

# Teaching ethics in retirement

Allan Jones

In 2016, after a frustrating attempt to return to teaching after eight years of retirement (a story of “A Game of Snakes and No Ladders” – please see separate article), I threw in the towel and admitted defeat. I was not prepared to start again as a Probationary Teacher and all that was entailed in the new regime of accreditation.

Later that year I was voicing my concerns about this to my sister when she asked would I consider teaching Ethics in a primary school. She had been doing so for three years at an inner city school where two of her grandchildren attend and it was proving to be very rewarding for her. I was hesitant at first as the thought of returning to a primary school where I had no previous experience was a little daunting. However my son, who at the age of 35 had made a career change from HR management to primary school teaching, was also enjoying the experience and he further encouraged me to give it a go.

And so, at the start of this year (2017) I contacted the Primary Ethics office and made an enquiry about how to volunteer. The reception I received was certainly different from the one I had received from DET and, the then, BOSTES. I was made to feel valued and I was welcomed onto the team of volunteer Ethics teachers.

After completing the mandatory Working with Children and National Criminal History checks I underwent an intensive two days of training. The background of my group of 28 fellow trainees ranged from three ex-teachers, two current part-time primary school teachers, a retired auditor, a doctor and a couple of company directors through to the self-employed and unemployed. All up, a good cross-section of folk, all committed to the central ideal of helping children develop a life-long capacity to make well-reasoned decisions on ethical issues. I should mention that this training took place from 8.30am to 4.30pm on two consecutive Sundays in the head offices of a major property management company. The offices were located on the 50<sup>th</sup> floor of an office tower with views to Sydney Heads and beyond. I certainly saw how the other half works. The training was as good as any training I have experienced in over 40 years in education. Two excellent facilitators took us through a comprehensive program in which they role-modelled the teaching methodology employed by the Primary Ethics program.

In Term 2 of this year I commenced my teaching of Ethics at a local primary school, coincidentally the same one my son now works at, and I now have a class of 19 students drawn from Years 1 and 2. Without the Ethics class these students would attend the non-scripture group that is minimally supervised for the half hour of the scripture period. Now they have a trained teacher deliver lesson materials that are fully scripted and resourced from K – 6. I have downloaded and printed all of the lessons for Stage 1. These lessons provide stories and scenarios that prompt the children to examine the complexities of ethical behavior. They invite the children to consider what we ought to do, how we ought to live, the kind of society we should have and what kind of person each of them should strive to become. The lessons do this through a process of collaborative inquiry and critical thinking that seek to develop in children a capacity for critical reflection.

And what about the reality I hear you ask. Well I am pleased to say that it is all good news. It did take a few lessons to get to appreciate the learning behaviours of children in the 6 – 7 years age range. I use more explicit teaching techniques than in a high school setting. I watch the classroom teachers and their methods as much as possible to pick up the children’s expectations of a teacher. This can be as simple as how the teacher gets the children to be seated on the floor. My students sit on the floor at the front of the classroom as it would be too time consuming to rearrange the furniture and I use the classroom of the teacher who has been assigned to help supervise and she has indicated that it may cause problems if we move tables and chairs holding the working materials of her students.

Lesson timing was my main concern as each lesson is tightly scripted and I have a tendency to improvise. In the first two lessons I didn't finish the set lesson although my Ethics Coordinator (a parent at the school) told me this was not a concern, as the students don't know what the end of lesson is other than a bell that rings. My training and experience told me that it was important and my last lesson finished within 30 seconds of the bell and I now feel as if my timing has returned. A bit like my golf swing, timing is important.

I am fortunate in that I can use a Smartboard and the classroom teacher leaves it on for my lesson. This saves me from having to log on to the school system, a pain for anyone who has had to use IT and there is no-one available to log you in. All the lesson materials are in digital format and so all I need to do is use a USB stick or log on and go to the Primary Ethics site – it is much quicker to use the USB stick.

Behaviour management has not been an issue. I have one student who is autistic and he has a Teacher's Aide who comes with him and assists. To date I have not needed her assistance as he does participate in the lessons and I feel I have developed a rapport with him. What is interesting and sometimes a tad challenging is when the supervising teacher interjects and chastises the children who may not be behaving as she thinks they should be. I have not spoken to her about this as that is her role but I feel that to develop the dynamics of a discussion style lesson with young children there needs to be a bit of give and take. What I am pleased with is that the children are not off task as they are talking to each other about some aspect of the lesson and I use this to stimulate further discussion. But perhaps this is outside the acceptable classroom behaviours of the school. I am sure I will resolve this as I rediscover my teaching methods.

Are there any downsides? The only thing that I have to do to accommodate this role as a volunteer is to set aside my day for what is only 90 minutes. I leave home at 11.00 am and it takes me 15 minutes to get to the school. I sign in and the set-up takes another 15 minutes with the lesson taking 30 minutes in total with 30 minutes to pack up and travel back home for lunch at 12.30pm. This effectively means that my whole day is taken. However I believe that the school is now keen to introduce Ethics into Stage 2 and 3 where scripture runs from 12.00 to 12.30pm. This would make more of a "day" of it.

I am enjoying the experience immensely. The interaction with the children is a highlight. I made a special effort to learn their names in the first lesson and now I know a little bit about them from the lesson interactions. The highlight? Apart from the many enjoyable lessons, when I arrive and especially when I leave, the children call out to me with a welcome or a farewell. They also think it is a bit special that I am the father of one of their teachers. I think I get as much out of it as they do.

## **Acknowledgements**

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