Chapter 12
Care and Compassion: Values Commitment and Attitude Clarification in Education

John Fien

1 Education, Indoctrination, and Values

Phillip Hughes once reminded me that the very first paragraph of the Report of UNESCO’s International Commission on Education for the twenty-first century, known as the Delors Report (1996), stated that:

The Commission does not see education as a miracle cure or a magic formula opening the door to a world in which all ideals will be attained, but as one of the principal means available to foster a deeper and more harmonious form of human development and thereby to reduce poverty, exclusion, ignorance, oppression and war.

The importance of values in educating for a better, fairer, and less troubled world is central to the work of Hughes. Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Chairperson of the World Commission on Environment and Development, outlined the nature of the transition required for such a world, and the role she envisaged for education, when she wrote:

The transition to sustainable development touches on core issues of our societies. It concerns basic values and moral codes for human behaviour, attitudes and consideration for fellow human beings and for nature itself. In order to reverse the present negative trends, there is an urgent need for commitment and action at all levels of society. Today, there is an increased awareness that solidarity and responsibility must be extended to encompass the interests of future generations.…

Teachers play a very important role in the transition between generations, in the knowledge from one generation to the next. Consciousness – raising is vital for change. Teachers can convey to children a sense of respect and responsibility for nature and for the global environment.…

But respect for the environment alone will not be enough to save our common future. A sense of solidarity with the world’s underprivileged will be equally important. There is no way we can win the battle to save the global environment unless we deal squarely with the issue of world poverty. We must teach the next generation that necessity of caring for the poor and the dispossessed. (Brundtland, 1991, pp. 4–5)

Despite such high level support for values education, teaching as indoctrination – or indoctrination through our teaching – is a concern for teachers and parents; teachers-in-training are generally taught how wrong it is and are shown various ways of ensuring they adopt a balanced approach in their work. In place of indoctrination, balanced perspectives and neutrality are claimed as virtues. However, claims to balance and neutrality often deny the reality of much educational decision-making by curriculum planners and teachers.
Like all social institutions, education is a human creation; its nature and purpose determined by human values, history, and changing patterns of power relationships. Another reason why education cannot be neutral is that there is insufficient time to teach everything that is possible to be taught. Thus, all educational emphases in curriculum content and classroom processes must necessarily be a selection of the culture from which curriculum planners and teachers make their selections of objectives, content, resources, and teaching methods – and there is no rational way of making such selections without holding certain values to establish priorities. In this way, the processes of education continually expose students to filtered experiences. This inherent values bias in education means that it has the potential to serve the needs and interests of certain groups and not others and, given the unequal power relations in most societies, educational systems, and classrooms tend to reflect and transmit the values of the more powerful political, economic, and educational decision-makers in a society, thus perpetuating their dominant cultural beliefs.

However, the pervasive liberal ideology of balance and values relativity in traditional educational discourses often masks this reality and makes educational processes appear fairer than they actually are. In this way, many traditional and progressive approaches to education can – albeit unintentionally – serve the hegemonic purposes of dominant cultural groups and blind students, as young people and later as adults, to dominant ideologies and incorporate them within their structures. This view of the relationship between education and society provides the starting point for the arguments advanced in this paper. Thus, this chapter is based upon the assumption that, whatever ideology of education one follows, education is “not a random or neutral process but purposeful and value oriented” (Stanley, 1985). This means that the key issue for educators concerned with questions of values and ethics in education should not be to check whether a particular approach to teaching is indoctrination but to ask questions related to the ways, and in accordance with what values and ends, should schools and teachers “indoctrinate” – or “inculcate” to use a less pejorative term.

The values foundations of education demand that teachers should play a role to help address the living conditions and lifestyle choices that lead to so many of the problems in today’s world. The severity and scope of these problems have been documented by many international reports that indicate, for example, that 18 countries (460 million people) had lower scores on the Human Development Index in 2003 than they had in 1990 and more than one billion people still live in abject poverty on less than US$1 a day. In 2003, three million people died of HIV/AIDS while there were another 115 million preventable deaths, the life expectancy gap between sub-Saharan Africa and the rest of the world is increasing and over 1.2 billion people lacked access to clean water (UNDP, 2005; Worldwatch Institute 2005). Nonetheless, some people are incomparably richer than ever before through historically unprecedented levels of access to resources, knowledge, and technology. However, the fifth of the world’s population that enjoys these privileges are far outnumbered by the large majority who are experiencing increasing levels of preventable illness, needless hunger, premature mortality, unceasing illiteracy rates, social exclusion from decision-making processes that affect their life and the denial