Values Education, Quality Teaching and Service Learning – lessons learned from the Good Practice Schools Project.

Professor Terry Lovat is Pro Vice-Chancellor of Education and Arts at the University of Newcastle, and a central figure in the Australian Values Education Project. Here he discusses the lessons learned from international Values Education initiatives as well as the Good Practice Schools Project.

“Values education is one of the paradigms – along with quality teaching and service learning – that has shown us how much more can be achieved in schools than we probably have believed for most of the past century.” Achievements, Prof Lovat says, such as the elevation of struggling students.

Lovat laments the tendency for the value of “values” to be diminished by political pragmatism and tradition. “Things like mastery learning, the need for more testing, the need for more prescriptive learning, the sort of thing that one can still find being trumpeted in the pages of the tabloid press almost on a daily basis – that the problems in our schools with failure are to do with teachers trying to do too much and not focusing on the basics, and we need more testing… (but) what values education has helped us to see is that in many ways the dead opposite is the truth!”

He points to research showing student failure has little to do with their heritage, gender ethnicity or language skills, but rather is directly connected to their learning environment. “In particular where learning environments focus too exclusively on low level cognitive type of learning, repetitive learning, learning that is the focus of tests – then it seems, for many students and especially those who struggle with learning, we just encourage the brain to go further into sleep mode.” This was a foremost consideration in the establishment of the Australian Values Education Project. “Setting up a learning environment that just focuses on the cognitive and doesn’t concentrate on the emotional – and worse still sets up a very negative sort of emotional environment, is the sort of environment where eventually no-one will learn, much less the person who struggles.”

Lovat believes that “unless you touch people’s hearts, you’re not going to get to their heads” and described values education as the missing link in quality teaching. He acknowledges the importance of the technical infrastructure and delivery of teaching, but observes that the full, powerful impact of quality teaching can only come through a “positive trusting ambience”. It is in creating such an environment that children can begin to develop confidence and a sense of themselves and their place in the wider world.

However he says society is slow to grasp the sophistication and potential of values education, describing Australians as living in an anaesthetised world and governed by politicians who can get away with perfunctory vote catching. “Bluntly, I still think Australia’s a little too naïve and our politics are probably a little too sheltered.” He says there is a wealth of evidence and testimony generated through the Good Practice Schools Project, yet the average classroom still operates with a mentality of “barricades” between teachers and students, with everybody “in their bunker”. But he says there’s no doubt
“how much better learning can be” even for those cynical and resistant to values driven quality learning, “when a different kind of relationship develops between teachers and students, and you get a different kind of discourse going, especially one that involves the transaction of values”.