

Talking it Over Beats the Bullies

CONFRONTING SOCIAL ISSUES IN AUSTRALIAN CLASSROOMS

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Recent news reports about bullying and violence in schools remind us of the need for schools to show leadership on confronting apparent declining standards of behaviour resulting from societal pressures. So what, if any, approaches and strategies do teachers employ specifically to develop to assist students anticipate and cope with a rapidly changing social environment?

There are some who believe that the young are unfit to participate in moral philosophy because either they are inexperienced, or they lack rational principles. If moral understanding required a basic understanding of the social and political world of adults, then children, young and old, and even many adults, are inexperienced.

Those who believe that sophisticated reflection cannot occur before the age of twelve are being proved wrong by work being done with children which assumes they are capable of reflecting on a variety of moral concepts and kind and cruel. Instances occurring in everyday values such as right and wrong, fair and unfair, kind and cruel, discussed in class, for example 'Why shouldn't we throw stones at an animal?', or 'What's wrong with saying "Anyway, you're a fat wimp"?' or discussing whether one right action be made up from many wrong actions?' Examination of issues at an early age can hopefully curb unnecessary or unreasonable resentments or prejudices.

Children have a natural sociability, and well developed moral stances. They are able to discuss objectively instances of jumping to conclusions, generalisations and seeing things from only one up from many wrong actions?' Examination of issues at an early age can hopefully curb unnecessary or unreasonable perspective. Morality is seen as being subjected, with each person's reasoned viewpoint valid. The central activities are reason giving, clarifying ideas and evaluating ideas.

Teachers in many classrooms in Australia are currently dealing with ethical issues such as prejudice, freedom, bullying and rights with their students through examining newspapers, literature, films, or songs which contain reference to relevant social issues. They are helping their students explore ethical issues, and at the same time improve reasoning skills by developing their classrooms into 'communities of inquiry' which promote the valuing of others' opinions.

One of the reasons teachers are turning to this method is that it increases opportunities for success and improved self-esteem. Its success comes from the development of appropriate discussion techniques which foster tolerance of a diversity of views. Improved discussion skills emerge as the students come to value one another as individuals, challenge ideas through classroom discussions, and accept responsibility for their own view.

The valuing of one another as individuals with interesting ideas, able to criticise, modify and challenge ideas via classroom interaction, but in a non-threatening environment, is an important achievement. Participants in discussions are expected to view each other as rational and reasoning persons. The process of the inquiry is valued, reasons for views are respected, and participants are encouraged to be self-critical and self-corrective. The environment for the discussion is supportive, and listening is a vital component.

The reason I advocate the use of the community of inquiry method when dealing with issues where values are inherent is that it does not require that teachers and students give up their individuality or become

part of a group where each thinks alike about moral issues. The underlying beliefs behind the community of inquiry are that:

- The members' beliefs remain their own, but they are ready to seek reasons for their ideas and submit them to public inquiry.
- In a pluralistic society the community should be composed of a number of diverse participants capable of public inquiry in which they can think well for themselves.
- Each member of a community of inquiry is someone who lives in the present, remembers the past and anticipates the future; each in a unique way.

A vital requirement of the community of inquiry method is the teacher's preparedness and ability to foster an imaginative philosophical dialogue. The process of co-operative co-inquiry takes time, and as the methodology develops, checks are made frequently to ensure the group is remembering appropriate behaviours for discussion.

The development of the skills and attitudes described above, achieved by forming a community of inquiry, provides a way of dealing with values, not by teaching a set of values, but rather, a certain procedure for thinking and talking about them.

LEVELS OF VALUATIONAL DISCOURSE

I wonder how often teachers stop to consider the extent and frequency of valuing that occurs every day in their classrooms. Consider how common it is for classroom discussions to be conducted in a manner that reflects the seeking of the answer. Expressive valuing, where one merely says 'good' or 'wrong' without expecting to justify such opinions with reasons is common. However, teachers should remember that whenever they express an opinion, their intent is to influence others, or express and encourage empathy.

How often do teachers consider whether an assertion made in class is based on sound reasoning and with justifiable authority. Consider the difference in the statement 'Matisse was a poorly skilled painter' when made by a high school teacher, and the same statement made by an accomplished art historian and painter. Teachers need to be aware there is a complex web of evaluations involved in the selecting, organising, presenting or rejecting of any curriculum content.

Are there recognisable, accepted or basic principles which define the domains of moral standards? This is an important and hotly debated point and, I suspect, one of the reasons teachers are avoiding such discussions.

The vexed question 'What moral standards ought one follow in a situation like this?' requires an awareness that changing conditions and new knowledge will bring rules and standards into conflict, and that student's values, being both fluid and emerging, may already be quite different from their teachers' and should be sought.

CLASSROOM DIALOGUES

Rather than dwelling on the particulars of a moral problem, by using the community of inquiry method, philosophical discussions are more likely to revolve around broader issues raised by a particular event. For example, the questions 'Should you trust strangers?' and 'Is bullying an answer to any problems?' led one class to discuss the notion of freedom. The existence and place of rules entered the discussion and resulted in a discussion of questions like: 'If rules are needed, who should make them?,' and 'According to what criteria should rule-makers be selected?.'

The school is a part of community life, and, by forming communities of inquiry, the students are participating in an effective model for future citizens in a democracy. This is because mastery of the procedures of the community of inquiry require one to think about an ideal self and world, be reading to consider intention and consequences, seek consistency and objectivity, try to determine the truth of one's premises, and try to draw correct inferences. In doing so, students are gaining the skills they need to think for themselves about the values

they and others hold. They are figuring out how various concepts and ideals like fairness and justice relate to their moral life and the institutions of which they are a part.

Teachers should be prepared to point out student views which are not well thought out, not on the topic, not plausible or invalid under the circumstances. As discussions develop, the participants should become aware of their beliefs and, most importantly, learn that they may be mistaken in certain instances, and that this is not the end of the world.

EXAMPLES OF CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

- A *newspaper article* about censorship led to a discussion of the reasons for restricted entry into movies and access to videotapes.
- A *Videotape* raised the issue of leaving mid year and not finishing school. Discussion revolved around the reality of the main character's expectations of the world.
- The topic of duck shooting, introduced via a *television news item* led to the following question being explored 'Do you think that animals or humans that have done nothing wrong should be made to feel pain?.'
- Extracts from a *novel* raised issues of fairness, pride, mental images, unfair reprimands, non-verbal actions and teasing.
- A *debate* on the topic 'Friends' led to animated discussion about whether there are people who have no friends, and whether you can trust friends more than anyone else?
- Following a *schoolyard incident*, a class was asked to differentiate between harmful and harmless teasing.

Students in one class demonstrated an awareness of the changes that occurred following the formation of a community of inquiry:

- It has made us realise that what other people think is important.
- We go into issues in more depth when we talk.
- we discuss issues we would never have considered before.
- At first we thought that if the topics were not on things like Michael Jackson (i.e., topical/news, people's feelings) it would have been boring, but we've found the topics interesting.

The emergence of previously silent members of the class including those regarded as 'less able,' students from minority culture groups, or those whose previous education perhaps precluded the expression of opinions, has been noted by teachers. Encouraging the students to listen, reason and assess social issues is proving to be most beneficial in many areas of the curriculum. More importantly, it has altered the way the students view themselves, others and everyday situations.

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