

Southland Connect November 2010

Dear All,

As we approach the joy and busyness and (sometimes) silliness of the end of the year, I noted recently (i.e. during November 2010) that the Australian media was again discussing the issue of class sizes. I heard one ABC commentator say, 'all this fuss over one study from overseas'... although to be honest, I turned the show off before she explored the issue more fully. I think I was lamenting that it sounded like the debate would predictably fall into the usual political camps – academics raising the spectre that the quality of teaching really does make a difference; and the teaching unions complaining that there are not enough resources available for the teachers to teach well.

The bottom line is that we know there is a kernel of truth in all of the arguments – can we make sense of how they combine? Immediately below is something that I originally wrote in 2004 in response to an excellent review article by Jennifer Buckingham (2003): "Reforming School Education – Class size and Teacher Quality", Policy, 19/1, 15-20. I hope through reading it you can help your community reflect on the issues more thoughtfully. The highlighted sections are what I would term 'critical summary points'.

Jennifer Buckingham tackled the sometimes assumed belief that smaller class sizes are the most critical aspect of learning improvement head-on in her article, noted above. She covered the issue in three different ways. The first aspect was that of reviewing comprehensively the findings of the relevant research. The second was that she also looked at the relative merits of the methodologies in which this research lives. Thirdly, she also asked questions of where such issues should be decided upon and the preferred action decreed by some central authority.

Her summary of the research findings was that "**effective teaching is much more important than the number of children in the classroom**" (p. 15). She detailed work on the STAR major research project in Tennessee, and the large SAGE project in Wisconsin. Buckingham admitted that there is some indication of an effect when class sizes are reduced, however, that this effect was "mediated by the quality and

method of teaching” (p.16), such that “class size is more important when the teacher is less effective” (p. 17).

Or as she commented when reviewing the Vinson recommendations:

Only one thing comes through loud and clear from all the research: what goes on in the classroom is more important than how many children are involved. This is not to say that classroom activity is not unaffected by the number of children, but that proven and appropriate teaching methods are paramount. (p.18)

One of the difficulties in assessing the relative merits of class size is the problem of appropriate research methodologies. Buckingham quoted researchers that have reviewed groups of studies, such as Ronald Ehrenberg: “Unfortunately, most of these studies [reporting some evidence of smaller class effects] were poorly designed. Teacher and student assignments were rarely sufficiently random; a number of studies were either too brief or too small, and too few had independent evaluation” (p. 15). She quoted others who are even more critical of the research methodologies.

Buckingham concluded that:

Evidence shows that most research on the relationship between class size and student achievement is flawed, or shows a marginal effect on reducing class size, or both. Research is, however, unequivocal on the finding that good teaching practices are more effective than any other external factor on learning (p.19)

A representative list of what good teaching practice looks like is offered in her review:

1. Mastery of subject matter and curriculum content;
2. Awareness of the individual capabilities and abilities of students;
3. Classroom management skills;
4. Use of teaching strategies that are proven effective; and
5. Good verbal communication skills (p. 19).

My summary of these findings on good teacher practise is that we as Christian teachers are to *engage our students by knowing their hearts, and the beauty and truth within and across our subjects*. Or put more poetically...

*Teaching and learning is the art,
Of connecting through our disciplines,
Heart to heart*

Buckingham also challenged whether it is the role of centralist authorities to determine such policies as class sizes, or whether this is an essential domain for those in governance of the local school. She noted that:

Whatever the conclusions of researchers and analysts, **such priorities should be determined at the school level**. Given the opportunity, some schools may well decide that against all evidence that small classes are of highest importance, while others might opt for slightly larger classes but offer salaries to attract better teachers. (p. 19)

All of these issues raised by Buckingham have implications for our schools, if we want to a part of the discussion as to who determines class sizes for our teachers. I would add that there is also what might be termed the '**Good Samaritan Principle**' at work as a bottom line for our decision making – that is, are we taking the opportunity to use the resources we have available to us to help our current pupils the best way that we can? This morally instructive story from Jesus expresses the outworking of Proverbs 3:27-28:

Never walk away from someone who deserves help; your hand is God's hand for that person. Don't tell your neighbor "Maybe some other time" or "Try me tomorrow" when the money's right there in your pocket. Don't figure ways of taking advantage of your neighbor when he's sitting there trusting and unsuspecting.¹

In the light of this principle, some of the implications of Buckingham's research are put as questions for us to consider immediately below.

¹ *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Pradis CD-ROM: Pr 3:27. Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, © 2002, 2005.

Implications for your school:

1. What are your policies on class sizes?
2. On what are these policies based?
3. How do they link with other policies - e.g. staff development?
4. Do you have any ongoing staff development policy that helps all teaching staff review their practise according to a list like the one offered above?
5. Are you in contact with your local state member over these issues?
6. Do you discuss these issues with your staff, parents and students [I found in many student interviews that they would rather have an engaging teacher than an incompetent one, regardless of class size]; and
7. How do you evaluate the structures into which you place your teachers? Do some structures free teachers up to achieve better teaching and learning, whilst others detract from it?

Enjoy thinking through these issues. If you wish to add something to the discussion, please email us here at Southland College: info.southland@morling.edu.au

*Stephen J Fyson PhD
Revised 2010*

Shalom... Stephen

Southland Summer School...

Because of the change of leadership that we are undergoing at the moment, we will only be running one week of Professional Development over the Summer Break. It is:

Monday 24th to Friday 28th January

We will be running the **Grad Dip Ed (Secondary) orientation** during this week – so please let any friends who are interested in training to teach as a Christian secondary teacher know about this opportunity.

Southland Face to Face in the Hunter Region

We are still looking to run the Hunter after school Masters classes from St Philip's Christian School at Waratah – and because they have kindly agreed to us using their video conferencing facilities, we can also have people interacting in real time in Gosford, Port Stephens and Cessnock. We look forward to piloting this exciting opportunity.

This will be run on Thursday afternoons, 4:30 to 7:30pm, commencing *17th February*. Please remember to encourage friends **to enrol in time for the commencement in February.**

Thank you for Financial Support for our Development

We wish to thank all of those schools who responded so generously to our voluntary invoice opportunity. It is a great blessing to us as we continue to develop God honouring teacher training and development programs here at Southland.

Personnel News

We will send a Southland Connect update to inform you of the leadership of the College into 2011 very soon! All of the functions of the College will be operating in the New Year.

Stephen will be taking up the position of looking after the DALE Newcastle program with St Philip's Christian College in the New Year. DALE is a mercy ministry that provides alternative educational opportunities for students in years 7 to 10 who do not fit easily into 'usual' school structures; and also in years 11 and 12, for pregnant teenagers and young mums who wish to finish their schooling. He will still be strongly involved in the ministry of Southland College.

A Sister Program – Plunge = Morling College's Gap Year Opportunity

We recommend Plunge to the Southland community as an avenue for encouraging their final year students to continue in their walk and develop further before taking up a long term vocation.

Please note the following:

- Plunge 2011 applications are now open. Application information can be found online at www.morlingcollege.com/plunge
- If you have any questions or if your school doesn't have a Plunge Promo Pack please don't hesitate to contact 02 9878 0201 or plunge@morling.edu.au



Here are some quotes from past students;

“This year has helped to build my confidence and encourage my dreams while giving me the knowledge and experience to make them possible.”

“It totally changed my perspective on life”

“It has been an honour to be part of a team and family who desire to step out of their comfort zones in order to learn more about our local and global community.”

“What started off as theological concepts in my head became reality as I experienced a whole new world.”

“Plunge was a massive learning experience and so I grew in knowledge and I grew spiritually in my walk with God because I learnt more about what it truly meant to be a Christian, a disciple and follower of Christ.”

“Plunge has been a time of growth which has equipped me for the things that I will experience in life.”

“My eyes have been opened to the reality of this world and my place in it all”

A Research Thought

There has been a lot of discussion recently in NSW about whether *ethics* can be a reasonable substitute for *Religious Education (RE)* classes. There has been an evaluation report conducted about this. I suggest that such research demonstrates an endemic problem we have in Australian social science research. Normally this research section is a short and pithy report – but because of what I believe this debate represents in marginalising our Creator God and His love, we will take some time in unpacking some of the critical issues.

The difficulty that I see is that we improperly conceive of our human nature – and thus we construct poorly the questions that we consider in these teaching and learning issues. This of course has impacts on the information we collect and how we reflect upon this data in reports such as this.

The RE case study is a case in point – the suggestion is that we still want to give pupils who do not go to RE some sort of training in citizenship – and that the alternative to RE based training is Ethics.

This logic carries within it at least the following assumptions:

- a. The purpose of RE is ethical training for moral citizenship

- b. Ethics is an adequate alternative to this
- c. Humans can be trained into virtue

I would challenge all three assumptions. The Bible clearly teaches us that how we live describes who and what we worship – that is, we are essentially beings who orientate our whole lives around someone/ some things... thus the language of ‘idols’ is still alive in our society as a reflection of this need of our hearts.

RE therefore is more than training into citizenship - is an opportunity for confessional expression and within that, an invitation to the whole person – the whole person who has as their reality both the physical and spiritual – and whose thinking is more than the sum total of their physiology.

An ethics course is therefore shallow if it does not attempt to explore our distinctly human search for meaning as ‘embodied spirits’. It will ultimately become relativistic because it relies on community consensus – and this consensus does not have a reference point beyond itself.

We recommend two books to help think through the questions of:

1. Who are we as people:
2. Can the ethical life be simply a matter of instruction?

These questions are one way to challenge the assumption that we can manipulate *who* we want our children to be simply through good planning and good implementation of cognitive only information transfer.

John Hare deals with this well.² He summarises his consideration of whether we can mechanistically teach commitment to goodness as follows:

... there are problems both on the side of our capacity to comply and on the side of the authority of the demand [to act with goodness or civility]. On the capacity side, when we lose the context of the covenant, it is not clear that we *can* live that way. We no longer have the resources of Christ’s life in us, or of his church, or of his forgiveness. On the demand side, what is the source of the demand’s authority? Why *should* we live that way? Without answers to these questions, we face the threat of incoherence, and the moral life becomes unlike what it was in its initial context. It becomes desperate, or grim, or compromised...

² John Hare (2002) *Why Bother Being Good: The place of God in the moral life* IVP

We pretend to ourselves that we are better than we actually are, or that the moral demand is just an ideal and not something to which we are actually accountable, or we fill the gap with various attractions, or self realization schemes, or rational systems, or communal attachments, none of which (if I have made my case) succeed by themselves in the task we give them (pp. 210-211)

Over the last twelve months I have also referred to the book by Flew and Varghese – and their philosophical contention that says there is a God. Their book is “There is a God: How the World’s most notorious atheist changed his mind”³. Why did Flew shift from atheism to theism? Because in looking at the data of life, Dr Flew moved to his theistic position after concluding that atheism does not account for what the information of life describes. This is particularly so in the areas of failing to address the “rationality embedded in the fabric of the universe, of life understood as autonomous agency, and of consciousness, conceptual thought and the self” (p. xvii)

This does make a difference in the classroom. Here are some examples:

- a. *Rationality embedded in the fabric of the universe* – how does one explain the order that allows our science to work? How can rationally be born of irrationality?
- b. *Of life understood as autonomous agency* – If we are nothing but chemistry and physics in biological form, then we do not have any free will to make any decisions outside of this hard science. We then have no definite basis for teaching about kindness, patience, and love;
- c. *And of consciousness, conceptual thought and the self* – the brain is not the same as the mind. If we conceive of our brain as being the same as a computer screen (receiving and patterning the information from our five physical senses), then we would also have to admit that there is someone sitting there looking at the screen. For example, we are self conscious (ask any teenage girl who does not like her body shape), we are transcendent thinkers (we think about our thinking- unlike the animals), and we know that we exist as part of, but distinct within, the cosmos.

What then of these alternative ethics courses? To say that we can teach in a meaningful way that brings deep hope to students when we dare not touch these spiritual issues is ignoring some of the key philosophical issues about education that is truly human. It is not enough to

³ Antony Flew and AR Varghese, Harper Collins, 2007

say that ‘civic values’ are the bottom line – because sooner or later a student will want to know the source of these values.

Does this mean that all teachers need to be ‘preachers’ of some kind? No, this is not what is being suggested (particularly if we are thinking of the type of zealous preacher/teachers who do *not encourage questions*, enquiry and testing out). Dr Hill⁴ makes a case that says that in state or religious schools, what has been traditionally considered as ‘religious education’ is critical for ‘deeper learning’. This is because values, including ultimate values (what others would call beliefs) are intrinsic to what we learn, and what we do with what we learn.

Thus he makes the case that:

Religious frameworks of meaning offer explanation of the nature and source of spirit, and motivating contexts within which values hang together as models of the good life (p. 14).

He also attempted to explain how both religious focussed and State-run schools need to tackle this issue from their particular belief systems:

The neutralism of state schools has been one of the reasons given by the newer wave of alternative Christian schools for offering another educational route. And on the face of it, schools working from a religious foundation *are* in a better position to do this. But it is not neutralism, but impartiality that the state school must observe. Impartiality includes advocating that students enter into worthy value *affiliations*, along with those embraced in the school’s value charter... It should be noted that religious schools face the opposite problem: of ensuring that students do not just conform to group pressure but embrace such affiliations *critically*, having first come to terms with the value of pluralism of modern society and learnt to respect those with whom they may nevertheless disagree⁵ [Emphasis in the original]

Thus, a comparable program would be a *comparative faith and belief class* that did not attempt false *neutrality*, but instead, an invitation to commitment through *impartiality* that recognises our full humanity.

⁴ Hill, B. (2005). Whose house do you live in? A brief for religious education in schools *Journal of Christian Education*, 48/2, 9-17.

⁵Hill, B. (2005). A talking point at last: values education in schools. *Journal of Christian Education*, 48/3, p.55



Both programs require **creative and invitational stances in their teaching processes** – and that would take us to another discussion about avoiding teaching through *secularism or religionism*⁶.

It is appropriate to end with a quote from a theologian – for here at Southland, ultimately we want people to more naturally think theologically so that we can know and love God more through Christ and the guidance of His Spirit:

Whether consciously or unconsciously, each of us has a set of convictions about ultimate reality. We believe *something* about God, ourselves, and the purpose of life. And these foundational beliefs surface in what we say and how we live. Every person is in this sense a theologian.⁷

Much Shalom,

Stephen

A Devotional Thought

My dear children, let's not just talk about love; let's practice real love.

This is the only way we'll know we're living truly, living in God's reality.

It's also the way to shut down debilitating self-criticism, even when there is something to it.

*For God is greater than our worried hearts and knows more about us than we do ourselves*⁸

GOD'S KNOWLEDGE OF US IS OUR HOPE BECAUSE

HIS MERCY IS GREATER THAN OUR SELF JUDGEMENT

⁶SEE *Pupil Learning* by Trevor Cooling (Chapter 4 in Barnes LP, Wright A, Brandom, AM (2008) *Learning to Teach Religious Education in the Secondary School* Routledge Publishers)

⁷ Grenz, S.J. (2000). *Created for Community: Connecting Christian Belief with Christian Living*. Baker Books, pp. 13-14

⁸ *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Pradis CD-ROM:1Jn 3:18. Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, © 2002, 2005.