

# STRENGTHENING SOCIETY'S VALUES

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## ABSTRACT

This presentation considers the development of community awareness of the need for a compassionate ethic in relation to our conceptual understanding of and dealings with animals and all living things within our total local and global environment, and the valid role of such an ethic and the dynamics of humane education within the nine-value structure of the ***National Framework on Values Education in Australian Schools***, and other relevant typologies for values education.

It also considers strategies and opportunities for the development of an appropriate range of learning and information resources and processes which will contribute to an informed understanding of the issues and achieve appropriate levels of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values and behaviours in young people in the context of their families and communities.

Finally, it will consider the most effective approaches by which that learning can be facilitated by a framework both of teacher training and professional development in relation to pre, primary and secondary schooling, and also through less formal sources of information from community organisations and other relevant entities through which families and young people access information.

## **STRENGTHENING SOCIETY'S VALUES**

### **ABOUT ACSSO – THE AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL OF STATE SCHOOL ORGANISATIONS**

The Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO) was established in 1946 as the national peak body representing the interests of the families and school communities of the some 2.2 million students who attend Australia's 12,000 public schools, preschools and kindergartens, and also deals with issues affecting their access to appropriate high quality tertiary education.

ACSSO provides research-based input to the Australian Government and its agencies and operations on proposed policies and actions in the education area, plus a range of information and support services to State and Territory affiliate organisations and their membership networks across the country. Our functions are increasingly diverse and extensive, and include in particular to:

- conduct, commission and publish research on educational issues
- lead and facilitate public debate and discussion to establish the strategic directions and priorities for education
- provide an interactive information service to government and to schools and their communities
- ensure that community needs and priorities are reflected in education decision making processes
- develop and manage a range of initiatives and community projects to improve the effective involvement of parents and families in student learning and development.

ACSSO maintains close and positive liaison linkages with our colleagues of the Australian Parents Council (APC), and increasingly develops, designs and conducts action research and community projects in partnership with APC.

### **ACSSO AND VALUES IN EDUCATION**

You will recall that a couple of years ago, the public debate about values in education was ignited by a range of statements from a number of high-profile political figures, along the lines that we needed to restore the central role of basic community values in education.

Unfortunately the debate was from the beginning cast in a negative mode and driven from a deficit model, with assertions that schools are increasingly becoming values-free zones – and this was successively taken up and put into more extreme forms by successive commentators, to the point where allegations were being bandied about that public schools were increasingly operating in isolation from traditional Australian values – or in some cases were perceived as actively antagonistic to those traditional values.

ACSSO was a leading entity in seeking to focus those comments and commentators in more specific and accountable ways in terms of clarifying which values they saw as being more honoured in the breach than the observance, and what exactly was that canon of “traditional Australian values”. To us, the concept of “values-free education” is an ultimate oxymoron: the whole concept, purpose and all the processes of education – young people’s learning and development – is fundamentally and essentially a values-based concept from beginning to end.

This is strongly stated in the 1999 Adelaide *Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*”, endorsed by all Ministers of Education:

*“Schooling provides a foundation for young Australians’ intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development. By providing a supportive and nurturing environment, schooling contributes to the development of students’ sense of self-worth, enthusiasm for learning and optimism for the future.” (2)*

That debate led to the development and publication by the Australian government of the “*National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools*” (1) which is shaped around a typology of nine broad values descriptors:

- Care & Compassion
- Doing Your Best
- Fair Go
- Freedom
- Honesty & Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Tolerance & Inclusion

It also resulted in ACSSO being specifically commissioned to establish, maintain and progressively further develop a national Website at <http://www.valuesineducation.org.au> to promote an informed discussion and debate about the role of values in education and the processes of articulation and understanding of what are our shared community values, and the ways in which these are developed, inculcated and manifested in the school community.

### **THE CENTRAL ROLE OF FAMILY-SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS**

Research conducted by ACSSO, together with the results of research conducted in recent years in Australia and around the world, demonstrates the extent to which young people's learning and personal development is enhanced when the school, its families and its wider community are working together in a productive and sustainable partnership with a shared focus on young people's well-being and education opportunities.

That learning and development has a number of facets which on the "classic" model can be set out in this sort of hierarchy; of:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Attitudes
- Values
- Aspirations, and
- Behaviours.

Working through this hierarchy of elements, the research clearly demonstrates the increasing importance at each successive level, of a shared understanding and close positive working relationship between families, school and the wider community. This is especially important in relation to values education and the ways in which those values are understood, articulated and practised. The more extensive and interactive this discussion, the more usefully the process can differentiate between real shared community values and propaganda; between core values and irrational prejudice.

## **TOWARDS A NATIONAL FAMILY-SCHOOL & COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK**

ACSSO and APC have worked closely over the past three years with the support and leadership particularly of the previous Education Minister, to develop and validate through extensive action research, a national Framework for establishing and developing family-school and community partnerships. That National Framework, which is shortly to be signed off and endorsed by all Ministers of Education as the guidelines for all Australian schools, was drawn from the twenty years of research by Joyce Epstein and her team at Johns Hopkins University in the USA (3), reconceptualised through a national discussion and consultation process in terms of the dynamics of the current context of Australian schools and their communities.

The Australian framework is based on a core typology of seven elements - which differs significantly from the six-element Epstein model in that it includes a strong focus on the values elements of the Adelaide Declaration. The elements of our framework are :(4)

- **Communicating**

This dimension emphasizes that effective communication: is a two-way exchange between families and schools; involves not only an exchange of information, but also an opportunity for schools and families to learn about each other; needs to take into account cultural and linguistic diversity and not assume that all families prefer, or are able, to communicate in the same way; is multi-dimensional – it may be: 1) formal or informal, 2) happen in different places (both in the school and in other sites such as community centres), and 3) use different modes (oral, written, face-to-face, phone, email, etc).

Family-school communication needs to be taken seriously –it must be valued, recognised, and rewarded by schools and education systems. It is essential to provide teachers and school leaders with education and training programs to prepare them to communicate effectively with families. It is equally important to empower and encourage families to communicate effectively with schools.

- **Understanding of roles**

As primary educators of their children, parents/carers and families have a lasting influence on their children's attitudes and achievements at school. They can encourage their children's

learning in and out of school and are also in a position to support school goals, directions and ethos. Parents look to schools to provide secure and caring environments for their children. Families and schools can reach mutual understanding of each other's roles and priorities in partnerships by:

- exploring the nature of the parent role in the education of their children;
- offering strategies for parents' support and encouragement of their children's learning at school;
- ensuring families understand school goals, curriculum and the social objectives of schooling; and
- ensuring schools understand family, parent and community priorities.

- **Connecting home and school learning**

This dimension involves: families and schools creating positive attitudes to learning in each child; ensuring families are informed about and understand their child's learning progress; families and schools valuing and using the skills and knowledge children bring from the home to the school and from the school to the home; families and schools recognising and using literacy and numeracy learning opportunities in the home environment; and parents working with teachers in the educational decision-making process for their individual child.

- **Participating**

Families' time, energy and expertise can support learning and school programmes in many ways. This may involve family members: working with students on learning activities in classrooms, participating in other school activities outside the classroom, or participating in activities outside the school itself. Families participate in the school in a wide variety of ways and all contributions are valuable.

- **Sharing Decision-making**

Parents can play meaningful roles in the school decision-making processes. Training and information to make the most of those opportunities can be conducted as part of the partnership programmes and processes of the school. An inclusive approach to school decision-making and parental involvement creates a sense of shared responsibility among parents, community members, teachers and administrators. In turn, shared responsibility:

- ensures that parents' values and interests are heard and respected, and
- makes the school more accountable to its community.

- **Collaborating beyond the school**

This dimension involves identifying, locating and integrating community resources. The wider community provides services to strengthen and support schools, students and their families. Schools, families and students can assist the community in return. Schools are increasingly relying on collaborative efforts with partners such as:

- local businesses,
- after-school care providers,
- higher education,
- foundations, and
- other community-based agencies.

- **Building community and identity**

This refers to activities that improve the quality of life in a community while honouring the culture, traditions, values and relationships in that community. By including activities that shape students' sense of identity and culture, schools can build a sense of community in each student. ***This dimension importantly includes the moral, ethical and spiritual dimensions explicitly recognised in the Adelaide Declaration.*** Thus schools have a role to play in promoting personal identity, moral and ethical development and cultural renewal.

## **THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THAT MORAL DIMENSION**

In retrospect, it is interesting to note that - despite the strong values emphasis of the Adelaide Declaration - a significant number of the one hundred members of the original Roundtable group which the Minister brought together at Parliament House in 2004 to develop the initial discussion-draft of the National Framework, expressed strong reservations at the inclusion and emphasis of the seventh element. Throughout that fairly passionate discussion there was a level of discomfort clearly evident, a sense that values, ethics, moral and spiritual issues are better left unpacked and undiscussed; or swept out of sight under a convenient carpet.

With that in mind, it is even more interesting to note that in the subsequent evaluation of the eighteen months action research testing of the Framework in 61 schools in all parts of the

country through 2005-2006, not only were all seven elements strongly supported, but all parties in all schools (Principals, teachers, parents, families, community members) **ranked that seventh Values dimension as pivotal**, equally important with effective two-way communication.

This strongly confirms that, as leading European researcher Birte Raven has put it, *“there is a critical need to take more specific account of the extent to which aspects of the social, emotional, moral and spiritual development of young people has been drawn into the work of the school.”* (5)

### **HOW DOES ACSSO'S EDUCATION AMBIT INCLUDE ENVIRONMENT AND ANIMAL WELFARE?**

The point here is that the factors and issues bearing upon young people's learning and personal development are many and varied; and initiatives of the Australian government impacting on them and their families are increasingly being driven through portfolios and ministers outside the traditional role of the Education Minister and her Department. Each new government initiative that has some level of implication for education and school communities, widens the scope of matters that we deal with on behalf of our national constituency.

ACSSO was an active contributor to the discussion processes on the development of the **National Framework on Environmental Education**, and the current processes to redevelopment that as a Framework for Education on Sustainable Development.

ACSSO has also been directly involved in discussions around the educational aspects of the **Australian Animal Welfare Strategy** (AAWS), and represents all parents, families and school communities on the national Advisory Group on Education & Training. (The work of this advisory group will be discussed below.)

The stated scope of the AAWS is to *“embrace a broad vision for the humane treatment of all sentient animals and provides a framework for sustainable improvements in animal welfare outcomes, based on scientific evidence and social, economic and ethical considerations.”* A key goal is to ensure “Effective communication, education and training across the whole community to promote an improved understanding of animal welfare”. The enabling strategies include raising informed awareness and understanding through provision of access to and

dissemination of, a comprehensive range of high quality information, education and training resources that meet the needs of all sectors of the community. (6)

An associated paper published via the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage notes that in these processes there is a valid, necessary and important role for Animal Welfare groups; stating that:

*“Animal Welfare groups are concerned with ensuring that all animals are treated in a humane manner. They do not challenge the right of humans to use animals for food, clothing, entertainment or research but endeavour to ensure that all efforts are made to improve their well-being and living conditions.*

*Animal Rights groups do challenge the right of humans to use animals for their own needs. Animals are seen as having intrinsic value, not just an instrumental value, and thus have the 'right' not to have their well-being compromised to serve humans.” (7)*

#### **A MATTER OF MORAL AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY**

The evidence of recorded history shows that far too often we treat other people very badly indeed – and treat other living and sentient beings a great deal worse!

This is shown in the recent book edited by Peter Singer “In Defense of Animals” (8) – underlining the extent to which the human animal has ignored its own first principle of “first, do no harm”. The ways in which we perceive ourselves in relation to all other forms of life and thus how we should relate to them, has trod an uncertain path over the centuries. From Descartes who famously said “I think therefore I am” but was not thinking very clearly or usefully in assuming other animals were in essence automata, like clockwork toys (p.58). To Kant who postulated that we have strong duties to animals, and that we can “judge of the heart of a man through his treatment of animals” (p. 134).

And in 1758 Samuel Johnson was fulminating against experiments on live animals fashionable at the time: “Among the inferior professors of medical knowledge is a race of wretches whose lives are only varied by varieties of cruelty ..... He surely buys knowledge dear, who learns the use of lacteals – at the expense of his humanity.” (9)

Unresolved problems lie in two linked traditions handed down to us:

- The Judeo-Christian tradition embodied in Genesis (Chapter 1, Verse 26) “*And God said, let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle and over the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth*”. This drives the concept of homo sapiens as a separate creation, essentially different in kind from any other animal upon the earth, and from all living things.
- The popular interpretations of science that are informed by this thesis. These suggest that all life is a hierarchy or “ladder” upon which the human animal is set upon the top step. Or those sequential picturegraphs illustrating a progression of living things from the amoeba to the apes to modern man – all suggesting that the human animal is the purpose and fulfillment of creation or evolution – the outcome to which the whole of life’s processes for the past billions of years have been dedicated.

However, as Richard Dawkins points out, “Biological evolution has no privileged line of descent and no designated end. Evolution has reached many millions of interim ends (the number of surviving species at the time of observation) and there is no reason other than vanity – human vanity, as it happens, as we are doing the talking – to designate any one as more privileged or climactic than any other.” (10)

Our species did not inherit this planet with title deeds or inalienable rights of control, any mandated superiority which entails a right to treat other life forms as things to be exploited, plundered, exterminated and treated with cruelty or indifference. We came from extremely humble and inauspicious beginnings as an obscure by-product or accident of history, our remote ancestry getting its chance to progress via the Permian extinction, which eliminated 95% of life forms on the planet – our family tree goes back then to the surviving life forms that can be seen in the Burgess shale in Canada and the Ediacaran Fossils here in Australia.

Our next lucky break was the meteor shower that put an end to the dinosaurs – probably the most impressive and successful life form, who dominated the planet for 100 million years. (11) With them conveniently out of the way, the opportunity was there for the processes which eventually led to the emergence of Homo sapiens – the clever beastie. Our species did not inherit and does not own the planet and the other life forms: we are simply a life form that has come to pervade or infest the place. Parvenus, it could be argued.

Of course, as Jared Diamond pointed out, to further deter us from speciesistic hubris, while we call ourselves *Homo sapiens* on a good day, we can as validly be seen as the Third Chimpanzee, cousins to the big chimps and the Bonobo, our closest living relation. (12). But perhaps we are too often the black sheep of the family, which those others would rather not talk about. When a chimp finds himself quoting Shakespeare, as they often do, and murmurs "What a piece of work is man!" he also probably adds under his breath: "And a fairly nasty piece of work at that, all things considered...".

Our having pervaded the planet in fact - in a very basic and very real sense - gives us more obligations than rights. This is reflected in currently accepted International Law. When we went waltzing matilda rather casually into Iraq with our American friends and allies, it was pointed out very strongly that this puts us into the role of Occupying Power. These days that status of Occupying Power does not (as once it may at the time of Genghis Khan) give us any specious right to pillage, plunder, trash the place, enslave, exterminate and plough the fields with salt. But instead, this imposes the obligation to put it to rights and leave it in better shape than we found it.

In the same sense, if we are the Occupying Power species over much or most of the planet, then we have a fundamental obligation to all other life forms to look after the place as custodian and to respect and protect their rights, needs and preferences.

In that very real sense, Kevin Rudd was absolutely right when he characterised climate change, global warming and greenhouse gases as the great moral challenge of our time. In the same way, in the ACT, then Attorney General Simon Corbell was absolutely right to state – a little time back - that the debate around the banning of battery hen cages was fundamentally a moral and ethical issue.

Curiously – but perhaps understandably – (and as we noted above in relation to the Family-School & Community Partnership Framework) - to approach issues from the moral, ethical, philosophical and values viewpoint seems to make people feel rather uneasy, and we find the conversation being diverted or reconceptualised in the language of economic rationalism – which seems to make the issues more comfortably discussable within those confines. But at the end of the day economic rationalism – like patriotism (as Edith Cavell memorably pointed out) is simply not enough. Indeed, while Samuel Johnson noted that patriotism is the last

refuge of the scoundrel, he might also have remarked that economic rationalism is perhaps the scoundrel's first and instinctive hiding place.

So the moment a conversation begins about the moral imperatives of protecting the planet and the rights of all other life forms upon it, we see two very different sectors of the ideological spectrum seeking to divert and re-invent the discussion in other terms entirely.

In one corner the neo-Marxist ideologues like those behind the specious documentary "The Great Global Warming Swindle" – who tend to view all things as resources that are valuable only in terms of their capacity for exploitation for human consumers, with the ethical and moral issues being something of a bourgeois self-indulgence.

And in the far corner, the Neo-Liberalists who have a parallel view that all things are weighed and sifted in terms of their relative financial benefit by the operation and dynamics of a free market and the imperatives of economics.

The implications of either approach could be reduced to a simple formula - that people and all other animals and life forms are only of any use so long as they are useful to maximise productivity and consumption, and in any case are necessarily expendable in pursuit of the ultimate purpose of life: which is measured by the criteria of GDP.

In the view of some of us – and I would hope most of us - that would be an abomination. Without a firm foundation in the moral, ethical and values dimension, we are all adrift..

In terms of that ethical dimension, Richard Leakey poses the question, "why then should we concern ourselves with species that, like us, will eventually be no more" and attempts an answer thus:

"We did not arrive on earth set down amid a wondrous diversity of life, blessed with the right to do with it what we please. We like every other species with whom we share the world, are a product of many chance events leading back to that amazing explosion of life forms half a billion years ago and beyond that back to the origin of life itself. When we understand this intimate connection with the rest of nature in terms of our origins, an ethical imperative follows: it is our duty to protect not harm them.

“It is our duty not because our position bestows some kind of benevolent superiority on us, but because in a fundamental sense Homo sapiens is on an equal footing with each and every other species here on earth. When we understand earth’s biota in holistic terms – that is, operating as an interactive whole that produces a healthy and stable living world – we come to see ourselves as part of that whole, not just as a privileged species that can exploit it with impunity.

“The recognition that we are rooted in life itself and its well-being demands that we respect other species, not trample them in a blind pursuit of our own ends. And by this same ethical principle, the fact that one day Homo sapiens will have disappeared from the face of the earth does not give us licence to do whatever we choose while we are here.” (13 )

### **INFORMATION, EDUCATION AND TRAINING – A PROGRESS REPORT**

Noted above is the recent formation of the national Advisory Group on Education and Training in relation to the implementation of the AAWS.

At its formation meeting in May 2007, the Group determined that as an essential starting point, consultants should be engaged as a matter of urgency, to undertake a national “stocktake” of all currently-extant information, training and education products and resources right across the country. Consultants have been engaged and have carried out extensive threshold discussions with a wide range of stakeholder organisations and their key personnel.

This clearly demonstrated to them (as certainly appreciated by all members of the Advisory Group) the challengingly vast scope, scale and content of the task – and its critical importance if the educational and training objectives of the AAWS are to be progressed and achieved.

The detailed process of identifying, locating and cataloguing that range of materials has begun and is shaping up very well to date. A further meeting of the Advisory Group in Canberra on 22 October will review progress and plan the next stage of the journey.

Once this essential enabling phase of the total project is eventually completed, then the Advisory Group – drawing also on an appropriate range of stakeholder input and expertise – will be able to identify any gaps and overlaps; to review the range of current materials in terms of its quality, currency, consistency and effectiveness; and to commission any additional or replacement resources identified as being required.

Once that process is well under way, then those endorsed high-quality information and learning materials can be promoted and made available to educational institutions, organisations and relevant centres of community information across the country – including high quality curriculum resources to schools.

At the same time, the appropriate range of information and learning materials should be provided to all relevant tertiary institutions, for incorporation into the training and development programs they provide. That should centrally include the provision of components and modules for inclusion in teacher training; to equip new teachers to incorporate humane education into their school curriculum; and professional development modules to update existing principals and classroom teachers.

It is also envisaged that Humane Education for students is ideally suited to the current development of Service-Learning – which has been mandated in Western Australia and is being considered for introduction in a number of other State jurisdictions. Essentially, the process of Service-Learning is to use opportunities in the community for experiential learning which is structured to achieve defined educational outcomes, relating both to learning and to personal development. This is an enabling strategy ideally applicable to reinforcement of effective Values Education – and of a compassionate ethic of Humane Education in action.

## LAST WORDS

Peter Singer concludes his book “In Defense of Animals” on a cautiously optimistic note:

*“It is true we have a long way to go in expanding the circle of moral concern ... but bad as our attitudes may be, we have progressed a long way from the days when Africans could be captured, shipped to America and sold, much as non-human animals are today. Just as we have progressed beyond the blatantly racist ethic of the era of slavery, so we are now starting to move beyond the even more firmly entrenched speciesist ethic of our own era. Moral revolutions of this scope do not happen quickly. .... If this book [**and the work of the AAWS Education strategy – and more particularly of this groundbreaking national Symposium**] does have a significant effect, however, it will be a vindication of all those who have believed that man has within himself the potential for more than cruelty and selfishness.*

(14)

The links between negative attitudes to other living creatures manifested in cruelty and abuse of animals by children, and their subsequent negative and destructive behaviours including ongoing and increasingly serious cruelty and abuse of their families and other people, has been credibly established and reinforced by a continuing range of research. This emphasises the importance, within a framework of values in education, for the inclusion of humane education as an essential element – the importance in young people's learning and development, of a compassionate ethic for animals.

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**Q - Delegate**

*I wonder if you could comment on an earlier question, about how you can bridge the gap of wanting to discuss justice issues in relation to animals, where this may be at odds with the values context in the home, and where there isn't a family-school partnership to support those discussions? In doing research I discovered students aren't at all threatened by these questions, but it is a question in teachers' minds: how can I widen the discussion about justice issues, when it may be clearly at odds with other entrenched views?*

It's a diabolical issue. And I don't have any clear answer. I've worked with a range of school communities, and the local dynamics are always different. The process we have developed and used is a very flexible facilitated discussion which encourages parents to talk about and gradually work through the issues of concern to them, the things affecting their young people's learning and personal development. Talk about these things from their own personal perspectives, but also sharing ideas and different points of view – an open ended process with no given positions, no pre-determined outcomes – but certainly the opportunity to look in an unthreatening way at different points of view and think about new issues in different ways.

The focus of our process was on building a better understanding of well-being, resilience and helping young people feel OK into adolescence, how parents can help them feel supported and encouraged at home and at school. That certainly raised a range of different issues along the way – but those who took part said it helped them think and talk more broadly about the issues, feeling better informed and much more comfortable about discussing these things, appreciating different views and better understanding where young people are coming from, and why they think and feel like that.

We know that this sort of process works equally well for a range of issues – might be about homework, or drug risks, or helping with literacy, or learning technology – or humane education and animal welfare.

What we have learned is that you can't talk at people, can't tell them what to think. You can't be seen to indoctrinate or proselytize people – or you lose them. But you can find ways of involving them in a conversation – and where that conversation bears upon issues affecting their young people, they will join in, even if with some reservations at first; and help them to work through the subject for themselves, in the context of their own community and personal experiences. And if the young people themselves are comfortable and would be happy to share their views with their parents in that sort of discussion, why not bring them in too?

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