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Values education: Bridging the religious and secular divide

Abstract
Recent research into factors impacting on student attainment has exposed the potential of ‘quality teaching’ to exercise a positive influence on their achievement. Extending the notion of teacher beyond surface and factual learning, quality teaching, as defined in the literature, has posited conceptions of “intellectual depth”, “communicative competence” and “self-reflection.” as being central to effective learning. Implicit in these conceptions are values dimensions reflected in notions of positive relationships, the centrality of student welfare, school coherence, ambience and organization. The influences of these on student learning, welfare and progress have been observed widely across all sectors, confirming earlier studies of similar phenomena in religious schools. At the same time, new research insights are challenging some of the assumptions held by religious schools in earlier times that part of the religious school’s distinctiveness was to be found around the values agenda. Evidence from the Australian Government’s Values Education Good Schools Project (VEGSP) (AGDEST, 2006) indicates the benefit to schools, religious or otherwise, of reflecting on, re-evaluating and rethinking the implications of ‘values education’, as defined, for curricula, classroom management and school ethos in the interests of student well-being and progress. Hence, it is proposed, values education is being seen increasingly as having outgrown any earlier conceptions of dependence on religious education and, in turn, yet another of the cosmetically defined differences between religious and public schooling is being stripped away.

Introduction
Throughout most of the twentieth century, pessimism predominated regarding the efficacy and even appropriateness of the engagement by schools, particularly in the public sector, in the teaching of values, morality or character. Positivism prevailed as the dominant influence in scientific inquiry with an emphasis on empirically-proven facts, so rendering values, seen as mere expressions of feelings rather than being in any way factual, as subjective and private and therefore not having the same status as objective knowledge. Attempts to find a place for values against this prevailing backdrop, such as the innovation known as ‘values clarification’ in the 1960s and 1970s, were based unapologetically on a relativistic rather than objective approach to moral ‘knowing’ and so largely failed to engage the ‘serious’ educational community. Such attempts were regarded widely as being peripheral to the core curriculum, having little tangible impact on knowledge or behaviour (Cunningham, 2005; Leming, 1993; Lickona, 1993).

One result of the confusion over the role and effectiveness of values education was a further bifocation between public and religious schooling. Not only were the two sides of education divided over the place and importance of religious education, as had been the case from the beginning, but progressively throughout the twentieth-century they became divided over values (or moral) education as well. In public schooling, values education was seen to have no place, partly because it centred on non-empirical and hence unreliable knowledge and partly because a growing secularization rendered it an invasion of the essential privacy that should obtain around matters of personal morality. In religious schooling, on the other hand, values education was seen to fit well with the charter around religious inculcation (Tarlinton & O’Shea, 2002). Hence, values inculcation became, in turn, a primary function of religion with attached pedagogical processes of exhortation and coercion. While these were acknowledged as being best exercised in the context of religious services, they were often translated with little finesse into religious schools as the fairly primitive forms of pedagogy to be found in dogmatic approaches to religious education (Lovat, 2002). In fact, even in religious schools, this kind of pedagogy was out of touch with the general pedagogy being exercised in other parts of the curriculum where positivistic approaches to knowing dominated as much as was the case in the public school. Inexorably, values
education became as much a pedagogical oddity as the misplaced forms of religious education from whence it had sprung.

Regardless of the pedagogical difficulties implied by the above, the fact remained that, at the same time as an alleged values neutrality was settling over public systems of schooling, religious schooling was ramping up the importance of values education, at least as an artefact of religious education and hence of the charter of the religious school (e.g. Tarlinton & O'Shea, 2002). For all the pedagogical anomalies and political variables inherent in this, research has nonetheless suggested that the values agenda ended up playing a positive role in overall student success that went quite beyond its original stated purpose. This research (cf. (e.g. Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993; Coleman, Hoffer, & Kilgore, 1982; Hill, Foster, & Gendler, 1990; Lee & Bryk, 1988, 1989), testing across a range of measures, showed enhanced student satisfaction and academic focus where an explicit values agenda was in place. Even when other variables around the difference between public and religious schooling were extracted, the values agenda seemed to be instrumental in the religious school’s demonstrated greater success around these outcomes. Over time, these findings impelled a reassessment of just what it is that impacts on student progress through school. In turn, they have led to a reassessment by all systems of the relative power of effective teaching and schooling to make a difference even in the face of the erstwhile allegedly intractable barriers to learning around issues of heritage and intelligence (Lovat, 2007a). These reassessments have ended up posing new questions about the relationship between values and the nature of the type of teaching that facilitates student achievement. These questions have resulted in the provision of new answers that underline the importance of quality teaching and values education as being mutually inclusive, spawning among other things recognition of the pedagogically bereft nature of ‘values-neutrality’ in education and a role for values education that goes well beyond its earlier position as a derived artefact of religious education (Lovat, 2007b; Clement, 2007).

The implicit values behind quality teaching

As suggested above, renewed optimism is emerging that quality teaching can impact positively on student attainment in ways that supersede the normal influences of heritage and intelligence. A significant influence in forging this new optimism was the Carnegie Corporation’s Task Force on Learning (Carnegie Corporation, 1996) that, on the basis of new research, proposed a broader definition of learning that went beyond conventional thinking around the centrality of cognition and intelligence to deal with the importance of affect, including the crucial role in learning played by the likes of social, emotional and moral development. Informed by the most recent developments in the neurosciences (Brer, 1999), the report emphasized the importance of a stimulating environment and practical experience in achieving effective learning because the only effective learning was one aimed at the whole person, rather than merely a disjoined intelligence. Learning was therefore said to be a dynamic process requiring forms of deep intellectual engagement aimed at these wider facets of development, referred to broadly in the Task Force report as communicative capacity, empathy and self-reflection. Schools, rather than students, failed when this whole-person learning was reduced to an obsession with low-level cognitive learning in a context offering little in the way of social and emotional support and ample modelling. In many ways, Carnegie established the charter and inspiration for what has become known popularly as ‘quality teaching’. Darling-Hammond, a member of the Carnegie Task Force, and others went on to do research that demonstrated how much quality teaching could achieve in the face of even the toughest of obstacles and, conversely, how enduring and debilitating were the effects of poor teaching (Darling-Hammond, 1996, 1998, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Fallon, 2003; Jordan, Mendro, & Weerasinghe, 1997; Sanders & Rivers, 1996).

Further insights into quality teaching resulted from research by Newmann and Associates (Newmann, 1991; Newmann & Associates, 1996; Newmann, Marks, & Gamoran, 1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993, 1995). This research showed that student achievement seemed to depend centrally on interacting spheres of influence between the student, the pedagogy, school organization and wider community support for the school. Pivotal to understanding the dynamics impelling student achievement was the realization that students are active learners and not passive receptacles for the deposit of knowledge. Dynamic learning required high calibre pedagogy, as defined, incorporating above all a ‘trusting, supportive ambience’. Hence, the nexus between quality teaching and the values agenda became even more explicit, this time around pedagogy.
Since the birth of the twenty-first century, research across the world has built on the above developments, focussing increasingly on the role to be played in student achievement across all measures by 'other-than-technical', values-filled pedagogical factors. Recent Australian studies (Australian Government House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training, 2002; Brady, 2005; Rowe, 2004; Scanlon, 2004; Slade, 2001) have highlighted that care and trust on the part of teachers are essential ingredients in the business of motivating student achievement. Such insights dovetail well with the findings of Bryk and Schneider (1996; 2002; 2003), in the USA, that have pointed to the vital role played in improved student achievement by the establishment of trustful social networks between the various stakeholders of students, teachers, administrators, the principal, and parents. They also fit well with an array of studies around West Kidlington School, in the UK, where transformation from extremely low to extremely high 'Ofsted' inspectorial ratings were driven by the explicit implementation of a values-based approach to education. From the early 1990s to the 2007 inspectorial report, student improvement across all measures, including academic, was tied to the implementation of a 'Values approach' that included implicit and explicit pedagogical factors and centred on the formation of positive relationships with and between all stakeholders in the school (Farrer, 2000; Hawkes, 2007). Research of the type cited herein has shown that, important as technical excellence might be, quality teaching cannot be reduced to technique alone because at the very core of effective teaching lies the capacity of teachers to form caring and trusting relationships with their students and of a whole school community to cohere around the betterment and well-being of their students (e.g. Carr, 2005, 2006; Hansen, 1998).

Religious schooling, values and education

As suggested above, the link between values and religious schooling is one that has been traditionally accepted and endorsed within these systems of schooling (e.g. Hofman, Hofman, & Guldemond, 2002; Hofman, Hofman, 2001; Hunt, 2004), a feature that has become something of a market-edge in the contemporary contestation between education systems. According to social commentator, Hugh Mackay, the perception that religious schools can effectively teach the values that parents themselves feel incapable of teaching contributed to the rise in the popularity of religious schooling in Australia (Burke, 2003).

Various studies on the effects of attending religious schools have been made throughout the world. A number of these have highlighted that the values dimension of these schools is instrumental to their success in schooling generally. Using data from the 1992 National Education Longitudinal Survey (NELS) in the USA, Jeyenes (2002; 2003) determined that the academic advantage of grade 12 students from religious schools, even after controlling for socio-economic status (SES), was owing to: school atmosphere including teacher interest in students; racial harmony or friendliness; level of school discipline; presence or absence of school violence; and, the average daily amount of time spent on homework. These five traits contributed to the academic advantage of attending a religious school. Furthermore, students from religious schools were more likely to be engaged in more demanding academic courses, to demonstrate a higher level of diligence, to have good work habits and to be punctual in handing in their work.

A large proportion of the published research on religious schooling in Western culture has focussed on the Catholic School System. Consistent academic achievement of students in Catholic schools across social groupings provided a stimulus for research into the effects of such schooling on student performance (Lee & Bryk, 1988, 1989). A significant factor contributing to the achievement of students of the observed Catholic schools, according to Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993) and Hill, Foster, and Gendler (1990), was the relationship between students and caring, dedicated teachers who considered it part of their mission to model positive values to students and to take an interest in their lives. The strong undertone of values characterizing the Catholic school system was borne out in other studies as well (e.g. Grace, 1998; Groome, 1998; Powney et al., 1995). Likewise, Hill, Foster and Gendler (1990) in a study of thirteen inner-city high schools in socially disadvantaged areas of New York and Washington, DC, found that, among low income youth, Catholic high schools produced the highest number of graduates and the highest test scores, followed by special public schools. Both were more successful than zoned (comprehensive public) schools. To explain the superior results of the Catholic and special purpose public schools, Hill et al. formulated the notion of 'focus schools', which meant that these schools had a coherent mission and the institutional freedom, organizational capacity and ability to structure themselves towards the benefit of student outcomes.

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Studies of non-Catholic religious schools have also underlined the central role played in their success by an explicit values approach to education. For example, Hawkes’ (2005) study of a Church of England primary school in England showed that the values embedded in the ethos of the school, most patently in the modelling of values and caring by teachers, contributed to the kind of positive learning environment that resulted in student achievement. Hawkes observed that the Christian principles of the school were “... implicit in the way that the school acts as a community and ... expressed through school policies, positive relationships and emphasis on prayer” (p. 179). Hence, the implicit values of the school were seen to provide the foundation for the high quality of the learning environment. Also, Hunt’s (2004) study of a Uniting Church school in South Australia provided an example of an explicit approach to values education and demonstrated the synergy between an explicit values curriculum, promotion of school values and parental support in the increase of student knowledge of values. According to the report, it would appear that the explicit values curriculum was crucial in focussing and maintaining student attention on the values embedded implicitly in the ethos of the school.

Hunt’s (2004) study is one of a number of studies that has pointed to the vital interplay between the implicit (modelling/ambience) and explicit (teaching/curriculum) in implementing the kind of values education that impacts on all aspects of student development, including the academic. In this respect, values education can be seen to be no different from other areas of learning (e.g. literacy, numeracy, etc.) where establishing an enriched learning environment combined with effective and direct teaching provides the formula for success. The interplay between the implicit and explicit, between modelling and teaching, has also been traditionally more easily achieved in the environment of the religious school where the charter is seen to include a mission to produce a certain kind of person beyond the purportedly neutral educational goals that were supposed to characterize the public school. Even when non-school-based religious groups have contributed to values education development, the holism of combining implicit and explicit approaches has been evident. This has made these contributions particularly useful as school systems have come to recognize the importance of values education and have been searching for resources and materials to support it. For example, the UNESCO-sponsored Living Values Education Program (LVEP) was originally developed by the religious group known as the Brahma Kumaris, the Virtues Project by the Baha’i faith and the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV) by the followers of Sai Baba. These values education resources and materials have played a crucial role in supporting many developments in values education across the world, in religious and, increasingly, public schools. At West Kidlington, for instance, a public school, an eclectic approach that used components of LVEP and SSEHV was instrumental in the early foundations of the program that became so successful (Arweck & Nesbitt, 2004b, 2004a; Arweck, Nesbitt, & Jackson, 2005; Nesbitt & Arweck, 2003; Nesbitt & Henderson, 2003).

In summary, studies of religious schooling contribute key insights into the relationship between quality teaching and values education. In many ways, this relationship has been implicit in religious schooling as demonstrated by the studies cited above, and in particular those of Hill, Foster and Gendler (1990) and Bryk, Lee, and Holland (1993). Such studies indicated that a consistent provision of a trusting and caring environment, together with positive relationships between students and their teachers and a commitment to meeting the needs of individual students, impact significantly on student attainment and constitute an especially positive enhancement of the stated impact of quality teaching in reducing the debilitating effects of social disadvantage. Furthermore, such studies of religious schooling demonstrate the importance of schools having the freedom and capacity to structure schooling for the benefit of student success. Care and trust emerge as essential features of an effective pedagogy. Hence, the foregoing survey of religious schooling demonstrates that positive values on the part of schools and teachers contribute significantly to student achievement and that the values-laden environment of religious schools seems likely to offer the potential for enhanced student effects generally including, of course, in the development of their own values. It would be also true to say that religious schools of religious groups are confronted with the challenge of coming to grips with values education in the contemporary setting as they encounter existential questions posed by the contemporary era and recent developments in pedagogical thought and practice (Forgasz, 2002; Newell & Rimes, 2002; Salman, 2002; Tarlinton & O'Shea, 2002).
Good practice values education for all schools

Recent times have witnessed a worldwide renewal of interest in values education in a variety of manifestations including civics, citizenship, character or moral education as well as finding expression through service learning and in programs addressing specific issues like resiliency, bullying, teenage pregnancy and sexual activity, and drug and alcohol abuse. This growing interest emerges after an era of turbulence and uncertainty regarding the process and content of values education. In Australia, the dialogue around values education has been shaped largely by the Federal Government’s initiative, the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project (VEGPSP), which has clearly thrust the values education agenda into mainstream schooling irrespective of whether particular schools belong to public, private or religious schools sectors. This has served notice to all educational sectors that, if it ever was the case, no longer can values education be considered as the exclusive domain of religious and private school systems where values education was an anticipated and expected part of the discharge of their obligations. The Final Report of VEGPSP Stage 1 (Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training (AGDEST), 2006) and the more detailed case studies in Lovat and Toomey (2007) demonstrate that explicit values education needs to be acknowledged as an essential component of education across all sectors and its implications for pedagogy requires direct and considered attention. Furthermore, the accounts of the implementation of values education in the participating schools indicates that effective values education incorporates the same traits as characterized for quality teaching by the Carnegie Report. These are, namely, intellectual depth, communicative capacity, empathic character, reflection, self management and self-knowing (see Lovat, 2005).

The effect of the Australian Government’s initiative around values education has been to force a reassessment of traditional expectations which viewed values education as being the discharge of religious and private school systems. Seeded in 2004 with a grant of $29.7 million from the Federal Budget, it led to the formulation of the National Framework in Values Education (AGDEST, 2005). The framework specified that the mode of delivery of values education would be ‘good practice pedagogy’ with this assumption being tested by research and action-oriented projects. Of these projects, the largest was the VEGPSP, comprising 51 school clusters (316 schools) in two stages of development and engaging public, private and religious school sectors across Australia. The impact of the National Framework in Values Education has been to rewrite the values education agenda, particularly for those schools participating in the VEGPSP (e.g. Brown, 2007; Lovat & Clement, 2008).

The VEGPSP had the effect of causing schools in the religious sector to reflect on the values implicit in their school system. One teacher from a cluster of Catholic schools remarked:

Being Catholic schools there’s already a high level of Values in there (in the curriculum). It’s (ie. VEGPSP) forcing us to name them explicitly. It’s giving it a priority that perhaps it didn’t previously. It’s actually focusing on it. (Chapman, Toomey, Cahill, Davis, & Gaff, 2007, p. 322)

A fundamental change in attitudes to teaching and learning was forced through the adoption of student action teams (SATs) by one cluster of schools. The development of student agency meant that teachers had to allow students to make decisions and to work out what they needed to do for themselves in real-life learning situations. This meant that teachers had to allow them to make less-than-perfect decisions and to encourage them to use the negative feedback as a guide for improvement. Teachers had to learn to empower student decision-making, rather than directing it as ‘experts’. It has meant changes in the ways that teachers view knowledge and the way it is gained. Students are seen to be active learners who negotiate their own learning and gain knowledge through a diversity of experiences catering for their different learning styles. Teachers themselves are learners, as they learn from, are supported and are motivated by other teachers in the cluster, while at the same time being exposed to different conceptions of learning and teaching. Intellectual depth and engagement were promoted through students taking responsibility for gathering and analysing data and communicative capacity was demonstrated through the results of the study. Students became initiators of activity and, in the process, developed deeper understanding and the capacity to transfer their skills to other areas, so allowing those students who were considered to have less academic ability to achieve nonetheless in unexpected ways. Furthermore, it has meant that students moved beyond clarification of their values to finding practical ways of implementing them. This type of learning environment requires openness and communication between the staff,
and supportive, consultative and nurturing leadership (Chapman, Toomey et al., 2007; Chapman, Cahill, & Holdsworth, 2007). SATs had a 'ripple effect', bringing change to the school community, with values becoming embedded in all aspects of school discourse (AGDEST, 2006, p. 70).

Another cluster chose service learning as the vehicle for values education with each school engaging in a slightly different variant: of the four schools in the cluster, two were religious schools and two were state schools and the interaction between the two school systems, different levels of resources, different stages in the journey of values education and the different life-situations of the students, provided for creative and constructive interchange. Diversity offered by the mix provided opportunities for growth and exposure to a broader range of experience, thus contributing to staff development. Student engagement in values learning, as promoted by diverse pedagogical approaches of both content and process, empowered student learning as dialogue extended across curriculum areas. Service learning provided opportunities for students to reflect on, evaluate and even mature in their own personal values. Opinion by teaching staff of the impact on student learning varied, but there were reports of students trying new strategies, taking risks in learning, sharing ideas, and expressing a sense of being valued. Reflective student journals provided evidence of the impact of service learning on the values formation of students. Professional learning for teachers was enhanced through the development of professional networks and the sharing of ideas and reflecting on the goals and practice of teaching (AGDEST, 2006; Chapman, Toomey et al., 2007).

Some of the most profound insights arose from the intercultural interaction around the educational needs of Indigenous learners. Values cannot be simply imposed on a culture but need to be linked to those past and present values that are embedded in the culture. Also, the values designated in the National Framework in Values Education (AGDEST, 2005) instigated a reflective process to make explicit any core religious values that are present and the ways that these are implicit in action:

The outcomes of this project will provide an opportunity for our Catholic schools to explore from within and reflect on our identity and purpose in the role of educating our young people. This will be particularly so for our Indigenous community Catholic schools. It is critical that we fit the elements of the National Values Education Framework with our past to provide coherence. The culture of a people does contain new material but must fit into the traditions or it will soon be forgotten. As a cluster, we need to identify and make explicit Catholic core values, thread these with our understandings of the nine values and critically assess how these values are reflected in the way we pray, welcome, engage in professional dialogue, solve problems, resolve conflict, lead change, restore justice, mourn, celebrate, introduce new ideas. Our policies and practice must characterise transparency, sincerity, right and respectful relationships for all members if we are to witness faith centred communities (AGDEST, 2006, p. 179).

Perhaps the most profound changes were ones that turned around pedagogical practices with the resulting changes in student attitudes and a 'ripple effect' permeated the 'whole school culture' (AGDEST, 2006, p. 70). Another cluster reported that students were showing more respect and being more attentive (AGDEST, 2006, p.116). Still another cluster reported a 'ripple down effect', drawing on values to inform behaviours that transformed classroom management. Changes in student behaviour accompanied professional development that enlarged the repertoire of classroom management strategies available to teachers (AGDEST, 2006, pp. 178-179).

Overall, the reported experiences of schools participating in the VEGPSW indicated that an engaging approach to values education requires the imagination, attention and volition of both students and teachers and that this cannot be left to chance or merely assigned to the hidden curriculum, but requires instead an intentionality spurred on by imagination and creativity. As teachers engaged with these aspects of quality teaching in their own professional development and classroom curricula, changes were noted in student attitudes, opinions and behaviours. The profound synergy between quality teaching pedagogies and those of values education created classroom environments conducive to the improvement of student learning, where students were motivated to do their best and give others a "fair go." It also instilled a calmer school climate generally with several reports of schools being better places to be (AGDEST, 2006, pp. 41, 120).
Conclusion
Religious schools, like other schools, found that the full effects of good practice values education cannot be achieved through mere cosmetics. Good practice values education depends on features such as the professional development of staff, an explicit recognition of the values embedded in existing curricula, a whole school approach, positive and focussed school leadership, and the modelling of behaviours, values and communication. The Australian Government Values Education projects have caused religious, private and public schools to reflect on those values that lie at the core of their day-to-day operations. This reflection has extended to consideration of the values implicit in their curricula, their teaching and learning, their discipline practices, and the whole school culture. With the introduction of the National Framework for Values Education (AGDEST, 2005), Australian schools, whether they be religious, private or public, face a new era in values education. It has now been demonstrated beyond contention, that excellent values education is possible across all educational sectors given adequate support. Furthermore, it demonstrates that the different sectors can cooperate with each other in the interests of providing an effective values education for all students. As suggested at the outset, yet another of the purportedly inherent distinctions between religious and public schools has been found to be far less than inherent.

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