

Values, a hot topic in a changing environment

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All Victorian schools are eligible for a one off grant of \$800 to engage in a values education activity as part of the Values Education Forums Project during 2005-2008. Values it appears, is a hot topic at both state and national levels. Unfortunately values also have a tendency to suffer from an image problem. Often politicised, marginalised and maligned, the values domain can be perceived as tricky territory. In this article I hope to clarify the usefulness of values education in framing actions for schools, particularly in relation to environmental perspectives.

Pressing issues

What are the most pressing issues facing Australia in 2007? It is not hard to generate a short list of environmental, social and economic imperatives that dominate current press and public commentary; drought, climate change, bushfires, the war on Iraq, terrorism, industrial relations, affordable housing etc. The order may vary according to whether you adopt a personal, local, national or global perspective but arguably environmental concerns are clambering for most attention in 2007. There is no longer debate about climate change, since scientific evidence is now solid enough to say that humans have contributed substantially to the state of our planet. John Howard, Australian Prime Minister, now agrees. All Australian state and territory governments grapple with their own program and policy responses within the context of global warming.

The water restrictions that now grip Victoria have made us pay more attention and encouraged citizens to install water tanks in unprecedented numbers and engage in a home plumbing revolution that sees the now ubiquitous 25mm grey water flexi-tube connected from washing machine to garden. The water storage readings on the night-time news have new currency and interest and I hope that somehow my efforts to reduce my shower to 1 and ½ buckets of water, (and then poured strategically on the 'vegie' patch) will make a small but important contribution to the percentages. These days there is more urgency and vigilance, less tolerance for waste.

Of course anybody who lives away from major metropolitan and regional centres, and who depends on tank, dam or bore, matters of water consumption are a way of life. A visit to my parents, who lived in an isolated spot three hours east of Melbourne, was always a stark reminder about the politics of conservation and the need for care, particularly when the tanks were low. Melbourne newspaper *The Age* carried a report recently of a family, near Wangaratta whose tanks had dried up and were unable to pay for water. In an act of compassion Anglicare stepped in and filled the tanks. This kind of report flags another alert about the fragility of the environment and a more pressing need to pay attention to the needs of our rural communities. The social dimension of the drought prompts further questions about water rights, shared responsibility and the notion of user pays.

Martin Flanagan, writing in the same edition of *The Age* suggests that this summer has done much to change his understanding of the country.

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We are in the grip of a great drama, possibly as big as any since the Great Depression. Possibly, in social terms as big as the industrial revolution. It is being expressed through the body of the land and we in the cities will ignore it at our peril.

The urgency in Flanagan's rhetoric signals significant environmental and social change. Issues such as global warming can not be discussed in isolation from values such as care or compassion or respect. However values must be placed in some context. Professor Brian Hill (2004) suggests that values are:

...the ideals that give significance to our lives, that are reflected through the priorities that we choose, and that we act on consistently and repeatedly.

Such language obviously has a place in any analysis and subsequent response to such issues as signalled by Flanagan.

A values debate?

In a recent ABC Radio National Encounter Program (4 February 2007), 'Taking the Temperature', a panel, including the Anglican Archbishop, Peter Jensen and Director of Islamic Research Unit at Griffith University, Mohamad Abdalla also discussed these pressing issues and apart from climate change and the war in Iraq added the complexities of multiculturalism and Australian values.

Needless to say multiculturalism has been brought into sharper focus in a post-Cronulla Australia. Questions of national identity, patriotism and citizenship have percolated alongside a values discourse that has become increasingly impressed on our collective psyche. Values have been traditionally linked to patriotism and national identity.

However, the health of our environment is also inextricably linked to our perceptions of who we are, what we stand for and what we do to the environment. Abdalla argues that in order to respond to the pressures of drought, Australians need to move away from what he perceives as selfishness and material aspirations, toward a lifestyle that interacts better with nature. Such change would require a paradigm shift and is very much about how people live and prioritise their lives.

Peter Jensen takes the position that the issue of climate change has generated great fear in the community, almost 'apocalyptic' but at the same time presents the kind of crisis that brings people together.

The drought presents a tremendous opportunity for generosity, particularly on behalf of those who live in the coastal cities, towards those who live inland of our great nation. Not just an opportunity of course but an obligation. We are going to be united as a country once again, in a way that perhaps hasn't occurred since the Second World War, so serious is this matter.

However, Jensen somewhat predictably argues that the values debate surrounding this issue is largely superficial and that this is due to the unwillingness of Australians to genuinely include a spiritual or religious dimension. How much depth and rigour does a values debate need? Do we need a spiritual, or a philosophical edge to better understand the values that drive and motivate us? Sushi Das in an opinion piece in *The Age* (March 10) takes Jensen's

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view further with her claim that the values debate is largely a waste of time and alarmist.

Hijacked by politicians, dissected by academics and regurgitated by a largely unquestioning media, the so-called debate has muddied the waters of Australian identity and unnecessarily alarmed many Muslims.

Das is also cynical of the view there can be a discrete set of Australian values and that they are somehow different from those held by other countries. She is also suspicious of the power and processes used to dictate values. Clearly the idea of a values debate has the potential to polarise or divide. This may well be the case if values are seen to be mandated and raises the questions about who owns values. Das's cynicism is not out of place when located alongside the term 'being un-Australian'. Meant to denigrate this unfortunate term implies an informal Australian standard. The values dialogue requires much broader understandings of our diverse community before people can be labeled un-Australian.

Eminent historian Inga Clendinnen, in a recent Quarterly Essay (2006), titled 'The History Question: Who owns the past?' tries to unravel the values debate within the so called, 'history wars' and suggests that:

A sense of shared values is our social cement. Without it we risk becoming a society governed by coercion rather than consent.

As Flanagan intimates, the iron grip of drought is as much mental as it is physical. It requires engagement and as Clendinnen suggests, shared values are more likely to contribute to community unity. Do we need to be forced or frightened into saving water or to look out for each other? Do we need to be monitored by water 'police', patrolling suburban streets, on the lookout for water cheats? Will Jensen's faith in community responsibility arising out of the crisis of drought occur by osmosis? Does the paradigm shift promoted by Abdalla need to take place, and if so can it take place in a values vacuum or without unity?

The examination of values does not necessarily constitute a debate but raises important questions about the ethics and morality of behaviour, individually and collectively. Such considerations can then help take account of what is plausible and possible within a local, national and global context.

National Framework for Values Education

In the last few years the values dialogue has been driven in no small way by the *National Framework of Values Education in Australian Schools*. Commissioned by the Australian Government, this framework contains nine core values for Australian schools. It has been unanimously supported by the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs and is based on a study conducted in sixty-nine schools in 2003. The values and associated principles are not mandated but framed as a way of more effectively engaging school communities in the rigorous debate alluded to by Jensen. The *Values Education Study* indicated that:

Values are often highly contested, and hence any set of values advanced for Australian schools must be the subject of substantial discussion and debate with school communities. The application of those values to real school circumstances invariably requires that they be appropriately contextualised to the school community concerned, and involve the community in the process of their implementation. (Department of Education, Science and Training 2003)

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There are some key ideas here, not least of which is that values themselves can be contested. Rather than reduce our capacity to engage in public debate they can act as a reference point and potentially strengthen both the meaning and intention of individual or community actions. As Halstead & Taylor (2000) suggest values are:

...the principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour, the standards by which particular actions are judged as good or desirable.

The nine core values include for example; integrity, responsibility, respect and freedom. An examination of any one these 'contestable' values provide a useful starting point for discussion about responses to those pressing issues.

For example responsibility is described as follows:

Be accountable for one's own actions, resolve differences in constructive, non-violent ways, contribute to society and to civic life, take care of the environment.

Responsibility is inclusive of citizenship and care for the environment. What does this look like in action? Freedom as a value is described in terms of the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship and free from unnecessary interference or control. Such words carry forward more questions about meaning of citizenship and the rights of the individual over the collective. How do these ideas relate to irrigation rights or to building dams?

Values education is not new to Australian schools and is often embedded in civics and citizenship education or social skills programs. Teachers are constantly engaged in an informal and formal values agenda. The *Framework* has proven useful in helping revitalise and refresh educational discussion and planning particularly in relation to rationale and purpose.

Good practice schools, values education and sustainability

The usefulness of such an approach has been best demonstrated most recently within national values education projects.

Throughout Australia more than fifty school clusters have been engaged in the Values Education Good Practice Schools Project. This research and development project, funded by the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training, produced a report in Stage 1 in which a clear message was to;

'Model the values you espouse'.

The notion that values are best taught by action is an extremely important one. The rhetoric of values needs to be supported and demonstrated by our behaviour. For example in Stage 1 of the Good Practice Schools Project a number of schools framed values education around environmental themes.

In Victoria, The Brighton Cluster, consisted of five primary, one high and one special school and were activated under the banner; BEACHVALE – (Brighton Environmental Action Community Helpers Values Education). Collectively they embarked on a process of building a learning community around a focus on local, national and global environments. Students actively engaged with their local

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community by planting trees in local parks, cleaning rubbish from streets and developing posters and brochures highlighting water conservation, reductions in energy consumption and waste minimisation. According to supervising teachers, student story books provided tangible evidence of how the language of values was translated into community actions:

At each school, teachers have reported a real buzz from students as they have worked in groups, researched, organised, created and designed their stories. Students can readily identify the values, discuss the issues, explain the impact and demonstrate the behaviour in their environment.

The Nerang Alliance of State Schools Cluster in Queensland included an Environmental Education Centre and its project sought to improve social literacy through Social Action Projects. To do this the schools engaged in a number of Inquiry Based Learning Units, such as *'Wipe out waste'* and *'Water wise: What does it mean to be more water wise?'* These units focussed on the values of respect and responsibility.

Also based in Victoria, Mooroolbark's Red Earth Community Cluster's desire to develop good citizenship saw students engaged in a range of projects dedicated towards respect for the environment and good citizenship. These included a focus on reducing greenhouse gases by walking and not driving and the development of a variety of garden improvements at the Caladenia Day Centre and local primary schools.

In Western Australia, the Children and Place Mapping Cluster, geographically dispersed between the Pilbara and Perth and led by the Lance Holt School, drew on ideas about what nourishes and sustains people in their local places. The Children and Place Mapping Project occurred because a number of schools wanted to extend children's understanding, appreciation and practice for caring for their country and place.

In Stage 2 the Cross Borders Values Cluster, hosted by Victor Harbor Primary School in South Australia, traverses three states and territories and targets specific values education programs including civic and environmental responsibility and community service as well as teaching specific social and resiliency skills. The project intends to improve student and staff knowledge of values education by changes to teaching and learning, curriculum and schools operations by associating values education with sustainability.

Engaging with values education; grants for schools

In Victoria, national values education initiatives are supported by a cross sectoral advisory committee and are housed within a broader commitment to improve the quality of education in Victorian schools. As such the Project offers schools an opportunity to consider values education in relation to their own policies and practices and also with the context of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards. This includes environmental education.

Rather than prickly or divisive, the exploration and articulation of values can provide unity and sense of purpose or as Clendinnen suggests the social cement. Environmental sustainability, like values education, is a hot topic and is very much at the heart of a values dialogue.

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Further details and contacts

Details about the Values Education Good Practice Project and values education resources can be found on the Values Education website:

<http://www.valueseducation.edu.au/values>

For further information and applications for values grants go to

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/program/valuesed/index.htm>

For information on the values education conference in Melbourne in May go to

<http://valuesconf.edublogs.org/national-values-education-forum-2007/>

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