

Lost and found: values in public education

Recent comment by the Australian Prime Minister indicates that he feels public education is either values neutral at best, or is imbuing negative values in the young citizens of our country. 'Political correctness', in his view, is to blame. Political correctness, according to the Macquarie Dictionary is 'conformity to current beliefs about correctness in language and behaviour with regard to policies on sexism, racism, ageism etc'. In other words, political correctness reflects current values.

The values that underpin the desire to use language that does not denigrate, hurt, insult, humiliate, exclude or give priority to a narrow range of people within the huge diversity of the human condition are based on an ethic of care. Caring for people is a positive value. If the teachers in our public schools are guilty of caring for the children of our nation, of developing responsible contributing citizens, how can that be seen as a bad thing or a value-free way to go about their work?

I invite John Howard to sit in on my class for teacher education students where they learn about values, ethics, professionalism and the law. I invite him to learn alongside the next generation of teachers. He would learn that no educational or caring act happens without values influencing what a teacher, or anyone in fact, says, does, plans, assesses or indeed thinks. He would learn that the values we all absorb from our families, communities (and these include friends, schools, organisations), churches, and the bigger world in general, become so ingrained that we don't sometimes even realise we have them until we analyse our actions.

He would learn that analysing actions is what teachers learn to do and what they base their daily practice on. He would learn that people have values different to each other's. He would learn that professional values, that define the purpose and rationale of our work, differ between professions.

He would learn that teachers have devised and articulated the core values of their profession and that these are based on trust and trustworthiness, truth and honesty, tolerance and respect, integrity, courage, fairness, excellence, diligence, care and support, respect for the environment (NSW DSE, 1991), individual uniqueness, the full potential of each human being, wellbeing and self-esteem, autonomy and self-reliance, confidentiality, holistic learning and development, the interconnectedness of children and families, protection of children's rights, cooperation,

appreciation of diversity, rights of families, and professional integrity based on sound knowledge and research (Stonehouse, 1991).

He would learn that sometimes, people's personal values differ from those commonly held within their profession and that those people need to reflect deeply to work out where they stand and how they will act. He may even learn that he needs to gain a little more knowledge about values, because when he draws a line in the sand that strictly divides 'political correctness' and 'values' he is indeed in error.

Political correctness embodies a set of values based on social justice. A fair go for all. Giving each person a chance. Isn't this in fact often cited as the most laudable of Australian values? What John Howard may come to understand in my class is that when he is criticising classrooms for being values neutral he is really referring to his concern at not seeing his own values reflected in classrooms.

Ironically, as an Australian, he is concerned that the spirit of a fair go is taking precedence, described by him as political correctness.

I'm left wondering, however, how much time the PM has spent sitting in kindergartens in Cambridge Park, Launceston, or Redfern. How much time sitting in Year 6 in Shalvey, Kingswood, or Cooma. How much time in Year 8 in South Tweed Heads, Picnic Point, Ipswich or Adelaide?

Mr Howard, I invite you again to join my class – sit in on the discussions of teacher education students and become a student teacher for a week in a classroom. I can assure you that you will see the values of respect, care, kindness, commitment, compassion, cooperation, courage, integrity, humour, pride, responsibility and self-reliance, among others, that lead teachers to choose work in our public education systems that do not pay the salaries that their neighbours receive in business, IT or many other enterprises, but is in fact among the most important work in our country: a site for development of responsible citizenry, whose lives centre on the values embodied in a fair go for all, not just the white middle class.

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