TEACH[R]

Developing values through the imagination

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Abstract

From 2004 to 2010 I served as a researcher and advisor in the Australian Government's values education projects. During the task of helping schools implementing and conducting research on values education, I took the opportunity to observe the importance explorative and imaginative modes of teaching and learning might have in the formation of values. In this essay, I argue that imaginative teaching and learning is essential in any type of values education, particularly if a constructivist view of values clarification (as opposed to values imposition) is favoured. As such, a warning is offered about the potentially counterproductive push for 'character' education, as seen in some parts of America, as well as the nationalistic approach to values education sometimes emphasised in Australia.

The problem

Values education has been high on the agenda in many Western countries in the last couple of decades. And justifiably so. Problem behaviour is a major issue for parents and educators across the Western world. The teacher attrition rate, particularly among entry-level teachers, is high in most western countries (Ewing & Smith, 2003), with many teachers and researchers citing behaviour problems and student discipline as the main reason for leaving the occupation (AGQT, 2006). Youth suicide and depression rates have been rising steadily since the end of World War II (Seligman, 2002; World Health Organisation, 2008), and violence, anti-social behaviour and binge drinking among young people are now so prevalent as to be viewed by some as the norm rather than the exception; moreover, all of the above phenomena are now being observed in younger age brackets across the full spectra of socio-economic strata and demographics (Childs et al., 2008). Clearly, we can do with some better human relations—and not only in classrooms.

> *Values education carries an innate complexity. Values are not as straight-forward to teach as fractions and nouns*

The only problem is that values education carries an innate complexity. Values are not as straightforward to teach as fractions and nouns. Much of the curriculum with regard to reading, writing and calculating is based on shared definitions. A triangle is a triangle by definition; we have all agreed upon what makes up a triangle. Values are different. One person's values can be different to another's, leaving us with the dilemma and frequently asked question in the values education debate—whose values are we going to teach?

Background

Since 2004, I have been working with the Australian Curriculum Corporation (now Education Services Australia) in the Values Education Good Practice School Project Stage 1 (2004–2006) and Stage 2 (2006–2008), as well as the Values in Action Schools Project (2009–2010). In these projects more than 395 schools across Australia have been supported by government funding to identify good practice for implementing the Australian National Framework for Values Education, a set of guidelines that has been formulated to assist educators in teaching values in Australian schools (see Final Reports at www.curriculum.edu.au/values).

Values education is a broad term, often encompassing, or linked to, other approaches such as 'socio-emotional education' (Clouder et al., 2008), 'positive psychology' (Seligman, 2002), or 'service learning' (Billig, 2000, 2007). Whatever the particular emphasis in individual schools, however, the general aim with these types of approaches usually is to assist students acquire personal attributes, such as respect, honesty, empathetic character, responsibility, agency, etc. The intent is to increase individual and communal wellbeing, thus counteracting the aforementioned problems in schools and society through preventative measures. My role in the Australian values education projects has been to assist schools with the research and implementation of the schools' respective values education programs, many of which have included elements of socio-emotional learning, positive psychology and service learning, to name a few.

Before I became involved in values education, I had been researching imaginative teaching and learning for a number of years. Ever since I began my doctoral thesis in 1999 on Rudolf Steiner's pedagogy of imagination (Nielsen, 2004), I have had a deepening interest in how to make education more engaging via imaginative means, a topic that has also received attention in the wider educational community in recent decades (see Blekinsop, 2010; Nielsen et al., 2010)

Imaginative education, like values education, is a broad term, sometimes encompassing pedagogies with each its own approach and research tradition. A general definition of imaginative education, however, could be said to be that of exploring possibilities when solving problems or creating, to go beyond the confines of conventional thinking, to think outside the box, or to think 'of what is not' (Egan, 2005, 1997). Such fluid and creative thinking has been associated with image formation in the brain (LeDoux, 1996), and images have been found to be strongly associated with emotional responses (Damasio, 2003), which is why imaginative education generally is believed to be increasing student engagement and make learning more holistic (Nielsen et al., 2010).

Because of these two research interests and affiliations—values education and imaginative education—I have asked myself the questions: Does imaginative education have anything to offer in the values education debate? And if so, what about the apparent paradox that imaginative education seems to be about *fluid, organic* structures of learning, and values education which seem to be about helping students to acquire a *particular set* of human values? Having developed some understanding of imaginative education, I felt inclined to look through this lens while working with the values education projects, hopefully developing insights into any possible relationships between imaginative teaching and learning and the formation of values.

An example of values education?

Whilst the following example of values education I experienced in an Australian primary school is in essence 'negative', I think it may contrast well, and thus illustrate, the argument to follow.

It is nine o'clock on a Monday morning and the whole school is gathered in the gym for assembly. "Congratulations to students of the week," the principal announces into a scratchy microphone. The whole school claps, and the 'students of the week' receive their certificates one by one, followed by an awkward handshake from the principal.

As the children return to their seats, the principal goes on: "These students have all made an effort and showed good manners!" While the whole school gives the students another round of applause, I notice a huge poster on the wall with the very same phrases: 'make an effort' and 'show good manners'.

Later that morning, I am in one of the classrooms. "What do you need to do when you want to say something?" the teacher asks. "Put up your hand," the children respond in unison. A bit later: "What do you do when someone gives you something?" The children, well conditioned, respond: "Say thank you!"

It is not that there is anything wrong per se with the above strategies when teaching values. My concern is that these were the *only* strategies I saw over a long period of time in that particular school. Why is it, for example, that we seem widely to have accepted that students learn best when they are actively and critically involved in the learning process but then do not apply this principle to all areas of learning? Is it only fractions and nouns that must be constructed by the learner in order for these to be more than superficial facts, implanted artificially via an outdated transmission model? Should values not be taught via constructivism and experiential learning as much as other parts of the curriculum, especially considering the argument that values are somewhat subjective and therefore need de- and reconstructing by those they are meant to serve?

In all fairness to the teachers I observed in that school, I think that educators in general struggle with facilitating constructivist learning in their classrooms. Yes, research has shown the benefits of guided constructivism and hands-on learning, but it takes considerable skill to create true 'treasure-hunting' in the classroom—without pointing to where the treasure is buried, and at the same time, not letting the students wander too much to and fro, wasting valuable time within a busy curriculum (see John Dewey's classic essay, *The child and the curriculum*, 1902). In other words, there might still be a gap between what theorists (like myself) say should go on in schools, and what actually goes on. Perhaps we need to be shown many more concrete ways of being treasure-hunt facilitators, as well as develop teacher training that nurtures such methods. But this is exactly why imaginative teaching is so interesting to consider in relation to values education.

> ***"The imagination possesses a unique quality: it makes things tangible to the conscious mind via intangible pathways"***

Imagination as transcendence to the whole

The imagination possesses a unique quality: it makes things tangible to the conscious mind via intangible pathways. Look at it this way: in using

a metaphor, we are explaining one thing in terms of another via images—for example, 'he was in a sea of emotion'. Stirred-up feelings are, of course, not literally the same as seawater. But the mysterious depths of the sea and its powerful undercurrents resemble roused feelings. There are shared principles, or 'essences', that connect the two concepts. What binds the 'sea' and 'feelings', in other words, is encapsulated by the metaphor—or more accurately, by the imaginative link created between speaker and listener (or writer and reader). A metaphor is, like imagination itself, an example of language transcending the form, connecting us to 'essences' and 'worlds of meaning'.

There are essences of 'significances'—of the spiritual—which transcend and connect the physical particularities that words tend to represent, even if this 'binding glue' is what we might call human meaning and thought. That is, after all, a spiritual aspect of human existence, I would argue. As John Dewey (1934) put it:

> To have 'aesthetic' experience is to depart from the observable and objective to the ineffable and subjective, telling us about 'love,' 'truth' and that life can be beautiful; it helps solve the pseudo-problem of the existence of another world and aids us in making sense of the material world through our imagination. (cited in Nielsen, 2004, p. 11)

In imagination, therefore, one finds a direct link with the 'meaning world', the world of the spiritual, exactly because its nature, by virtue of being imaginative, is to go beyond the physical world—that is, beyond what is known, the particular, the 'reality'. Put another way, imagination can work as a bridge between abstract thought-feeling and the more concrete sense experiences of daily living—between spiritual / aesthetic meaning and the more mundane world of particularities.

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Why is this important to the values education debate? Because in this debate we see an example of how easily living principles of meaning (the spiritual) can become crystallised into very concrete and set forms of particularity (matter). The values education debate often revolves around the concretisation of values , prompting the question—"What *are* the values we want our students to have?" Meaning that if we figure these out, we'll be able to instil values in our students. However, when one follows this kind of logic, one is trying to set in stone what is of a fluid, abstract nature; one is trying to create immovable truisms without the living principles underpinning the creation of them in the first place. As I have argued so far, however, we cannot disconnect our spiritual-aesthetic life from our physical-tangible life if we hope to keep either of them whole and connected to practical living.

And this is exactly where the values education debate sometimes goes astray. In the nature of values, there are 'essences' too—principles that do not exclude cultural, individual subjectivity and the social construction of values (see especially Seligman 2002, pp. 129–133). In fact, the inability to find common principles of values might be the single most important problem facing humanity today: it is called fundamentalism. The problem with Fundamentalism is when one is unable to see how that which appears different on the 'outside' can still be connected and share underlying principles. When things are black and white. And when black has no white in it and vice versa. I am not arguing here that we are all the same, or that there are no opinions more valuable than others. I am not a relativist. But I am arguing that if one is not able to see the connectedness of life when it is appropriate and indeed useful, one is doomed to live dissected 'truths', always unable to transfer, modify or adapt life's challenges as well as gifts.

Towards a living approach to values education

So how do we apply this rather philosophical discussion to the problems of teachers, who are out there, being expected to teach values—and then criticised when theorists come into their classrooms? Well, the antithesis to fundamentalism (as well as its extreme opposite, relativism), in relation to values education, is to know about our commonness as well as our differences, and to understand that our 'differences' do not preclude shared principles of universality—such as honesty, respect, kindness, etc. This means that, when governments create a 'list' of values that 'ought to be taught' in schools, while the list may be a useful starting point for discussing generic principles of values, shared across the community, the list has to be de- and reconstructed by learners to become of internal and social benefit.

In the many Australian schools I have had the pleasure of visiting, the attention paid to constructivism is reflected in the regular talk among staff and with children and parents about the needs and values of the group, school and community and how the considerations of such needs relate to individual needs. Even though core values appear to be similar around the world, they still need to be reinvented, indeed *re*constructed, by those systems and individuals that the values are supposed to serve. Then, and only then, as Townsend (1992) points out, will such settings be able to answer the

frequently raised question in the values education debate—'Whose values?'—with the appropriate reply: 'Ours!' In the Christian school context these would be based on school communities interpretation and level of adherence to the denominational views shared.

Having accepted this premise, that values are a living thing and must remain so in the learning of them, it follows that there is no easy way of creating a 'set' formula for teaching values, or indeed, any worthwhile learning for that matter. Good teaching is about important principles being alive and constantly being rebuilt by the individual student. And important principles can, of course, only be alive in any kind of teaching if they are alive in the teacher (Weissbourd, 2003).

For example, there are those who seem confused about why anti-bullying programs are producing different results in different schools. It is the same model applied, so shouldn't they produce the same results? In my humble opinion, the answer is obvious: we know that schools in which staff express a greater level of concern with managing bullying generally experience lower levels of it (see e.g. Lee, Buckthorpe, Craighead, & McCormack, 2008). Conversely, high levels of bullying, often correlate with teachers having nonchalant attitudes towards bullying—e.g. 'It is character building', 'Kids need to work it out among themselves'. Do you get the picture? One can employ the best 'models' for getting rid of bullying, but if the underlying principles and attitudes underpinning the models in the first place are not present or cultivated, it does not matter how 'good' the models are; they will always be destined to fail.

By the same token, it does not matter how 'perfect' the lists of values stipulated by governments or religious groups are, if there is no deep understanding of how values are shared, constructed and made useful and alive in the individual student's life. Further, this requires teachers to have values alive and vibrant within themselves, as well as a pedagogical understanding of how to engage their students in deep-surface inquiry. In other words, I would argue, it requires explorative, constructivist and imaginative teaching.

An imaginative example

As part of my doctoral study on the pedagogy of imagination (Nielsen, 2004), I recorded the following class discussion in a rural Steiner school in Victoria, Australia. It was not planned by the teacher but initiated spontaneously by the remarks of some of the children.

Suddenly, in the middle of a lesson on Noah's Ark, there is a class discussion of last night's eclipse of the moon. The teacher explains how the 'redness' of the moon was created by the moon moving into the shadow of the earth's atmosphere.

One child claims that the moon is always red, that red is its real colour and that "we just see it as white." The teacher listens patiently, showing interest in the child's comments. The other children do the same. Every opinion in the classroom is valued and given the same amount of respect, it seems. The teacher does not argue against the child's argument. It is as if he silently says, "Who am I to say that one explanation excludes the other—better to travel than arrive."

I suddenly remember once seeing a video with another teacher, discussing a shared story about a 'macaroni forest' with her class. "There is no such thing as a macaroni forest," she said in an unarguable manner. "You haven't seen a chocolate biscuit forest either, now have you," further supporting her point.

"Uhm... yes," said a child insecurely, "I have."

"And where have you seen this?" the teacher asked in disbelief.

The child, now even less confident, replied, "Well... on the floor in my room... after I've eaten chocolate biscuits."

A moment passed, after which the teacher resumed with factual precision to the other aspects of the story, brushing off the comment with a forbearing glance.

I become aware again of the classroom I am in at the present, where red moons and chocolate biscuit forests seem possible.

Usually, when I tell my pre-service education students this vignette, there is always someone who says, "But what about the facts—don't we need to teach the facts as teachers?" To which I always reply, "Yes, we need to teach the facts, but we also need to cultivate an openness about what the 'facts' might be. Wasn't that a chocolate biscuit forest on the floor in that child's room?" Or, as the teacher in the above example seemed to believe, "Who are we to say that the moon cannot be red at some level of existence?"

Then I usually also point out that the grade 3/4s in that particular classroom were probably some of the most knowledgeable and 'factual' 9–10 year-olds I have come across. Why? Because they had a great teacher who knew his content. But just as importantly, he knew how to build a space for the children's own processing of the content—a space where everyone's opinions would always be

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treasured and valued. Teaching the 'facts' does not preclude an openness for what goes beyond the factual—the imaginative, the spiritual, the aesthetic. One does not exclude the other. Indeed, perhaps each depends on the other.

Why I so often tell the above vignette as an example of imaginative education is not because it is a striking example of an imaginative teaching 'strategy', or 'model'. It is because it exemplifies the space where imagination has permission to live, and where its nature and significance are understood and appreciated by the teacher. The vignette exemplifies how the *principles* of imaginative education have to be alive before any 'strategies' or 'models' will work. In the 'macaroni forest' example, which I came to regard as antithetical to what I had hoped to observe, there was actually little difference between the teacher's conception of 'facts' and that of the teachers portrayed in Charles Dickens' humorous account of modern teaching in *Hard times* (1854). At one point, a teacher asks his class, "Should you have wallpaper with horses on it?" To which the children excitedly shout, "Yes!" However, the teacher rebukes the children by saying, "No! You should *not* have wallpaper with horses on it, because where in real life do you see horses walk up and down walls? Never should you see in *representation* what you do not see in fact!"

While Dickens depicts an extreme example of enlightenment thinking in education, the above vignette illustrates that the repercussions of the modern scientific period's separation of thinking and feeling, facts and imagination, still resurface within our educational settings today. Whether conscious of it or not, we still favour 'facts' over imagination, 'reality' over the imagined. We test the testable and measure the measurable. Then we think that our 'statistics' show the reality of our students' learning (yes, I am thinking NAPLAN here). But they do not. They only show how much students know about 'particularities'. In relation to values education, this is not only non-pedagogical; it carries certain dangers.

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A word of caution

If one accepts the premise that values education should be taught with the same constructivist principles that the last 30 years of research has shown as necessary for deep-surface learning, then we should truly stop to reconsider the behaviourist approaches to values education emphasised by some governments at the moment. The whole idea of 'character education', as expounded in many parts of the U.S.A., rests on a behaviourist notion of imposition. That is: we know what virtues we want our students to have; now let's impart those virtues. In Australia, our governments have sometimes taken a nationalistic approach to the debate, emphasising the 'values that makes us Australian'. Both approaches, however, are counterproductive to what should be the ultimate goal of values education: the nurturing of moral, independent individuals with the ability to think for themselves.

Indeed, a purely behaviourist approach to values education, with no element of critical constructivism or imaginative inquiry, will at best only produce sheep (something that people like Alfie Kohn say would motivate some of those in power!). Such an approach is not only non-educational; it is mis-educational (if we take the act of education to be an act of liberation). In fact, a common definition of indoctrination is that one is (a) told what to do or think, (b) provided with no reasons and (c) given no alternatives; for something to qualify as indoctrination, in other words, it must have these three ingredients (Tan, 2004). This means, then, that as long as we provide *reason* and explore *alternatives* alongside the teaching of certain core values, we can have explicit values education without indoctrination. If, on the other hand, we forget the two other clauses—providing reason and alternatives—we actually indoctrinate, however noble our 'core' values and intentions.

Thus, to teach anything in schools, it is useful to consider how to complement a legitimate need for clear instructions, expectations and reinforcement strategies with the inherent need in learners to be able to construct their own knowledge. As indicated, it is not that the first example of values education I gave is to be avoided at all costs; it is just that there needs to be a balance between reinforcement strategies and opportunities to interrogate what is being reinforced. The problem I experienced was not that behaviour modification practices occurred but that they were the *only* practices I experienced.

In a word, we should not be fooled into the belief that values education is to simply drill in a set of prescribed values. Research has shown on more than one occasion that an overemphasis on extrinsic motivation tends to erode intrinsic motivation (Kohn, 1997). If what is emphasised primarily is 'good' behaviour, with little or no interrogation of what that means and why it is good, there is reason to believe that it will actually counteract what we are hoping to achieve: independent, self-motivated people with inner values and integrity. Such internalisation does not come about through reinforcement alone but through imaginative exploration and constructivism.

Conclusion

I have in this short essay tried to highlight that, while values education is high on the agenda in many Western countries at the moment, we need to be cautious about not reverting to outdated transmission models when trying to instil so-called 'core values' in students. Such behaviourist approaches do not provide the space for imagination and exploration needed for students to truly own values.

Also, by allowing a space for the imagination in exploring values, one is by virtue of the nature of imagination, encouraging excursion beyond the narrow confines of any particular sets of values—the 'forms'—to reach a place where 'essences' and 'worlds of meaning' are nurtured. Thus, transcending the dilemma of whose particular sets of values to teach, the imaginative teacher stands for generic core values, not caring about the particularity with which they might crystallise for the students. The important thing is for teachers to live the values they teach and to encourage students to make values come alive in their own lives.

As such, programs, or models, of values education may be useful starting points, but it is ultimately the quality teacher and quality teaching that determine the success of any values education initiative (Lovat & Toomey, 2007). Good programs can support teachers who wish to improve, but they cannot substitute the principles that underpin the models in the first place.

Seeing both positive and negative examples of values education through my involvement in the Australian values education projects, I noticed how positive examples are almost always associated with imaginative, explorative learning activities and how negative examples more often than not lack such approaches. I can only conclude that, if we want teachers to teach values in schools, we do them and their students a favour by investigating with them the realms of imaginative and emotionally engaging teaching much more than is currently the case in most teacher training institutions. The engagement of students' imagination is the key to reaching their emotional selves, and reaching their emotional selves may be the only way to reach their moral selves.

> To reach a child's mind, a teacher must capture his heart. Only if a child feels right can he think right.
>
> Haim Ginott TEACH

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