

# Whose job is it, anyway?

**Dennis Sleigh**

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**M**ost teachers don't want to add anything else to the curriculum – unless, of course, we can also delete a lot of current content. I say this confidently because it echoes frequent comments I have heard over many years. Nevertheless, I did hear a teacher on talk-back radio recently pleading for the addition of good manners to the curriculum. I was driving on rural roads at the time and just as the argument was getting interesting, my radio lost its signal, but I had heard enough to suggest the caller thought our task as teachers would be greatly enhanced if pupils practised good manners – and that many parents today are failing in their responsibility to introduce these building-blocks of social interplay.

As I continued driving, I recalled a prominent politician making a similar plea some years ago. Google reminded me that it was the Hon Julie Bishop, the then Federal Education Minister, who was calling for manners to be taught in schools, to counter what she saw as a 'decline in civility in Australia'. Her comments were reported in *The Age* (7/11/2006) at the time. Without asking if politicians could seriously offer such suggestions – after all, are any classrooms as unruly as Parliament in Question Time? – it might be time to revisit the issue.

The obvious starting point for such a discussion would be to point out that any call for teachers to teach good manners seems to overlook that fact that most already do so. I wonder whether the Minister was suggesting teachers should have sole responsibility for teaching good manners. Did she not know that teachers, whether realising it or not, teach manners in their classrooms every day, unless they are willing to withstand constant chaos?

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classes it might seem as though the lesson is offered by default, with pupils learning the value of courtesy by observing its absence. Most teachers recognise that if their pupils are going to move smoothly through the education system, and then gain employment, some social skills are essential. This is part of the hidden curriculum of our society, and I think most of us recognise that those deficient in such skills often fail to progress as far as they might like. The issue, then, is not whether we should teach manners – we do – but whether the whole approach needs review. Manners is one topic that comes easily to mind, but there are others where debate occurs about being included in the curriculum. Fortunately, the on-going development of a national curriculum has at last opened the door to discussion of some of the more contentious issues and so there is a chance that less-obvious issues might also be scrutinised as time passes.

## **Clear processes**

In order to explore these topics, we need to set some clear ground rules or we will very quickly find ourselves more deeply buried under a new

mountain of demands from a society that seems increasingly unable to reach agreement about content. A dramatic example, of course, would be the recent national debate about the 'safe school' movement.

Perhaps the first question we have to ask is "What are schools for?" If they exist simply to prop up a lazy society no longer prepared to devote time to rearing its young, then heaven help us all. If, on the other hand, they function as a system whereby the shared values of our nation are promulgated in a coherent manner with the assent of the people concerned, then we have a good opportunity to ensure that what is taught more or less represents the desires of the stakeholders. These shared values are not taught solely in schools, but schools do have their role to play.

In the case of manners, teachers can reasonably be asked to assist in the teaching of good conduct, not by adding another item to an already over-loaded curriculum, but by modelling and reinforcing the relevant behaviour – such as taking one's turn in a conversation, respecting others' private space, showing genuine regard for others' views and attitudes, or honouring the dignity of classmates, teachers and visitors. I pity any class where a teacher fails to honour this obligation. Without teacher modelling and affirmation, we cannot expect pupils to absorb these habits, even when their parents are among those making a genuine attempt to inculcate them. Perhaps Fred Astaire was right when he said "The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any."

We already have an education system that offers the shared values I referred to and those who have other values can make alternative choices. They might opt for private education, either church-related or otherwise, or they might choose home schooling. While not everyone is in a position to implement such choices, it can fairly be stated that alternatives do exist in the overall scheme.

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### **Are all views considered?**

We then need to be able to address a second issue: will everyone's views be accommodated within this (existing) provision? Sadly, the answer has to be no. There are too many disparate views in any modern society to permit universal consensus; the best we can hope for is a majority view. However, while the majority might have their opinions accepted, there should still be some room for the disenfranchised to be heard as well. Compromises are essential. Many of the serious problems confronting our society today arise largely because we refuse to compromise.

Unfortunately, the idea that there are behavioural norms to which we are expected to comply seems to enjoy a reduced presence in our society today. I am reminded of a trenchant comment by Joan Chittister: "I grew up in a society where there were some words that were never spoken – in front of women, in front of children, in public, at a dinner table, in a professional setting, on a telecommunications program of any kind. But then, little by little, we began to see it painted on back walls of old buildings. And did nothing. Then we began to accept it in teenage music. And did nothing. Then it showed up in racy 'literature'. And we did nothing. Finally, it was everywhere on the streets. And now, it seems, there is very little we can do about it at all." The restoration of norms is not a task that can be left entirely to schools, even though teachers have a part to play in such a process; a co-operative society, anxious to enhance the on-going education of its children, will need to play a major role too.

### **How do we hear people?**

This line of thinking then raises a third issue: if we agree on the role of schools, and we also agree that the views of a majority should be acceded to (within limits, depending on the topic), how do we assess those views validly? To answer that question, we need to look at a practical dilemma currently facing Australia: should we change the *Marriage Act* to accommodate same-sex marriages? From opinion polls conducted in recent years, it is clear that there is a growing level of support for changes to the current position, but not everyone trusts such metrics. Having recently participated in such a poll for the first time in my life, I am now more convinced of their validity but there are still many people who might wonder whether most polls are conducted in the local pub during half-time in the footy.

Referendums are another source of data collection, but we can hardly hold a multi-million dollar vote every time we try to decide on what should be included in a school's curriculum. Parliamentary legislation is another option and in a democracy that seems to be a reasonable choice but again, many people have reservations about the validity of such decisions when the results seem to be tied to party allegiances.

Even a lightly populated nation like ours cannot realistically hope to canvass and respond to everyone's views. The ancient days of Greek citizens casting votes on discarded shards of pottery would not help much today – it would be a prospect even scarier than the 1.02 metre-long ballot paper for last year's NSW Legislative

## Manners defined

Manners are a sensitive awareness of the feelings of others. If you have that awareness, you have good manners, no matter what fork you use.

**Emily Post**

The test of good manners is to be patient with the bad ones.

**Solomon Ibn Gabirol**

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**Joan Chittister**

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Council. We cannot pretend that our democracy represents the collective voice of our fellow citizens. Rather, it reflects (at least ideally) the expressed views of the interested participants. If "decisions are made by those who show up", it follows that the chosen content in a school system's curriculum will be influenced by the views expressed by vocal stake-holders. Sadly, too few people actually take the opportunity to express a considered view.

This brings us back to a rising community problem: the silence of the masses. In an age when communications are so readily available to almost everyone, it is ironic that participation in serious discussion is seemingly dwindling. Just look at the key issues of refugee resettlement, revision of the taxation system, the escalating climatic crisis or the increase in deaths by suicide; each of these 'hot button' issues is worthy of serious discussion, but society seems more interested in working out whether a footballer should be fined for off-field conduct

or a model should be banned because her body shape is outside certain parameters. The founders of democracy must shudder in their graves as they see the futility of so many banal debates (not only in parliament but certainly obvious there) and the refusal to grapple with the key issues that impact on our lives.

Perhaps this is where schools come in – again! While it is common to find schools teaching public speaking and debating skills today, leading to far more confident students when called upon to speak in public, we must ask whether our emphasis is on the elite, rather than on the masses? Do we select our debating teams and then concentrate on them, or do we try to ensure that the skills of oratory, logical thinking, and self-confidence are developed in *every* student? No school would restrict its maths or science programs to those who are gifted (tempted though we might be to do so); instead, we work hard to educate everyone in the class. Why do we do less with oratory and debating?

I started with a claim that no-one wants to add to our already crowded curriculum, but perhaps teachers can nurture the necessary skills in an incidental manner. If we all refuse to accept poorly reasoned answers to questions, if we all demand clear diction when responding to a teacher's questions, and if we all extol the virtues of positive self-esteem, we will be contributing in a significant way to the development of communication skills and perhaps one day we will see universal improvement. Many teachers already do these things – just as you actively teach etiquette – but if all of us could accept the challenge, we could indeed make a major impact. The improvement in our own daily classes would be our reward.

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