance, one school states that: *By offering more than 30 activities incorporating sport, arts, service and clubs, the programme fulfils the ... mission of meeting boys' all-round needs — sporting, cultural, social and spiritual, as well as academic ... We are working towards engaging boys in emotional experiences which enable them to develop personal expression and communication skills' ... 'It's about educating the whole man, intellectually, physically, spiritually and emotionally'* (School F, Magazine).

The rhetoric of progressivism, with an added dose of emotional literacy, has produced a new alchemy in education. What is of interest here is that in this conflation of the spiritual and the emotional, any reticence about the *relevance* of religious principles has been turned around to be a positive selling point. Many more Australian children now attend schools where religious values are espoused. Because of their positive identity building quality, generic Christian values can be further reduced to ideas of 'spirituality' that allow for diverse interpretations. In so doing this reductive 'sanitization' of religion to broader notions of 'spirituality' and then to emotional literacy discourages scepticism about religious indoctrination. Instead there is a breadth of goodness here which is very palatable as a formula for soft-skilling tomorrow's citizens and leaders. Commensurate with ideas of emotional intelligence, spirituality as emotional literacy has become highly regarded and prized as part of life-long learning skills for future happiness, success and achievement. These attributes, learnt at school, extend to future careers, homes and workplaces. As one boys' school headmaster explained: *We take a lifetime view of education and look to providing every student with a strong framework which offers him support in every aspect of his adult life and extends far beyond training for a chosen career path* (School E, Prospectus).

Conclusion

It must be conceded that a textual analysis of school materials is just one avenue for investigating the discursive dominance of the discourses of self-esteem and emotional

intelligence as they combine in ideas of emotional literacy in education. Other methods, such as ethnographies and longitudinal studies would provide further data. However promotional materials in the public domain should not be dismissed or underestimated. These texts make truth claims that contain fabrications in some instances. Nevertheless they are important in understanding the cultural politics of the education market place.

In Australia's elite schools, the need to show that value is added to the education product on sale is of paramount importance in promotional materials. As such this is an example of parergonality whereby an emphasis on emotions and relationships has been brought in from 'outside' and is now pivotal to the marketing mix. Through a plethora of marketing, advertising and promotional materials, progressive educational ideals are being taken up to highlight the spiritual dimension of the whole child in new ways. Emotional literacy has another literacy to be learned at school as a soft skill. In this frame, religious principles are aligned with reductive but broader understandings of spirituality as a form of soft-skilling. Such moves make traditional Christian church schools more open and accessible, while their fee structure, scarce commodity value, and historical underpinnings continue to keep them 'exclusive'.

Performativity-inspired marketing materials that allegedly build subjective identities with a spiritual dimension translatable into successful and prosperous schooling outcomes should be viewed with a healthy scepticism. One needs to ask if this is anything more than calculated marketing manoeuvre to maintain the 'superiority' of these schools, this time in a moral sense.

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