

What does not involve an ethical decision? This is a question I have been considering during the long debate about ethics classes.

For those outside of NSW you may not have been aware of a significant debate during 2010 about the trial of ethics classes in NSW state schools. A significant issue for churches was the provision of the classes at the same time as Religious Education. Presently those children who do not undertake RE are provided with time for personal study, usually in the library.

Having the classes at the same time was considered by most churches (not the Uniting Church in NSW) to impinge upon the rights of children to also undertake RE, and to allow those doing RE to undertake ethics courses.

Having read the material that is publicly available I developed a sense of unease, coupled with my personal thought that this was a marvellously naive approach, but then this is partly determined by what one thinks of human nature. Having a dimmer view of human nature in general or at least less than those involved in this project (not withstanding the amazing common grace shown in disasters and difficult situations).

One Parent Ethics Class Facilitator on *Youtube* states "What has been the most difficult thing in facilitating the discussion was actually encouraging the children that there was no right or wrong answer, that what they thought was valid. It could be different to what their friends thought. So [we were] just getting them to know that it's okay to think differently [from] others as long as you respect the other people when you are disagreeing with them."

The project author Professor Phil Cam (Associate Professor, School of History and Philosophy, UNSW) clearly outlines: "In terms of education first of all there is a very big difference between Ethical inquiry and moral instruction—in moral instruction we think that we already have all the answers to how people should behave about character and conduct

It's official: 'No right or wrong' answers

and we try to inculcate that in children by telling them what to think and what to do. In ethical inquiry on the other hand we actually have open questions."

I fully understand the basis of the trial classes, and the approach adopted. Having grown up being encouraged to read and think for myself, I love inquiry, but this was not done in a vacuum without moral pointers and considerations. I also had the advantage of reading works of literature which grappled with moral and ethical situations. If one teaches ethical inquiry, it is helpful to acknowledge that everyone has an agenda and a philosophy that helps to determine their reasoning or at least provide some criteria for reasoning.

In the *NSW Ethics Trial Course Report (Evaluation October 2010)*, there are some interesting conclusions and recommendations, and it is helpful reading, especially for the discussion of the basis of ethics. I want to comment on part of the trial evaluation based around examination of responses to six questions (before and after the courses).

1. Working out whether lying to your friend is wrong
2. Thinking whether to have shorter showers to save water
3. Working out whether it is cruel to keep animals in zoos
4. Thinking about what you want to watch on TV.
5. Deciding which sport to play
6. Deciding whom to ask to your party

The report states: "Items 1, 2 and 3 were included as clear examples of ethical issues. Items 4 and 5 were included as clear examples of 'Not Ethical' issues, based as they are on face value as simple matters of personal choice. Item 6, 'Deciding whom to ask to your party', was included as a more complex example that might be classified as either 'Ethical' or 'Non

Ethical' depending on participants' personal experiences. (pp 60-61)"

My view is that this approach is inadequate, as I believe there are ethical implications of all these questions. From my extensive interviewing of children during many projects in the last decade, a key question for me has been how do children today develop moral reasoning skills that lead to decision-making? A basis that kept coming to the fore was a type of situational ethics approach based around their community of the time, mostly their peers and whether they had good "experiences". The ethical inquiry approach is designed to promote a community of respect and collaboration, but it needs to do more if it is to create a genuine community of understanding. One danger of the inquiry approach is that it does not seem to take into account the complex lives of children today and the wider ethical debate in which the world now operates due to environmental and world situations.

A significant area for example is the pornification of children. The danger in any system that lacks a code of right and wrong is that children will follow what they see and experience. Pornography wants to give the impression that it is a mutual loving experience, and that all sexual practices are equally valid. Provocative episodes on the special edition of *The Sex Education Show - vs pornography* (UK) about children and pornography by journalist Anna Richardson, left me with no doubt that our society is on the verge of a cataclysmic shift in moral values that have wider implications than sex.

The scenes where a group of parents are shown the images of what their children have been viewing are simply eye-opening (the camera shows the incredulous reactions of the parents and then their discussion). The estimate for one's first viewing of explicit pornography in the UK is now 11 years. Perhaps there are ethical questions about what one watches on TV, especially as the internet and TV converge? Needless to say, the present NSW Government confirmed the trial course as a success, and the developing party (St James Ethics Centre in Sydney) has stated it is committed to starting the courses in Term 1 this year. *Peter Bentley*