

**Submission
No 289**

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

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The Director

General Purpose Standing Committee No. 2

Parliament House

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I offer this submission as a Primary Ethics trained teacher at Newcastle East Public School. The points below respond to each of the areas under examination as part of the Inquiry and as they relate to the following statement:

The committee will conduct a formal inquiry to examine “ the stated objectives, curriculum, implementation, effectiveness and other related matters pertaining to the current operation of ‘special education in ethics’ being conducted in State schools, and whether the Education Amendment (Ethics) Act 2010 should be repealed.”

As a Primary Ethics trained teacher and educator at the University of Newcastle, I am deeply concerned with the prospect of the Act being repealed. As a general comment, the Primary Ethics curriculum and mode of implementation is rigorous and innovative. The content challenges students to think logically and deduce practical outcomes from their lived experiences and those of other students in the class. During this process examples are used that provide ‘real life’ scenarios which enable students to reflect on and ascertain what might be a ‘fair’ or ‘equitable’ way to conduct oneself. In terms of implementation or delivery, the curriculum draws on current best practice as improved student learning has increasingly been linked to teacher ‘engagement’. That is, the ability of teachers to relate and connect with students for improved learning outcomes. The Socratic circle

used in delivering the Primary Ethics curriculum enables such engagement with students, particularly as its student-focus fosters a collaborative learning experience.

Under the subheadings below I elaborate on the rigorous and innovative nature of the curriculum and conclude by asserting the educative benefits of it for NSW's primary aged students.

1. Stated objectives

The objectives of Primary Ethics is to examine ethical concepts and issues which give students a deeper understanding of the complexities and nuances that underpin things like fairness, moral responsibility and justice. A key objective is to foster an inquiring mind and improve each student's capacity to make considered judgments in their daily lives.

As a society we face significant social and environmental challenges. If primary school education is about, among other things, enhancing a sense of social justice, equality and sustainability, Primary Ethics offers the vision and educative qualities to shed light on such challenges. During the implementation of the curriculum in 2011, the ability of students to articulate and backup their views relating to issues of social justice, equality and sustainability, through considered judgment, was a delight to watch. Indeed, for the majority of students their overall capacity to form a logical position on a whole range of topics (see further below) was remarkable. As teacher/facilitator, I was in the position to observe the building confidence of particular students and the incremental steps they were making as they participated in the class.

2. Curriculum

Complimenting the regular school curriculum on ethical matters, the Primary Ethics curriculum provides a comprehensive focus on a range of topics. Each of these areas explore issues including fairness, honesty, goodness and rights and responsibilities. Through collaborative deliberation students are able to investigate the merits (or not) of

particular scenarios and judge conduct as right or wrong, better or worse. In this process students are able to consider the consequences of actions. Part of this involves students having to justify their position and have their views subject to scrutiny.

I would like to reflect on one lesson from a topic taught during 2011 and argue the student benefits of the lesson in terms of learning outcomes. Thinking about Animals was a topic that proved challenging and enlightening for students as discussions delved into significant questions regarding human relations with other species and the implications of this for gaining a better understanding of cultural practices and issues of ecological sustainability.

For the lesson, students were asked to think about various ways in which we treat animals and to examine the acceptability of one case in comparison to another. In groups, students judged examples relative to a continuum from 'less acceptable' to 'more acceptable'. Examples included, whaling, exterminating rabbits, hunting elephants for their tusks and using animals for medical research, to name a few. The level of articulation was simply outstanding as students broached the complexities of cultural difference, issues of agricultural sustainability, our responsibilities relating to introduced species, colonial practices in the era of British Imperial expansion, and the challenging moral questions that arise when one animal 'uses' (kills) another animal in order to live.

A poignant moment was when one of the students highlighted exactly how problematic it was that the human species has 'set things up' whereby they (we) are at the top and everything else, the environment, other species etc., are less important and that this will have an impact on the future of human existence. This was impressive to say the least.

3. Implementation

The implementation of Primary Ethics, or method of delivery, is an example of learning innovation and leading pedagogy. The primary mode of delivery, the Socratic circle, provides an informal and engaging learning environment that encourages all students to

be involved in discussions.

One method that is used is small group collaboration which involves students exploring specific scenarios that relate to various topics in groups of three or four. Once the group has finished deliberating on the topic, the group then reports back to the rest of the students who in turn discuss and scrutinize the findings. To complete the process, after a range of views having been communicated, the original group is then given a chance to express whether their initial views have changed.

Small group collaboration and the adoption of a reflective feedback loop provide an innovative element to teaching the curriculum as it enhances learning outcomes. Significantly, the method of delivery gives quieter students a chance to gain confidence in their communicative abilities.

4. Effectiveness

In terms of learning outcomes vis-à-vis the Primary Ethics curriculum, the group of students I taught/facilitated during 2011 demonstrated a surprisingly articulate level of comprehension and capacity to engage with both the topics discussed and method of delivery. The ways in which students developed their ability to reason, elaborate and justify their position on various issues and how well they engaged with the Socratic circle confirmed the effectiveness of the overall curriculum.

At the conclusion of term 4 and consistent with the mode of delivery of the curriculum itself, both Ethics teachers (my colleague and I) invited discussion among the combined classes to reflect on the year. Interestingly, students identified that their most enjoyable experience of the classes was the small group collaborations and that this 'gave them a voice' to put forward their ideas as they related to the topics.

The amendment to the Education Act that came into effect in 2010 which allowed those

students who opt out of scripture to undertake meaningful learning must be retained. The amendment meant that for the first time since the mid-19th century, when the state took over control of public education from the Anglican and Catholic churches, students not attending scripture had a legal right to partake in education outside religious instruction. Ethics classes add a meaningful and exciting addition to comparative religion already taught at primary school level.

It is hoped this Inquiry will highlight the necessity to extend the Primary Ethics curriculum to younger students. As this submission has outlined, the benefits of Primary Ethics in terms of learning outcomes is enormous.

Yours Sincerely,

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