

**Submission
No 1**

**INQUIRY INTO EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS
CLASSES REPEAL) BILL 2011**

Name: Ms Anne Powles

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SUBMISSION TO THE GENERAL PURPOSE STANDING COMMITTEE No 2
ON THE REVIEW OF THE EDUCATION AMENDMENT (ETHICS) ACT 2010

In relation to point (a) that you will be considering, I can see no problems with an inquiry into and a report on the areas enumerated in relation to the operation of “special education in ethics”. Indeed I welcome inquiries into any part of the educational curriculum of NSW schools. (That could, of course, include “special religious education” at some stage.)

Such periodic reviews can usually be of assistance in delivery of better education to our children.¹

In relation to point (b), I submit that the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should NOT be repealed and my reasons follow.

History

Choices of our current school curricula have been informed primarily by history. The roles that religions and belief systems have played in education have been considerable over the centuries and this is not different in the history of NSW schools. Christian Churches played a significant, very positive, part in the early development of education in the colony. Later, when various NSW governors decided the state would have a role in education the Irish National System was followed for a time and denominational religious instruction was prescribed in this system.

Since then, from the time of the Public Instruction Act 1880, through the Education Act 1980 to the present day, the Parliament, in the drafting of its legislation has appeared to struggle with both the practical role of religious teaching in our schools and definitional issues in the acts.

Most of us accept the philosophy, as included in these acts, that “general religious education”² that reflects the part played in history and culture by religions throughout the ages and as taught by classroom teachers, provides a worthwhile study for all students of any beliefs. It would be expected that the finer details of specific beliefs and moral codes of these various religions would rarely be germane here.

Special Religious Education was first enshrined in the Public Instruction Act as “carefully selected and graduated scriptural extracts supplemented by doctrinal and catechetical education provided by representatives of several churches.” It is required to be up to the number of hours that there are weeks in the school year.³

The view that choice of faiths is the prerogative of parents and families has been strongly upheld from the beginning of education in the colony and is still present in the current Education Act 1990 (as amended). Parents are permitted to have their

¹ May McLeod Lecture Education for Life and Ministry Prof Alan Rice 24.5.2006

² Education Act 1990 Sec 32

³ 1980 Overview of Report (Rawlinson) Religious Education in Australian Schools

children opt out of some areas of the curriculum on the basis of belief, and out of "Special Religious Education" entirely, without justifying this decision.⁴

Definitional Aspects

Difficulties arose when education was made compulsory because the children who opt out of attending Special Religious Education are not permitted to proceed, during this period, with education in other curriculum areas. This is quite incompatible with the compulsory aspect of education as it means that parents are legally obliged to have their children attend school for a period of time during which they are not taught or are not engaged in social activities such as play with their peers, but are merely supervised.

As well as education's being compulsory, it is also legislated that it is secular. In my experience the wider community regards the definition of "secular" as following the accepted "Oxford Dictionary" definition as "Belonging to the world and its affairs as distinct from the church and religion; civil, lay, temporal. Chiefly as a negative, with the meaning non-ecclesiastical, non-religious, or non-sacred." The Australian Macquarie Dictionary's definition is similar, "of or pertaining to the world, or to things not religious, sacred, or spiritual; temporal; worldly."

The Education Act 1990 Sect 30 provides its own definition of "secular instruction" for the purpose of the Act. It says that. 'In government schools the education is to consist of strictly non-sectarian and secular instruction. The words "secular instruction" are to be taken to include general religious education as distinct from dogmatic or polemical theology.' This more inclusive definition comes as a surprise to many citizens.

The primary religion disseminated in and around most NSW Public Schools has traditionally been Christian.

Personal Experiences

In the fifties when I went to school it was unthinkable not to attend "Scripture". Although by High School age I was not a theist, I came from a religious family and did not dispute that I should attend these classes. In my final year of school, in my final "Scripture" exam I wrote a lengthy, considered essay revealing my atheism and discussing comparative religions and ethical humanism. To my surprise the obviously accepting and non-threatened Anglican minister in the parish magnanimously awarded me a large scripture prize.

My children attended Special Religious Education in Primary School in the 70s and 80s as I wished them to have some knowledge of the primary religion in our community at the time, Christianity. Increasingly, they found it irrelevant to their philosophies and by High School most opted out. The teaching was very patchy – some good and some poor. With my blessing the boys usefully sorted recyclable garbage during non-Scripture periods, thus contributing to the school community. It appears this sort of contribution is no longer deemed acceptable.

⁴ Education Act 1990 Sec s 26 and 32

As a teacher myself for some years, I found this patchiness in the teaching of Special Religious Education and also to the “minding” of the non-scripture group to be the situation in my school, although there was significant good will from all the Scripture teachers I met. Later, as a counsellor in the South Western suburbs of Sydney, I encountered much more racial and religious prejudice against those of other cultures and religions, not helped by the exclusively Christian nature of “Scripture”. Whether this latter was by accident or design I did not know.

My experience in England in the 1990s, working for three years with four religious grant assisted schools, was that I found much more general acceptance of other views in those schools than in NSW State Schools. Although the schools were religious, two being Church of England and two Catholic, they were obliged, by their grant assisted status, to accept a wide range of pupils. There was a palpable Christian ethos apparent in these schools and there was some singing each morning that included hymns, but I saw no proselytising and a great deal of welcoming of differences.

In contrast, the situation in NSW schools seems to have continued to deteriorate in recent years, particularly in acceptance of other views. I have been verbally attacked for my atheism, and more recently for my support of Ethics in schools, as never before despite being, and remaining, very civil myself. There was considerable lack of knowledge and understanding demonstrated by some verbal attackers, even of their own religions! Fortunately these people make up a very, very small minority of the vast numbers who contribute in an ethical, compassionate and dedicated way to religious education but nevertheless this is new in NSW in my experience and entirely unsatisfactory.

Conclusion

The passing of the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 allowing for the establishment of Special Education in Ethics classes in schools as an alternative to Special Religious Education for a child, if a parent so requests and it is available, seems to me to have gone a long way toward redressing any problems that may arise from the anomaly of compulsory non-education periods in schools for some children.

It also fills the pressing need to demonstrate to the entire school population and the community that secular education in the area of human ethics has a place in society parallel to the important one that religious education has always held and still holds. Acceptance of both by authorities shows, to children and adults alike, that we can all be equally tolerant towards one another.

REFERENCES

- (1) Education Act 1990
- (2) 1980 Overview of Report (Rawlinson) Re Religion in NSW Government Schools <http://rel-ed.acu.au/mre/cdrom/1980> (22/11/2011)

(3) Public Instruction Act 1880

www.legislation.act.gov.au/a/1880-23/20050101/1880-23pdf (26/11 2011)

(4) May McLeod Lecture Education for Life and Ministry Prof Alan Rice 24.5.2006

www.elm.org.au/may-macleod-lecture-rice

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