

VALUES EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

Issues and Challenges

Brian V. Hill

Emeritus Professor of Education, Murdoch University

When I was invited to give this keynote address, I was moved to ask myself how long I had been writing articles about values education. I have to confess that I have been at it since 1960. I was then in my fourth year as a high school teacher and I published an article called: "Endless Education."¹ That title revealed two things.

First, it showed that I can never resist a pun. But second, it reflected my discontent with a tendency among educators in the state school sphere to focus on means rather than ends. I wanted to reflect on the *purposes* of education.

There is nothing more pernicious than "endless education": that is, an education which is so preoccupied with the foreground of facts and skills, that it neglects the backdrop of purposes and values which supposedly validates the facts and skills we choose to teach. The task of getting beyond motherhood statements at *this* level has tended to be put in the too-hard basket.

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

Admittedly, values education is a complex and controversial area, and it is easy to become jaded and possibly daunted by the obstacles it presents. So it may be helpful at the start to recall where we have all come from. I would maintain that there has been progress.

Looking back, I realise that I personally have lived through a period of great change with respect to values education; a period characterised by staggering social upheavals whose impacts have had a far greater influence on educational policy than anything I have written over that period. Indeed, for most of my academic life, I have felt that I was banging my head against a brick wall.

In regard to *state* education, I was arguing that schools could not remain value-neutral and still call themselves "educational" institutions. In regard to *non-state* schools, I was deploring their tendency to presume that their values and practices were beyond criticism. But for most of the time it seemed as if nobody in either sector wanted to hear.

Then, in the 1980s, the walls of the dam began to crack. A trickle of seminal documents appeared in curriculum studies, notably in "social studies", though science too

was beginning to take responsibility for its impact on the environment.² Then came the National Curriculum sponsored by John Dawkins.³ It attracted strong criticism for its avoidance of values outcomes. Yet most state departments hurriedly cloned their own versions of this curriculum framework, and these clones initially exhibited the same defect. What would happen to the trickle? Fortunately, in direct reaction to this technocratic addiction to marketable skills, talk developed about the need to identify “core values” and to formulate “democratic charters.”

In my own state, a project carried out in the non-state sector led to the compilation of an “Agreed Minimum Values Charter”⁴ which attracted wide comment. At the time, the state Minister for Education was creating a curriculum council to straddle both the state and non-state sectors, and one of its first acts was to produce a curriculum statement with a values framework which echoed many of the charter’s elements.⁵

Trials have been proceeding since 1995 in schools from both sectors. I remember Dr Mal Leicester visiting Perth that year. She was developing a series of substantial volumes on values education, primarily for the English context.⁶ Her comment to me on the West Australian project was: “We’ve been *talking* about this for years. You’re actually *doing* something.”

Meanwhile, Queensland about the same time was responding to the Wiltshire Report. In this report a provisional values charter for state schools was proposed, and it was recommended that individual schools develop their own charters as subsets of it.⁷ Similarly, educational authorities in several other states were trialling values frameworks for their systems.⁸

And what of the *Commonwealth* Government? There were signs it was beginning to emerge from its neutralist stance when the so-called Civics Expert Group was set up, reporting in 1994.⁹ This report confirmed the priority of values education in the public sector. I remarked at the time that this was a welcome initiative, albeit by focusing primarily on *public* morality and citizenship, it ran the risk of encouraging a continuing neglect of *personal* values and life commitments.¹⁰ Unfortunately, a change of government somewhat delayed further developments at the Federal level.

But in mid-2002 the present Federal Government launched the present Values Education Study which was charged with the task of developing an agreed framework and encouraging better classroom practice.¹¹ This consultation is, in effect, a progress report of this study. Although it is described as a “final” report. I hope it won’t be. We are not there yet! Nevertheless its emphasis on action research is to be applauded. And it is also encouraging to see the school sample crossing boundaries: as between states, and between the state and non-state sectors.

WHAT DISTURBED OUR DOGMATIC SLUMBERS?

But is this just another swing of fashion in educational circles? I hope not. And I think not. Again, it is interesting to recall how things were in the 1950s when I first became a high school teacher. The secondary curriculum had been stable for a long time, and consisted of basically the same subject matter that I – and my father before me – had encountered as school students. I was even able to use one or two of his old textbooks!

The culture in general was conformist, and still largely beholden to the sometimes contradictory values consensus derived from our religious and cultural roots in the old Mediterranean world. Patriarchalism was unchallenged, and sex was shrouded in guilty whispers. Nor was it clear to us in that day how profoundly the Second World War, which had recently concluded, had disturbed those roots. As for academia, it was of course “ahead” of the masses, locked in the certitudes of the Enlightenment.¹²

In the non-state sector, schools with religious origins were for the most part wedded to their historic traditions. Whether Catholic or Independent Grammar, they tended to assume that their value systems were proven and secure, and merely needed some fine-tuning.

So what disturbed the dogmatic slumbers of that era? The story is familiar and I need only summarise. In the ‘sixties the contraceptive pill came on the market, and there was rising angst among youth at the nuclear threat and the war in Vietnam. The ‘sixties also launched television’s window on the world, giving an enormous boost to materialistic goals as expressed through avid consumerism.

The resulting emphasis on satisfying *individual* desires was paralleled by agitation for individual *rights* – for women, for children, for oppressed minorities, and so on. Many gains have been made in these areas, in terms of greater equity, but along with these has come a worrying downside: climbing rates of marriage breakdown, and of suicide among youth and young adults. The holding power of old values has decreased; but permissiveness is breeding disillusionment and new intolerances. There has also been a huge increase in the use of litigation to advance private preference at the expense of the common good.

Meanwhile large numbers of migrants seeking new horizons, for both economic and political reasons, have transformed the Australian community into a multicultural society in which alternative value traditions challenge both the old values and the newer permissiveness. The apparent difficulty of defining a consensus on common purposes, at a high level, has left the door open for resolution at a more materialistic

level, dominated by an economic rationalism which bases everything on market value under competitive conditions. Woe betide us, if we let the values debate default to economic priorities alone.

That must suffice as a quick summary of the factors that have disturbed the dogmatic slumbers of the previous era. In consequence there has latterly been a number of reports and experiments in the area of values education.

WHAT ARE SOME PEDAGOGIC CHALLENGES?

The current values study is therefore very timely. But it is also showing that, as I said earlier, values education is a complex and controversial topic. In the remaining space, I want to comment on some of the current challenges that are coming to light in the reports of those experiments. Much of this I have said before, but I sense that it needs to be said again. Forgive the repetition.

1. Describing the nature and sources of values

First, I am not sure we yet know how to talk about values. The Final Report of the Values Education Study elected fairly summarily to adopt a definition by Halstead and Taylor which spoke of values as principles and standards that guide behaviour.¹³ This carries a cognitive weighting which potentially obscures the motivational aspect. How and why should propositions of thought be supposed to have any real bearing on conduct?

I sense that we are still grappling with the problem of moving the student from “*knowing* the good to be desirable” to “*desiring to do* the good.”¹⁴ I’ve often quoted the chastened observation made by Oliver and Bane, researchers who had worked with Kohlberg, that although they seemed to be able to stimulate mature classroom reasoning about justice and cognate values, there was little observable flow-on into behaviour in the school playground!¹⁵

My own preferred definition is that values are “*the priorities individuals and societies attach to certain beliefs, experiences, and objects, in deciding how they shall live and what they shall treasure.*”¹⁶ This shifts the focus from a value being a merely cognitive state of mind to a whole-person decision, readiness or “*disposition*” to act in certain ways, given the opportunity.

2. Identifying the teaching domains

The definition I have proposed has several significant implications for the way we view the teaching of values.

First, it implies that there *is* a cognitive component, because clearly, value priorities can be described in propositional terms, and are accessible to good reasons being given for holding them. Commitment to a value is not merely a socially conditioned habit.

But words like “experiences” and “treasure” invoke the affective and volitional dimensions of valuing. To speak of “experience” requires that we encourage students to feel “what it’s like” to act out, or live by, the values being commended. Empathy needs to be awakened through such teaching strategies as drama, role plays, simulations, and being given responsibilities within the school community and the classroom lesson.

An important part of values education then becomes the act of talking about the insights gained from these experiences, which again brings in the cognitive dimension. One school in the recent values education study reported that there was an observable “change in the language of students who [were] more able to express their feelings through their success or otherwise in living the values of the school.”¹⁷

I also want to repeat that a value is a “‘disposition’ to act in certain ways, *given the opportunity.*” We do not always act according to what we believe or value. While normally valuing honesty, for example, we may balk at admitting to a man at our front door with a gun in his hand that someone he is searching for is actually inside our house. Similarly, fear of peer group pressure often prevents students who are actually interested in the material we are teaching from showing it. It is not “cool” to show interest.

This should warn us against attempting to rely primarily on specific behavioural outcomes under formalised test conditions to tell us if our values education has succeeded. Dispositions *can* be inferred from observable behaviour, but only over the long haul and in a variety of different situations, formal and informal. Only then is the teacher entitled to conclude that certain values have in fact been embraced.

Then, of course, the question is whether we ought to report this conclusion as part of our assessment of the student. This raises ethical issues about the student’s right of choice in regard to values, which suggest that our knowledge of whether there’s been value change in the student should only be used for the purpose of assessing *us*, the teachers; not the student.

To put this another way, within the context of formal testing, we are only entitled to test and report on *capacity*, not commitment. The teacher’s task is to enhance capacities of thinking and feeling in regard to values. This is not to deny that the teacher can and should teach with the *hope* of influencing the student’s actual

commitment. But it would be an invasion of personal liberty to require that students desirous of obtaining a good mark produce evidence of having embraced certain teacher-preferred values.

Framed in this way – and the present Report does tend to polarise the options in these terms¹⁸ – values education appears to be caught between the devil of value-free rationality and the deep blue sea of conditioned conformity. I am not sure that this old debate has yet been satisfactorily cleared up. Surely we would want to affirm that education is about liberation, not domestication? But equally, surely we want out of it responsible citizens not fence-sitting self-pleasers?

The resolution I argued for in the ‘nineties was a position I called “critical affiliation.”¹⁹ This involved:

- (a) the right of students to know the nature and sources of the values impacting on them;
- (b) the development of their capacity to empathise with these values, and also to evaluate them;
- (c) the encouragement of commitment to worthy values.

3. Applying complementary strategies

So far, I have continued to refer to values without using any adjectives to qualify what kinds of value I have in mind. We tend to relapse into associating such remarks primarily with *moral* values. But my comments to this point have been intended to apply just as much to other realms of value, such as the intellectual, aesthetic, technical, religious and social. This validates the claim that every curriculum area is implicated in values education. It has been pleasing to see that several of the schools in the study have interpreted their brief in this way.

Similarly, it is apparent that many of the schools in the sample have taken on board the need to achieve consistency between the general administrative practices and relationships in the school community and the content of what is being formally taught in the various curriculum areas.

Since the ‘sixties discussion of the so-called “hidden curriculum”, which postmodern critics in the ‘eighties have reinforced, we have known how easily the teaching of values in the classroom can be sabotaged by other school practices.

Teachers and administrators inevitably function as role models, and have little chance of hiding their true values from the people with whom they are so constantly and intensively in contact. Indeed, I have been bemused visiting schools at how much one can learn by asking a student or two: “What sort of a person is Mr (or Ms)

X?” Usually, the answers probe much more deeply than what Mr (or Ms) X thought they were revealing of their true selves to the students.

Again, schools in the study exhibited a growing appreciation of the need to have a two-pronged strategy: one interpreting values education as an “across-the-curriculum” theme, infusing the teaching of every subject; and the other, of providing a place in the curriculum for specifically studying values as such – their nature and significance in our life-choices, and how one goes about justifying them and negotiating value agreements in the group: in short, studying the “discipline” of values discourse.

Frequent involvement in professional development seminars has convinced me that more PD is needed in respect of both these strategies. There are still many teachers who think *their* subject area has little to do with values education, and that anyway it’s the responsibility of some other specialist. And there are still few timetables which allow for the systematic study of logic and values discourse as such.

WHAT IS THE COGNITIVE CORE?

1. Exploring Underlying Belief Systems

This curriculum deficiency is magnified by deficiency in regard to another area of disciplined study: the study of underlying belief systems. One of the main problems with talk about values education in previous eras was the “bag of virtues” approach. I mentioned earlier the researchers who, while working with Kohlberg, concluded that their cognitive developmental model seemed unable to guarantee a carry-over of mental practice into voluntary life-situations. This had already been demonstrated in the late 1920s by the famous Hartshorne and May Character Education project.²⁰

More recently, I encountered the attempt in one South-East Asian country to base moral education on a Confucian model, whereby moralisms were taught in the spirit of duty towards one’s elders, in the expectation that this would produce willing personal allegiance to the moral precepts presented. The apparent or supposed success of this strategy was due less to what was taught in the schools than to a tradition in that culture of strong authoritarianism in the home and in wider social structures. But it is now becoming much harder to impose unquestioning obedience on the “options generations”²¹ in modern Asian societies.

The point is that the motivation to act on the values we accept intellectually comes from more basic beliefs about the nature of the reality we inhabit, and the point of going on living in that reality. Each individual develops a personal framework of meaning which may vary from an inconsistent mish-mash to a thoughtfully

integrated network of beliefs and values. Hence there is a need to help students understand this connection and to inspect some of the more fully articulated life-stances influential in their culture.

The operative word here is neither to “impose” or “ignore” the ways underlying belief systems influence values, but to “explore” them. In this connection, approaches to values education such as the *Living Values* project initiated by Brahma Kumaris, and the *Virtues Project* promoted by Baha’i, to the extent that they neglect to spell out the religious belief systems on which they rest, are potentially miseducative.

In this connection, I was at the launch this morning of a book entitled *Teaching About Worldviews and Values*, by former English teacher Julie Mitchell.²² I commend it as a new breed of teaching resource which takes seriously, and deals impartially with, a number of the worldviews which are influencing value commitments in today’s world.

This highlights the need to ensure that what has traditionally been known as “religious studies” is seen as both an integral and a distinguishable part of values education. I have argued for this proposition on many occasions.²³ It implies the same two conditions that I laid down for the formal aspect of values education in general.

First, each curriculum area should accept some responsibility for life-stance education, acknowledging that wider frameworks of meaning account in part for both the justification and the motivation for learning about that area. Second, the curriculum should also accommodate the specific study of religious and other life-stances, not just as an appendage to “cultural studies”, “moral education” or sessions on “personal development”, but as a conceptual focus in its own right.

Australian state school systems have for too long been crippled in the fulfilment of their mandate by their failure to take on this task. Even the united testimony of reports tabled in each state in the 1970s affirming that this was part of their secular mandate have failed to remedy the deficiency.

The neutralism of state schools has been one of the reasons given by the newer wave of alternative Christian schools for offering an alternative. And on the face of it, schools working from a religious foundation are in a better position to do this. But we are not requiring the state school to adopt neutralism but impartiality in its approach to the study of worldviews. And, as I argued earlier, impartiality includes advocating, particularly by example, that students enter into worthy value *affiliations*, including those embraced in the school’s values charter.

In any case, religious schools face the opposite problem: of ensuring that students do not just conform to group pressure but embrace such affiliations *critically*, having first come to terms with the value pluralism of modern society and learnt to respect those with whom they may nevertheless disagree.

2. *Clarifying the Core*

All that I have said so far presumes that we have reached sufficient agreement on which values to teach, in order that we may operate as truly educational institutions. That is “a big ask”. Most school staffs are value pluralistic, and the families of the children they teach even more so. Many people believe that this will inevitably lead to value hiatus, and their desire to protect their children from such an environment has led them to prefer non-state education. But to the extent that such schools become strongly protectionist, they are likely to contribute to increasing social fragmentation, which *is* on the increase. Is there no middle ground?

This was the problem which the 1995 Values Project in Western Australia tried to tackle head-on. It began with an attempt to get four major faith traditions to talk together, in the hope of identifying some common ground based on their mutual desire to live together in a political democracy. Some misunderstanding was caused at the time by the inclusion in their Agreed Framework of a value dimension identifying ultimate life-stance values. This prompted the *state* educational authority to keep its distance, claiming that it must retain impartiality in regard to such values. But the project, by including this dimension, was making two points.

First, it was expressing the conviction that attachment to other values, such as those of a democratic or educational kind, ultimately depends – *for the individual* – on that person’s more general world-view or life-stance: a point I have just been making.

Second, it granted that people might achieve public consensus on democratic and educational values for more *proximate* reasons, even though they didn’t agree on the ultimate beliefs which for them validated those values. The hope was that by identifying democratic and educational values separately, this might enhance the possibility of co-operation, not only between systems in the non-state sector, but also with the state sector itself.

The problem was to convince policy makers in the public sector that the quest for a consensus on the common good was not a pipe-dream but an achievable goal. For the previous 20 years my own efforts to make this point had failed dismally.

This time, however, the values charter which subsequently appeared in the W.A. Government’s Curriculum Framework drew heavily on the democratic and educational dimensions of the framework developed in the non-state sector.

Since then, the Civics and Citizenship Report has further strengthened the case. But that report also raises a further question, which I will come to in a minute.

One other feature of the WA Values Project that I would like to highlight here was a procedural rule adopted to avoid stalemates. Our stated aim was:

not to develop a totalistic account to which all participants would be expected to conform, but a minimalist set of agreements on which to base common action in the wider educational arena . . . Where specific beliefs and values [...] failed to secure general agreement, they [were not to be] treated as unimportant, but [were] put on hold for further attention at a later stage, while the main process of achieving an agreed minimum proceeded. Though held over, they still earn[ed] a place as content in that part of the curriculum devoted to developing an appreciation of value-stances and honing the skills of values analysis.²⁴

Many of the trials undertaken since in this project, and in the more recent values study, fortify me in the hope that robust workable agreements are achievable.

3. Transcending the Public/Private Dichotomy

My last point can be made quickly, albeit it may turn out to be the most controversial. I noted earlier that the Civics and Citizenship Report was mainly concerned with *public* values. I commented that this could blind us to the need to seek consensus on many values that are more personal, though not less relevant to the common good.

It is interesting to note in the reports of schools in the present Values Study trials which values tended to dominate. There is much emphasis on self-esteem, community morale, and responsible citizenship, less on personal morality and life-goals as such. Feelings and attitudes depend not only on affirmative *procedural* values such as “resilience” and “connectedness”, but also on personal visions of the life good to live.

As I said earlier, values always have a belief component, and reasons given in justification of those beliefs supply part of the motivation for their adoption. In the end, public morality is reliant on personal morality and vision, and any education worthy of the name will seek to merge these elements.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I hope I have given you reason to take heart from what has already been done. We now have available an increasing number of case studies on which to model our attempts. But I also hope that I have been able to point out some particular areas in which we have yet to get up to speed. In a culture on the turn, it is urgent that we maintain the momentum. Hopefully, that includes funding!

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ENDNOTES

¹ Hill (1960).

² E.g. *Approaches to Values and Attitudes* (1987); *Effective Participation in Society* (1987); *Learning and Living* (1982); Hutchinson and Waddell (1982).

³ *Australian Education Council* (1989).

⁴ *Agreed Minimum Values Framework* (1995).

⁵ W.A. Curriculum Council (1998).

⁶ Leicester, M, Modgil, C. and Modgil, S. (2000).

⁷ *Shaping the Future* (1994).

⁸ E.g. *A Curriculum for All* (1988); *Educating for the 21st Century* (1990); *The Values We Teach* (1991).

⁹ Civics Expert Group (1994).

¹⁰ Hill (1996).

¹¹ See *Values Education Study: Final Report* (2003).

¹² Max Weber nearly a century ago considered that **intellectuals** were caught in the "iron cage" of instrumental rationality. With unusual foresight, he warned that our civilisation would not see the importance of value rationality "until the last ton of fossilized fuel [had been] burnt." Quoted in Flyvjerg (1993).

¹³ *Final Report*, (2003, 2).

¹⁴ Cf. Frankena, (1958).

¹⁵ Oliver and Bane (1971, 260).

¹⁶ Hill (1994a, 7).

¹⁷ *Final Report* (2003, 112).

¹⁸ *Final Report* (2003, 175ff).

¹⁹ Hill, Brian V. (1994, chap. 5).

²⁰ Hartshorne and May (1930).

²¹ The insightful term coined in Mackay (1997).

²² Mitchell (2004).

²³ E.g. Hill (1989).

²⁴ Hill (2000, 201,206, original italics).