

The classroom teacher: making a difference through values education

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Abstract:

Values education has been a controversial issue in Australia for a number of years, with the Commonwealth Government releasing the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* in 2005. However, despite the apparent topicality and the publication of numerous government-funded “best practice” examples of values education in Australian schools, little is known regarding how individual classroom teachers have taken up the values education mandate. This paper explores the experience of “Helen”, a senior primary school teacher in Queensland, Australia. Using discourse analysis, two semi-structured interviews with Helen were analysed for both content and form. Helen’s account of her approach to values education shows how many of the debates played out in the broader field of values education become matters of serious theoretical and practical complexity in the life of the classroom. The role of the classroom teacher in navigating this complexity is also shown to be one of significant power. Overall, therefore, Helen’s account paints a detailed picture of a classroom teacher ‘making a difference’ in the lives of students through values education.

Context

Whilst there appears to be little current conjecture in Australia over the often repeated statement in media releases and other government documents that “education is as much about building character as it is transferring skills, knowledge and the thirst for learning” (Nelson, 2004, 29 April), there remains considerable tension over exactly how this educational purpose is to be realized. The difficulty in translating government policy into classroom practice is not a new phenomenon (see Lingard, 1996, 2000; Stockwell, 2005), and the policy process behind the release and distribution of the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005 hereafter, the National Framework) closely mirrors that of an earlier government push regarding civics and citizenship education

(Heck, 2003). Ongoing debates about how best to instill values in young children, however, make considerations of what and how to teach values particularly problematic for teachers. This is especially so in a pluralist democratic nation such as Australia where the teaching of values can be directly related to the constant negotiation of boundaries between public and private domains in a liberal democracy (Ferres & Meredyth, 2001).

For individual schools, and for individual classroom teachers, decisions regarding the teaching and learning of values are problematic. At the micro level of the classroom, teachers are faced with recent calls to make their own values explicit and act as a role model for students, to be a part of determining the values of their school community, to ensure these community values are consistent with those prescribed by the Government, and to help incorporate these many aspects into a coherent and specific statement of values to be pursued across the school (Commonwealth of Australia, 2005). Ongoing tension surrounding values education in both the wider community and among politicians and academics, as well as the plethora of values education programs on the commercial market, all contribute to a number of competing values education discourses that can make it difficult for individual classroom teachers to make choices regarding curriculum and pedagogical approach.

The current dominant approach advocated is for students to analyse and clarify a range of values, a relativistic stance, but within a common set of core values, a more absolutist stance (Bottery, 2000). That this half-way measure between the poles of absolutism and relativism is successful remains largely untested. Wilson summarises this approach, dominant also in policy material in the United Kingdom, as one where “we are to establish some kind of social consensus about ‘values’, and then inject the agreed values into our pupils” (Wilson, 2000). Despite the recent policy emphasis in Western countries on establishing common values, the ongoing tension between polarizing philosophical positions remains largely unresolved, reflected in the fragmented nature of the field of research.

The difficulty in demarcating a distinct field of research in values education is exacerbated also by its potential to include a broad array of educational issues, all of which have import for the teaching and learning of values. Bullying, racism (Applebaum, 2005) diversity (Skinner & McCollum, 2000) and spirituality

(Crossman, 2003; Newell & Rimes, 2002), for example, are all issues that can be related to values teaching in some way. Blum (2000) has highlighted the importance of values teaching within antiracist and multicultural education. Ling (2000) considers the teaching of values in the context of diversity and national policy in Australia. For researchers in the area of spirituality (de Souza, Cartwright, & McGilp, 2004; Fisher, 2001), the inner life of students becomes central and is linked to values education through an explicit focus on beliefs and values.

Perhaps most directly related to values education in Australia, both in national policy development and in articulating prescribed values, is the civics and citizenship project, “Discovering Democracy”(Curriculum Corporation, 2005). The values of citizenship, it is argued, are primarily moral in character (Aspin, 2002). Indeed many of the same contentious issues regarding the teaching of citizenship in a pluralist democracy hold true for values education, where the need to create ‘good citizens’ with democratic values creates tension over perceived interference of the State in the private lives of its citizens (Ferres & Meredyth, 2001; Hill, 1991; Kennedy, 2003). The tension between policy and practice is also salient in such contested issues. Interviews with teachers in Australia discussing the policy and practice of civic education in schools, for example, have shown that it is the personal views of the teachers that most influence their civic education programs, rather than any external or centralized policies (Kennedy, Jimenez, Mayer, Mellor, & Smith, 2002).

Values education is also frequently linked to many of the issues that are considered current social problems; indeed the common catch-cry of those in favour of values education is to cite the many social ills that such education is supposed to cure (Carr, 2002; Cawsey, 2002; Lickona, 1991; Starratt, 1994). “MindMatters”, for example, a government funded resource addressing mental health in secondary schools, is frequently mentioned by the secondary schools that participated in the Australian Values Education Case Study (Commonwealth of Australia, 2003). The prevention of bullying, violence or injustice is also an explicit aim of many of the values education programs used by the schools in the same case study research. Overall, the interrelated nature of these issues with values education gives rise to the expectation that there may be marked differences among classroom teachers in how they conceptualise ‘values education’.

Introduction

This paper explores the conceptualisation of values education of one upper primary school teacher, named “Helen”¹, in North Queensland, Australia. Helen had worked at the same State primary school in North Queensland for approximately 10 years, and had over 33 years of teaching experience. Helen was interviewed twice, as part of a broader study on the discourses of values education in Australian primary schools. This paper is based on data collected from the first interview with Helen. The decision to limit this paper to discussion of Helen’s approach to values education is largely pragmatic as a full discussion of all research participants is beyond the scope of this paper. Helen’s first interview was also reflective in many ways, however, of other participants in the study who also accounted for values teaching in a predominantly informal manner.

Helen’s approach to the teaching of values included the strategic use of the classroom environment, the use of external motivators through systems of reward and punishment, the use of formal curriculum explicitly targeted at the development of values and the use of many opportunities that Helen described as ‘spontaneous teaching’ where values were taught in an informal manner. For the purposes of this paper, discussion is limited to those aspects of Helen’s approach to values education that were most dominant in her interview: her informal or ‘spontaneous’ teaching of values and her use of the classroom environment.

In Helen’s interview, excerpts of which are reproduced in the following pages, many of the issues raised in the broader literature are evident. Demarcating a distinct field or domain to which values education can be applied and making decisions in regards to the selection and interpretation of values, for example, is shown to bring a measure of complexity to the classroom teaching context that is potentially divisive.

Theoretical Framework

The concept of Discourse, and more specifically Discourse Models, of James Paul Gee (Gee, 1996, 1997, 2004a, 2004b, 2005) frame the broader study. This broader study aimed to identify salient discourses in the accounts provided by individual

¹ A pseudonym

classroom teachers regarding their approach to values education. For Gee (1996), Discourse encompasses all the things required to enact a particular role in a particular setting. A related concept, Discourse Models, describes the informal theories, usually referred to as beliefs and worldviews, held in common by a group of people as a result of shared social or cultural commonalities, such as membership in a particular family, occupation or institution. In analyzing the Discourses in values education, the broader study aimed to reveal some of the dominant Discourse Models, the 'storylines', that contribute assumptions about how or what values education should occur in Australian schools.

In this paper, it is the assumptions embedded in Helen's informal approach to values education that is explored. Interview excerpts are transcribed according to the conventions used by Gee (2005), where each interview line represents a 'spurt' of salient information, and is often indicative of a pause or hesitation in speech. Where lines are connected in such a way so as to constitute a single "sentence", a macro-line, this relationship is indicated with the use of the same number but an accompanying alphabet denotation, such as "4a, 4b" and so on.

Helen's informal approach to values education

Whilst Helen used a variety of resources and methods of instruction in her approach to values education, it was her informal approach that she emphasized, primarily through repetition, in the first interview. Helen variously described her approach using such terms as 'informal', 'incidental', 'ongoing' and 'spontaneous'. Helen professed a liking for "integrating everything together" and saw her classroom environment as a tangible reflection of such integration, made possible because of its primary school context.

That the "everything" referred to by Helen in the interview included the integration of values was evidenced in the example of integration Helen provided: "like sticking the values in every three minutes". Helen's statement not only suggested a high level of frequency in the teaching of values, but also suggested a high level of awareness on the part of Helen that she was, at those frequent intervals, engaged in the teaching of values. Whilst Helen characterised her overall approach to the teaching of values in

the interviews as “incidental”, therefore, it is not without a measure of conscious deliberation.

Indeed Helen equated effective teaching with the ability to “seize the moment” and offered an example in the interview of where she told the girls in her class not to let their happiness “depend on some bloke”. This was a spontaneous and persuasive speech, what Helen referred to as a “spiel”, and was motivated by student talk in the classroom about girlfriends and boyfriends that Helen had observed. Important in Helen’s recount of the event was not only that she showed how she seizes the moment but that she does so in a “brilliant” and relevant manner. The presence of a third-party observer (a parent) lent legitimacy to Helen’s story, with the positive evaluation: “I wish you could tell that to everyone”. Helen stated that “it just basically comes out”, reinforcing her purportedly innate ability to teach values, having already established in the interview that she “must have always known what worked with kids”. Helen’s example of when she did “seize the moment” in teaching not only supported her earlier self-description in the interview as an “opportunistic teacher” but also built on her identity as an experienced and good teacher.

Although Helen, through recounting the story of the ‘spiel’, offered an illustrative example of how she teaches values in a spontaneous manner, the value itself is not clearly articulated. Helen’s preference for integration appeared to present a recurring problem: that of separating or isolating specific values for explicit instruction. Helen was very clear in recounting the event and the message of her talk with the girls, for example, but she was significantly less clear in evaluating how this related to the teaching of values. One could argue that the message *is* the moral: “don’t let your happiness depend on some bloke”. Helen, however, attempted to evaluate her “spiel” in three different ways: that it was about “self esteem”; that it was about “valuing yourself”; and that it was about “not thinking you’ve got to be some bloke’s handbag or something”. Helen’s three-fold attempt to locate the value shows how a behaviour, in this case that of having (or not having) a boyfriend, is insufficient in and of itself to teach a value. First, the behaviour itself needs to be judged. It is only when Helen conveyed the view that such a relationship “does not really matter” that the point of her “spiel” is made. Helen also obviously felt the need to link this point to an explicit

generic value, hesitantly linking her judgement of the behaviour (“probably it is something about”) to self-esteem and valuing yourself.

Some of Helen’s hesitancy could be attributed to the difficulty, alluded to by Helen, in distilling specific values from “real life”. Values are, in Helen’s words, “so much entrenched in real life” that she found it “a bit hard to separate values from, from everything else, from real life”. At several points throughout the interview, Helen sought clarification from the interviewer as to the relevancy of what she had just said, such as “I’m not sure I’m giving you the right info”, and “does that sort of answer your question”. Evident in Helen’s interview, therefore, was a difficulty in clearly demarcating a specific domain to which ‘values education’ could be applied. Indeed in regards to the National Framework, Helen stated that the values are “very easy, if you know what they are” and that she was focusing on them anyway:

HELEN

378a I think the thing I disliked about it most

378b was kind of paternalistic Simpson and his Donkey being the kind of symbol for it

379 I think they probably could have found something a little more relevant

380 But there are things that are very valid

381 And things that I think that are very important just for everyday life

382a And being like that

382b I think that they are really easy to integrate

383 They are very easy

384 If you know what they are and basically what

385a Well I focus on them anyway though

385b I think without it being implicit [explicit?] that these are the values that

385c you know we want you to do

(Helen, 1:378-385)

Helen appeared confident that her values education approach focused on the list of values put forward in the National Framework “anyway”, even without the perceived directive from the government. Lines 385-385b imply that Helen does indeed know what the values are, and that they are “easy to integrate”. Interestingly, however, this integration appears to relate back to the perceived relevancy and importance of the values for “everyday life”. Although Helen is aware that she is frequently engaged in the teaching of values, and confident that the values she teaches are also those of the National Framework, therefore, she appears significantly less aware, or inclined, to

identify specific value/s in her teaching. This preference for integration, conceptualization of values as being for “real life” or “everyday life”, and the generic nature of the values in the National Framework, all combine to form an approach to values education that is seen to infuse everything, and, as such, difficult to isolate and specifically identify.

The lack of contestation over meaning, or questioning of the values or messages presented by Helen to the students, or of her own understanding of the generic values in the National Framework, implies that Helen is secure in her knowledge that the values she teaches, although not clearly articulated, are ‘normal’. Some of Helen’s professed confidence in her approach to values education may have been exaggerated in the face of an interviewer, but the singular way in which she puts forward her judgements of behaviour, or ‘messages’ conveyed to students suggests a high level of assumed ‘normalcy’ about the values she teaches to the students in her class. The process of reading values into behaviour, based on judgements of the behaviour itself and the production of a moral message or “point”, moreover, appeared to be a primary method of instruction for Helen. It is a pattern of instruction that recurred frequently throughout the interview.

Helen’s use of the classroom environment

The classroom environment was spoken about at length in the interview and appeared to be a major part of Helen’s informal approach to values education. Helen stated that she uses the sayings on the classroom walls “all the time”:

HELEN

178a Well I actually do something about values

178b I’d say every day

178c and probably you know more than once a day

179 I try and teach values incidentally wherever I can

180a Wherever I can find an

180b an opportunity to bring in a little narrative or

180c or an expression or proverb or anything

180d I’ll try

180e try and bring it in

181 So it is ongoing in that way

- 182a For example
 - 182b like
 - 182c um
 - 182d “why try to fit in when you were born to stand out”
 - 183a You know
 - 183b I’ve got
 - 183c always got little things like that around the room and that is
 - 183d that is our common language in the room
 - 183e all these things that are around the place and so
- (Helen, 1: 178-183)

Helen described, through her placement of the sayings around the room, a discourse around values had been created that was common to Helen and to the students and appeared limited to the confines of the classroom, being “our common language in the room” (line 183). Helen suggested elsewhere in the interview that the common language of the room is frequently used by students (“all all the time”), and implied its use in the context of issues regarding behaviour. An example in the interview of where the language was used when “something would come up”, for example, is followed with an example of student dialogue regarding “trash” or “treasure” behaviour. Helen also provided another example of such language later in the interview, with the language again used in a behavioural context:

- HELEN
- 464 And then we have that common language
 - 465a So you only have to say something to a kid and they will say
 - 465b “Oh ok
 - 465c Bart says bin it” or something
 - 466 They get to learn pretty well from that as well
- (Helen, 1: 464-466)

That “you only have to say something to a kid” (line 465a) and a set phrase or saying is produced as rejoinder by a student, shows how easily the common language can be elicited by Helen from the students. This points to the pervasiveness of the common language and supports Helen’s assertion that it is frequently used. Some of the sayings mentioned by Helen included: “why try to fit in when you were born to stand out”, “think you can, think you can’t, you’re right either way” and “I just made an ass of myself when I assumed that”. Apart from demonstrating familiarity, student use of the set phrases or expressions (the common language) also suggests that students are aware of the favourable reception with which use of such language could be predictably met by their classroom teacher.

A common language was seen by Helen to contribute to a type of shared understanding. Indeed in response to a question from the interviewer regarding Helen's repeated mention of having a "common language", Helen pointed out the benefit of having a shared understanding:

HELEN

190 I think it [a shared understanding] is essential

191a I don't think

191b I don't really see how you could do it without having a common language

191c because that way you

191d you know

191e you only have to say like two words

191f and the children know exactly what you are talking about
(Helen, 1: 188-191)

Through the deliberate display of specific sayings in the classroom, and through constant reference to these sayings, therefore, Helen had created a common language in the classroom which, in Helen's view, had led to the students knowing "exactly what you are talking about". The greatest asset of having the common language appeared therefore to be that Helen was able to be understood.

Implicit in the examples provided by Helen, moreover, is that the common language was externally produced and introduced into the classroom by Helen. This is not unusual in a teaching context where new information is often introduced into the classroom by a teacher who is seemingly tasked with making themselves, and the information, understood by students. Many of the sayings use an American variety of English, with many stemming from a theory of behaviour known as "Choice Theory"² (*The William Glasser Institute*). In the following excerpt, Helen pointed out how training in Choice Theory in the past had provided a common approach among teachers:

HELEN

110a Anyone who worked in the school basically

110b was trained

111a So we all had a common language

111b and we all operated the same way

(Helen, 1: 110-111)

² Choice Theory is a theory of human behaviour developed by Dr William Glasser and suggests that we can directly control the thinking and acting components of our behaviour, and that through right thinking and acting we can indirectly control our physiology and feeling components of behaviour. See www.choicetheory.com

The use of a common language in this way has implications beyond Helen's classroom:

HELEN

236a But when I had the Roman Catholic religion teacher in this room um

236b he was great

236c because he used to have a look and see what I was doing

237 And he used to tailor his lessons so that they fitted in perfectly with what I was doing

238 And he used a lot of my language as well

239 So there wasn't a huge division between what was being taught in Religion and what was being taught in Ethics

240a And that was

240b that was worked really well

(Helen, 1: 234-240)

In lines 237-8 Helen compliments the Roman Catholic teacher who used the classroom for Religion lessons because he adapted his lessons in such a way so as to align with Helen's approach. Helen takes specific ownership of what she is teaching in the classroom ("what I was doing") and of the language she has created ("my language"), showing a high level of control over her approach to values education. The tailoring of lessons and use of the language of the classroom in Religion meant, for Helen, that there was little discernable difference between the content of this subject and that of Ethics (line 239). Helen earlier said of ethics that "basically they are values".

Several issues are evident in Helen's account. These are that values and ethics are of similar equivalence, that ethics and values and religion can also be of similar equivalence, and that the common language in the classroom contributes to the narrowing of any divisions between ethics/values and religion. That Ethics and Religion classes are offered to students as an either/or proposition implies that the school itself has already judged both as being of equal or similar equivalence. Further implied in such an assumed equivalence between ethics and religion is that both can be assumed to deliver a similar outcome, perhaps the teaching of right from wrong, or a guide to moral conduct. Apart from the evident ambiguity surrounding such a broad conceptualization, it is instructive to consider that the common language to which Helen refers has a neutralizing effect; it would appear to be powerful enough to contribute to the overriding of potential differences between ethics/values and

religion. This powerful effect of having such a common language suggests not only that it is a pervasive part of the classroom culture, but that it shapes teaching and learning in such a way that a common understanding or way of “knowing” can be produced.

The classroom environment, in reflecting a type of language and in helping to create this same language through its use as a constant source of reference, contributes to a form of equivalence. It can, for example, be claimed by Helen that a common language has helped to reduce division between what is taught in religion lessons and what is taught in ethics lessons, reduced division between what is said by the teacher and what is understood by the student, and, more broadly, a common language has helped to reduce division between the way in which staff at the school operate. Helen herself identified how this “common language”, through “pointing to various things around the room” or “just little sayings”, had become “like a common knowledge”, with herself and the students “on the same page”.

Implications

Helen’s informal approach to values education, although only briefly discussed in this paper, shows how a classroom teacher can exercise significant influence in determining how values education is taught. Helen adopted the views of Choice Theory because it was her “philosophy” anyway, even though she admitted that some teachers at the school took to the theory more than others, with some finding it more suited to their “operating philosophy” than others. The theory had not been sustained across the school due to high staff turnover, but Helen deliberately and frequently used the language associated with, or reflective of, the theory in her classroom. Helen also positioned herself as an active and important agent in the initial adoption of the theory at the school, describing herself as “instrumental” in the development of the behaviour management policy that stemmed from the theory. Helen legitimised her “operating philosophy” through use of Choice Theory, for it was her philosophy anyway, and further legitimised her approach to values education through her own experience as a teacher (“it works”) and through behavioural evidence (“I don’t have any behaviour problems, which is probably the biggest thing in teaching”). Helen’s adoption of Choice Theory and the way in which this theory, and that of her own

“operating philosophy”, informs the “incidental” teaching of values throughout the school day shows the way in which the values perspective of an individual classroom teacher can be a pervasive influence in the classroom.

The creation of a common language in the classroom and the impact this has on the way in which knowledge is produced is also significant. In using Gee’s (1996; 2005) approach to discourse analysis, language is seen to both reflect and construct reality at the same time. That Helen has introduced this language and that students have adopted this language raises questions as to what type of reality is being reflected or constructed. It would appear, even from the limited evidence presented here, that the perspective of Helen, legitimized through Choice Theory, is the prevailing one in the classroom and constitutes what is perceived as normal in the classroom. The dominance of Helen’s perspective and lack of evidence in the interview of a critical questioning of this perspective would suggest that students are expected to conform to this dominant way of perceiving the world around them. As such, therefore, Helen, as classroom teacher, would appear well positioned to make a difference in the lives of students. Consideration of the positive or negative potential of such a difference is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is an issue that harkens back to the debate over the potential for values education to be used as a tool of indoctrination.

The way in which Helen has difficulty in demarcating a distinct educational domain to which values education can be applied also points to the lack of a clear conceptualization of the domain in the broader literature. Values education can potentially include a vast array of educational issues, and this confusion was evident in Helen’s approach as she questioned the relevancy of what she was saying at several points in the interview, and limited a significant amount of her conversation to issues of student behaviour. Ethics were seen to be the same as values, and the divide between ethics and religion appeared, with the aid of a common language, to be minimal. Overall, much of the theoretical ambiguity surrounding values education is evident, therefore, in Helen’s approach.

Conclusion

From this brief exploration of aspects of Helen's informal approach to values education, it is evident that many of the theoretical debates played out in the field of values education become matters of immediate practical complexity in the life of the individual classroom teacher. In navigating this complexity, Helen showed she primarily relies on her own value system in the informal messages she conveys to students. Helen also displayed a very hesitant understanding of the scope of values education. Giving a spontaneous 'spiel' to the girls in her class regarding the unimportance of having a boyfriend or using the sayings and language of Choice Theory throughout the school day, are reflections of Helen's perspectives on teaching and learning and the faith she displays in the normalcy of her own value judgments. In this way, Helen is "living out" key debates in the broader literature regarding the scope of values education and its potentially indoctrinal effect.

Whilst there are yet many unanswered questions in regards to school practice, Helen's account of her approach to values education has shown the significant role that an individual classroom teacher can play in adopting specific external theories that align with their own individual philosophy, and creating a classroom environment and common language based on these perspectives. It is clear that Helen, in using her "operating philosophy" to guide the conduct of students in her classroom, is making a difference in the lives of students. If Helen's viewpoints are perceived to be positive, then the difference she makes could be said to be one of 'development' or 'influence', but if her approach is evaluated negatively then it could be said to be a form of 'indoctrination' as students are inculcated into the values held by their classroom teacher. Additional research on the approach to values education of individual classroom teachers will further illuminate in what ways this difference is made, and how the nature of such difference is to be evaluated in light of the government's *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools (2005)*.

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