

# **Addressing issues of Religious Difference through Values Education: An Islam Instance**

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## **Addressing issues of Religious Difference through Values Education:**

### **An Islam Instance**

#### **Abstract**

The article explores ways in which modern forms of values education are being utilized to address major issues of social dissonance, with special focus on dissonance related to religious difference. Evidence is drawn from a variety of global studies, and especially from the federally funded Australian Values Education Program and its various research projects. The evidence suggests that values education that proceeds in the ways described has potential to impact on a range of educational measures, including those related to enhancing understanding and tolerance across lines of religious difference.

Keywords: Values, Religion, Difference, Understanding

## **Introduction**

Australian education has been adjusting to its increasing reality as a multicultural and multifaith society (Trewin, 2007) for much of the past few decades. This has been done largely through new forms of social education and religious studies, designed in part to inform all Australians about the many different beliefs and values represented by the religious make-up of the country. As such, the approach has been largely content-oriented requiring a cognitive response, with only marginal attempts to deal with matters of emotionality or sociality. Especially with the onset of ill feeling and social exclusion emanating from more recent tensions around Muslim populations, there is an increasing feeling that such an approach is inadequate and that more comprehensive research around Muslim populations, their own effective schooling and the schooling of non-Muslims about Islam is essential (Lovat, 2005; Lovat & Samarayi, 2009; Moulton, 2009). Indeed, many of the perpetrators of some of the nation's ugliest Muslim versus non-Muslim events are products of an education replete with social education and religious studies curricula of the kind noted above.

In this context, there is much interest in Australian values education initiatives and their potential to provide for more effective holistic preparation for dealing with difference, including religious difference, in everyday life. Values education is being implemented increasingly in Australia as an effective pedagogy for strengthening a range of educational measures, including moral, social and emotional growth, as well as academic improvement. Results from a number of research projects have highlighted the interconnected and mutually reliant nature of these measures, confirming insights from neuroscientific research that cognition is inseparable from affect and sociality (Damasio & Damasio, 2007; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007).

Among the values education results in question are those pertaining to the practical effects to be derived from the development of empathic character through pedagogy that focuses on understanding and dealing with difference, including ideally a component that engages students with their wider communities (often referred to as ‘service learning’) and draws on these experiences to enhance their learning and, in turn, their empathic character. Such pedagogy appears to have potential to address issues of social dissonance, including providing a means of improving communication and understanding between groups characterized by religious difference. The article will outline the conceptual foundations of such pedagogy and the modern forms of values education that build on these foundations. In turn, the article will outline the scope of the Australian Values Education projects and their results, including a focus on results that point to the potential of values education to enhance sociality by addressing issues around religious difference. In this paper, the special emphasis will be on the evidential effects of increased understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim groups of students.

### **Conceptual Foundations**

The notion that morality is inherent to all human endeavour, including that related to effective learning, is an idea well embedded in the history of thought and in philosophy. Confucian and Aristotelian philosophy, and the various Eastern, Middle Eastern and Western traditions of thought that have emanated from them, serve as testimony to the notion. Confucius’s pedagogy centred on the ‘Six Arts’, including a range of practical arts but, at the centre of any content, lay morality (Brooks & Brooks, 1998). For him, education was about facilitating ethical judgment and practical morality. In similar vein, Aristotelian philosophy is replete with notions of practical action being at the heart of all that we hold to be moral and humane and that

practical virtue was the true end of education. Aristotle's (1985) characterization of virtue was of someone who took practical action to put into effect their beliefs about right and wrong. *Eudaemonia* (literally happiness) was the supreme good that could only come from practical action devoted to the issue of virtue and its promotion. The medieval Muslim Sufi, Abu al-Ghazzali (1991), would echo these sentiments a millennium and a half later in remarking that God (Allah) finds nothing as distasteful as the one who stores up knowledge but fails to take commensurate practical action. In effect, such lack of practical virtue made a mockery of the education provided by the *Ummah of Allah* as part of God's service to his people.

Confucius, Aristotle and al-Ghazzali are, among other things, early pioneers of the philosophy of mind, that branch of philosophy that focusses on the relationship between the mind and the body, and therefore on matters of cognition, emotion, intention and social behaviour, and the connections between them. Through such pioneers, we learned early lessons about the importance of such connections to education. While it is an ancient art in some respects, therefore, philosophy of mind nonetheless developed a more analytical and critical focus with advances in science, including neuroscience (Ryle, 1949; Armstrong, 1968; Schopenhauer, 1974; Chalmers, 1997; Braddon-Mitchell & Jackson, 2006). One of the effects of this sharper focus has been to confirm many of the postulations of the ancients about the relationship of mind and body, the integral connections between cognition, emotion, intention and social behaviour, and the importance of all of these phenomena to education.

In Arthur Schopenhauer (1974) and Gilbert Ryle (1949), we find a firm refutation of Cartesian duality of mind and body. Both philosophers contended that this dualism had led to the fallacy of supposing that one's mental states (cognition and intention) were separable from one's practical actions and behaviours. Furthermore, they proffer that there is more than a causal connection between the two, but rather that the two are one:

But I say that between the act of will and the bodily action there is no causal connection whatever; on the contrary, the two are directly one and the same thing perceived in a double way, namely in self-consciousness or the inner sense as an act of will, and simultaneously in external spatial brain-perception, as bodily action. (Schopenhauer, 1974, p. 21)

David Armstrong (1968) agrees with Ryle's refutation of Cartesian dualism in showing that an 'act of will' and 'purposive activity' do not constitute two separable phenomena but two aspects of the one phenomenon: "An act is something that we do as opposed to something that merely happens. An act springs from our will." (p. 137) Furthermore, he believes he goes beyond Ryle in eradicating any sense in which mind can be distinguished from functions of the brain and that it is the brain that drives both introspection and purposive action. David Chalmers (1997) is another philosopher of mind who rejects Cartesian dualism and hence the notion that the mind is somehow or other superior to the brain and so constitutes the determining agent of human behaviour. For him, behaviour is entirely and best explained in terms of functions of the brain. In similar vein, David Braddon-Mitchell and Frank Jackson (2006) argue for a 'common-sense functionalism' as the most appropriate contemporary theoretical basis for philosophy of mind, granted where modern science and neuroscience have taken us. For them, the heart of their functionalism is in a materialist theory of mind where the "... ingredients we need to understand and account for the mental list are

... essentially the same, and the basic ones are the ones we need to account for the material or physical side of our natures.” (p. 3)

The conceptual foundations of the research implicit in the article are inspired in part by Dewey (1964) and Habermas (1972; 1974; 1984; 1987; 1990). Dewey spoke of the overarching need for a way of knowing in schooling that was about the cultivation of a mindset on the part of teachers that was, at one and the same time, self-reflective and directed towards instilling reflectivity, inquiry and a capacity for moral judiciousness on the part of students. Habermas’s theory of knowing, on the one hand reminiscent of the core of Deweyian thought and an equally significant influence in attempts by educationists to deepen conceptions of learning, has the added value of an attached theory of social engagement. Habermas spoke of ‘communicative capacity’, which is when the knower comes to see his or her own life-world as just one that needs to function in a myriad of life-worlds, and of ‘communicative action’, where the knower takes a step beyond mere tolerance of other beliefs and values to take a stand both for justice and for oneself because one’s new found self, one’s integrity, is at stake. This is a concept about personal commitment, reliability and trustworthiness that spawns practical action that makes a difference, or what Habermas describes as ‘*praxis*’. This is the kind of education that aims to transform thought and practice and so make a difference to the way the human community coheres.

Deweyian and Habermasian epistemologies render the notion of values neutrality in education nonsensical and non-viable. They bring to education the pedagogical imperative it so often lacks when conceived of merely in instrumentalist outcomes-based or competencies terms. In other words, Deweyian and Habermasian epistemologies demand a values-laden pedagogy that saturates the learning experience in both a values-filled environment as well as in explicit teaching that

engages in discourse about values-related content, transacts practical and personalized values, and in turn inducts students into personal empowerment over their own stated and lived out values. In earlier times, values education has connoted a moral option among various approaches to education. It was often seen therefore to be more relevant to religious schooling and, conversely, shunned by public systems on the basis of their purported 'values-neutrality'. This is now coming to be seen widely as a dated perspective. Values education is increasingly coming to connote a holistic pedagogy aimed at the full range of developmental measures, rather than merely at moral development, and therefore as an effective and inextricable way in which learning should proceed in any school setting (Benninga, Berkowitz, Kuehn, & Smith, 2003, 2006; Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson, 2004; Carr, 2006, 2007; Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Lovat & Toomey, 2009).

The demands of Dewey and Habermas have been vindicated by modern research into quality teaching and effective pedagogy. In a variety of ways and across vastly different research regimes, it has been demonstrated that a values approach to education is no mere option if the fullest effects of learning are to be achieved, including but not limited to academic learning. It was the Carnegie Corporation's 1994 Task Force on Learning (Carnegie Corporation, 1996) that in many ways impelled the modern era of quality teaching. It represented a turning-point in the dominant conceptions placed on the role of the school and, in turn, on the power of teaching to effect change in student achievement. It utilized an amassing body of research knowledge that showed flaws in earlier conceptions around the limited power of schooling to impact positively on student development on the basis that heritage and especially disadvantage were its most powerful determinants (Coleman



et al., 1966; Jencks, 1972; Parsons & Bales, 1955; Plowden 1967; Reynolds, Hargreaves, & Blackstone, 1980).

In recent times, these forms of pessimism regarding the power of educational interventions, both on students' academic achievement and their overall formation, have been challenged by the seemingly powerful effects of quality teaching and by an attached recognition about the implausibility and inadequacy of a values-neutral approach being taken to such an inherently values-filled endeavour as education. In this regard, the Carnegie Task Force was also crucial in its definition of the range of learning skills that should be seen as constituting student achievement. By this, it began to blur the boundaries between what would normally be regarded as academic achievement and other core learning pertinent to education.

Beyond the more predictable aspects of intellectual development, the Task Force report introduced for the modern era notions of learning concerned with communication, empathy, reflection and self-management. Pointing to the inadequacy of surface learning, the Carnegie Report emphasized that effective learning unleashes within the learner the cognitive, affective and moral energies that engage, empower and effect learning of genuine depth. This revealed partially the reliance of Carnegie on new and emerging neuroscientific evidence that forced a revision of what was meant by cognition (see Bruer, 1999; Carnegie Corporation, 1996). Research insights from the works of Gardner (1983), Sternberg (2007), Goleman (1996, 2001, 2006) and Damasio (2003; Damasio & Damasio, 2007; Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007), each in their own way, have determined that cognition cannot be separated from other developmental factors, including those pertaining to emotion and sociality. Hence, notions that pitted academic development against or even as separate from emotional and social development in the way of the

old taxonomies have been discredited. Findings from projects emanating from the Australian Values Education Program have reinforced that cognition, affect and sociality are inextricably intertwined in the education setting designed for holistic development.

### **The Australian Values Education Program**

The Australian Values Education Program is a federally funded venture, beginning with a pilot study in 2003 (Department of Education Science and Training [DEST], 2003), followed by the development of a National Framework for Values Education in 2005 (DEST, 2005) and a range of attached research and practice projects from 2005 to 2009. Within the key project named *Values Education Good Practice Schools Project* (VEGPSP), 316 schools organized into 51 clusters across the country engaged in a variety of approaches to values education, all based on the central premise that values education and best practice pedagogy are inextricably interrelated. Findings from stage 1 of VEGPSP (DEST, 2006) have shown that a sound values education can be a powerful ally in the development of best practice pedagogy, with positive effects being demonstrated across the range of measures, including in terms of academic development. Many of the reports from the cluster projects identified improved academic diligence, strengthened intellectual engagement, and students settling into work more readily and calmly as routine effects of the ambience created by values education.

Moreover, the wider categories of learning enumerated by Carnegie were also seen to be enhanced in VEGPSP findings. Many reports identified improved communicative capacity between teachers, students and each other as common outcomes. Similarly, reports spoke of students broadening their sense of social justice

issues, within and beyond the school, and setting out to address these in practical ways, so showing a clear development of empathic character. Other reports spoke of demonstrable outcomes that connoted greater reflectivity, self-management and self-knowing, in ways characteristic of both the Carnegie categories and of Deweyian and Habermasian epistemology. These included demonstrations of greater student responsibility over local, national and international issues, greater student resilience and social skills, improved relationships of care and trust, greater student awareness of the need to be tolerant of others, to accept responsibility for their own actions and their ability to communicate, with students' sense of belonging, connectedness, resilience and sense of self all being enhanced.

Similarly, the Stage 2 Report (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations [DEEWR], 2008) uncovered the vital link between a values approach to pedagogy and the ambience it created with the holistic effects of this approach on student behaviour and performance. In Stage 2, a number of features of the broad values approach were clarified. These included a greater recognition of the centrality of the teacher's role, the explicitness of the pedagogy around values being seen to be determinative, and the role of an experiential (or service learning) component coming to be seen as a particularly powerful agency in values pedagogy. The Executive Summary of this project proffered the following in relation to enhancing student agency:

The Stage 2 cluster experiences speak convincingly of the critical importance of enabling and providing opportunities for student agency. Although present in many of the Stage 1 projects, the role of student empowerment and agency in values education practice has been significantly highlighted in Stage 2. Starting from the premise that schooling educates for the whole child and must necessarily engage a student's heart, mind and actions, effective values education empowers student decision making, fosters student action and assigns real student responsibility ... In many of the Stage 2 projects students can be seen to move in stages from growing in knowledge and understanding ... to an increasing clarity and commitment ... and then concerted action in living those values in their personal and community lives. (DEEWR, 2008, p.11)

Furthermore, when speaking of the specific goal of fostering intercultural understanding and literacy around matters of social inclusion and exclusion, the report had this to say:

Stage 2 speaks more specifically and extensively than Stage 1 on the use of values education to foster social inclusion within school communities. A number of cluster projects demonstrate how some of their values education practices can provide both the tools and the common ground for positively engaging with the diversity and difference that arises from a multitude of cultures, faiths, ethnicities, abilities, and geographic and socioeconomic circumstances, and which can marginalise groups from mainstream learning. These Stage 2 cluster projects show that values education is uniquely placed as a vehicle to work across these different forms of 'divide', and to provide opportunities for social inclusion, fostering social cohesion, developing intercultural and interfaith understanding, and engaging the disengaged. (DEEWR, 2008, p.11)

For one cluster that took a global education focus on children's working conditions in third world countries, reflection on action resulted in enhanced empathic character demonstrated in student campaigns to alert consumers to manufactured goods that were the product of child labour. In another cluster, engagement with disadvantaged groups in their own community led to organized activities to address loneliness and deprivation, again portraying growth in empathic character, an essential learning outcome related directly to the goals of enhanced civic awareness and citizenship involvement. The report proffers about the experiential and agency dimensions of values education (service learning):

Service learning is a pedagogy that aids the development of young people as they learn to engage in the worlds of others and then participate in civic service. It is a form of experiential learning which is integrally related to values education, and helps young people to empathise, engage and take their place as civic-minded, responsible, caring and empowered citizens in our community. (DEEWR, 2008, p.34)

### **Testing and measuring the impact of values education**

As asserted above, the thesis about the inextricable link between values education and quality teaching, as well as the particularly beneficial effects of a service learning component as part of this mix, has been the subject of much anecdotal evidence and strong teacher assertion in the two stages of VEGPSP (DEST, 2006; DEEWR, 2008). Across the three years in which the project rolled out, the nature of the evidence was shifting from being purely qualitative to having a quantitative edge, albeit lacking formal instrumentation and measurement. These latter were brought to bear in the

*Project to Test and Measure the Impact of Values Education on Student Effects and School Ambience* (Lovat, Toomey, Dally & Clement, 2009). In this study, there was interest in all of the claims being made around student effects, with a dedicated focus on a range of factors which have been identified as mediating variables in facilitating student motivation and academic improvement. These include teacher-student relationships and inter-personal interactions in the classroom and school (Davis, 2006). Deeper learning occurs when an individual engages in social discourse with peers or more knowledgeable others, and thus, classroom contexts which optimize student learning are characterized by an emphasis on social skills, such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy and self-control (Brock, Nishida, Chiong, Grimm, & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). According to Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, and Ryan (1991), “The highest quality of conceptual learning seems to occur under the same motivational conditions that promote personal growth and adjustment” (p. 326).

A mixed methods approach was adopted in the study in order to measure some of the inter-personal and social factors associated with student motivation and achievement. As noted by Gläser-Zikuda & Järvela (2007), multidimensional methods are required to provide insight into the multiple perspectives operating in classrooms and to examine the complex effects of social contexts on student learning and educational outcomes. The mixed methods approach employed was a sequential explanatory design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann & Hanson, 2003). In this study, quantitative data were collected over two time-periods and analysed. Qualitative data were collected during the second phase and were analysed separately to help explain and elaborate on the quantitative results. The qualitative data helped to refine and explain the statistical results by incorporating more detailed information from the

perspectives of the research participants. Hammersley (2008) describes this kind of integration of qualitative and quantitative data as a process of ‘indefinite triangulation’, which serves to both illuminate different aspects of a phenomenon and also validate the interpretation of the research findings.

Student, staff and parent pre and post surveys were administered in order to obtain quantitative and qualitative data about the effects of the values education program on student behaviour and engagement as well as classroom and school ambience. The results of the analysis of the teacher surveys revealed that teachers perceived statistically significant improvements on the three aspects of student behaviour that were assessed. These included academic engagement ( $t = -3.89, p < .05$ ), inclusive behaviour ( $t = -2.31, p < .05$ ) and responsible behaviour ( $t = -2.15, p < .05$ ).

Insert Figure 1 here.

The qualitative data also supported this view, with many comments from both students and teachers indicating that improved interactions between students had led to more harmonious and productive learning environments in which students were demonstrating greater kindness to each other and taking more care and pride in their work. The teachers observed that giving students more control over routine tasks added to their sense of competence and this appeared to lead to more independent learning and increased intrinsic motivation. The teachers reported that students were putting greater effort into their work and “striving for quality”, “striving to achieve their best” and even “striving for perfection”.

As noted in a number of other studies (e.g. Benninga et al., 2003, 2006), it seems that the ambience, relationships and discourse germane to values education

have potential to impact positively on students' academic work habits, without any other explicit contaminating factor being obvious. The report states:

Thus, there was substantial quantitative and qualitative evidence suggesting that there were observable and measurable improvements in students' academic diligence, including increased attentiveness, a greater capacity to work independently as well as more cooperatively, greater care and effort being invested in schoolwork and students assuming more responsibility for their own learning as well as classroom 'chores'. (Lovat et al., 2009, p. 6)

The study also provided confirming evidence from both the quantitative and qualitative data around the many testimonial claims made in earlier studies about the impact of values education on school ambience. For example, evidence was elicited of a "... 'calmer' environment with less conflict ..." (p. 8); "... rise in levels of politeness and courtesy, open friendliness, better manners, offers of help, and students being more kind and considerate ... a greater respect for each other's position" (p. 9); and of "... the creation of a safer and more caring school community." (p. 10). Contributing to this more peaceful and cooperative environment were changes in students' acceptance and understanding of difference and diversity. This change was evident in the statistically significant improvement in teachers' perceptions of students' 'inclusive behaviour' (See Figure 1). The items on this scale referred specifically to the students' willingness to act kindly towards other students who were 'not their friends' and to include children with special needs or who were from different cultures. The teachers' comments in the post-intervention surveys, (identified in the following quotes by a code number preceded by the prefix T), also made frequent mention of the students' improved attitudes and behaviour towards peers who were perceived as 'different'. Teachers described an improved understanding and awareness of why some children may look or act differently:

Students are more understanding of others- in particular when there are behavioural incidents in the classroom they are able to act responsibly and are more aware of why some students act/ behave in a particular way. (T1156)

This improved understanding not only led to greater acceptance and tolerance of difference but also appeared to motivate children to spontaneously offer active support to those ‘in need’. The following comments were provided by teachers in response to one of the survey questions asking them to describe whether there had been any changes in the way that students related to one another:

More accepting and caring towards each other (T1039)

Now very tolerant of children with diverse needs. Show empathy if other children need support. (T1017)

Children are far more patient and prepared to wait a little longer for the child who finds some tasks more challenging. During small group sessions they are quite supportive and caring of others. (T1043)

During something like PE children are very caring and accepting of each other. They allow weaker players to join in and praise each others efforts. (T1038)

Synchronous with the teachers’ perceptions that students were demonstrating more inclusive behaviour, the student comments (identified in the quotes by a code number preceded by the prefix S) also contained frequent reference to very deliberate actions to make peers who were not necessarily a student’s ‘best friend’ feel accepted and included. When students were asked to name a value and give an example of when they had shown or seen that value, one student remarked on the change in his initial mistrust of a peer who was newly arrived in the school and from another country, “Acceptance. A new kid came to my school and he is from France, at first I didn’t like him but after a day or two we became friends” (S01009). Another student comment indicated that the language of values and the clarification of concepts underlying the effective enactment of the values was helping to create a shift in student perceptions of difference as a ‘deficit’, “Unique, because people are more nicer (sic) to people that are different” (S200423). The terms ‘kindness’, ‘care’, ‘acceptance’ ‘fairness’ and even ‘empathy’ were often used by students to describe their actions towards children who previously might have been regarded as ‘outsiders’



but were now viewed more positively. These are factors that seem directly related to the issue of addressing matters of cultural, including religious, difference.

### **Addressing Issues of Religious Difference**

A number of VEGPSP clusters engaged in projects designed specifically to address issues of cultural and religious difference, in each case combining within-school pedagogy with an experiential component that impelled interfaith engagement. In one Sydney cluster, the schools were drawn from Muslim and Government school sectors. This cluster had as its central focus a broadening of understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim cultures and so included schools that were heavily representative of the divide. Beyond learning targeted at understanding the 'other' within the school, the cluster was involved in an array of organized excursions that took students out of their own environment and placed them in the environment of the other, complete with pedagogical attachment that ensured engagement with the other. The beyond-school pedagogy was heavily focussed on 'place' and 'space', with careful and even-handed movement of students from their own comfort zones into the comfort zones of the 'other'.

The cluster in question attracted considerable public interest because its array of schools not only represented the divide between Muslim and non-Muslim but was also connotative of a particular event in 2005 that saw the forces of the divide pitted against each other in a summer-time riot on one of Sydney's better-known beaches. The beach itself (Cronulla) had become quite central to the media folklore around the riot's cause and meaning. In essence, the beach became an icon of traditional Australian culture in that its artefacts (lifeguards, bikinis, etc.) allegedly came under attack when a group of Muslim Australians of Middle-Eastern heritage threatened some non-Muslim Australian women engaging in artefact behaviour and their

equivalent Australian males came to their rescue, becoming in turn the protectors of the beach as an Australian icon. Later reports that the riot had in fact resulted from some Muslim women being harangued by drunken non-Muslim males did nothing to dampen the original folklore. This event served as a particular focus for the values education project in question, providing a sharp example of what can transpire when the goals of the project are not attempted and a mixed community is left without communicative capacity, empathic character, self-reflectivity and the like.

The 'beach' (indeed the very beach on which the riot occurred) therefore became an iconic 'place' and 'space' for the project in question. It was the first site visited by students from across the cluster and, granted the shadow hanging over it from the riot, the pedagogy was intensely focussed on addressing the misunderstanding and prejudice that had led to it and been promoted so vigorously in its wake. It was also pitched in a way that was designed to soften some of the emotions that were still charged on both sides. Hence, a democratic and dialogical pedagogy sat at the centre of a day intended to challenge understandings and feelings that were fairly fixed and raw at the time. Apart from the persistent within-school pedagogy aimed at achieving enhanced understanding of the other, this beyond-school experience, together with several others equally strategically placed, seemed to work to challenge the earlier problematic attitudes and understandings. Students reported as follows:

I found that we all liked similar things no matter where we came from.  
It was great meeting people and finding we are the same.  
While some had a different religion to me ... we were alike in other ways.  
We had similar ideas, we said the same things ... I also got to know their friends and they got to know mine.  
I learnt that everyone thinks in different ways ... I also learnt that no matter how different a person is, you can learn to cooperate with them.  
(DEEWR, 2008, p.67-68)

Specifically in relation to the iconic 'beach' place and space, the teacher coordinator reflected:

They were able to learn about the beach and how to be responsible at the beach together ... it made them see how much they had in common with one another ... they learnt that being responsible and respectful on the beach was in the common interests of all who want to enjoy the beach. It was also the first step in our cluster in teaching self-awareness as well as awareness of others. (DEEWR, 2008, p.67)

Meanwhile, a Melbourne based cluster consisted of schools from the Muslim, Jewish, Catholic and Government sectors. Although a thousand kilometres from the beach in question, the riot had become so symbolic of religious and cultural difference gone wrong that it featured heavily in the thinking of those designing the project. The pedagogy in this cluster also entailed within and beyond-school components with, at its centre-piece, ‘Socratic Circles’, a form of discussion that ensures reflective dialogue through participants moving interchangeably from positions of active dialogue to reflection and evaluation. This strategy was used by all schools in their within-school pedagogy as well as when they were together. In this cluster, the beyond-school experiential components centred heavily on iconic events related to each religion’s calendar, together with an Australia Day event pertinent to all religions and to non-religion as well. In the case of the Muslim school, the event revolved around an Iftar Meal to celebrate the end of Ramadhan. The focus of the Socratic Circles on that day was enhancing understanding by all, Muslim and non-Muslim, of the significance of the ritual to the set of beliefs that constitute Islam.

Student reports on the benefits of such pedagogy to their greater understanding of religious difference and hence their confidence to deal with the realities of their world were ‘overwhelming’. The University advisor to the project remarked of the pedagogy:

... it gives student support and direction when discussing potentially difficult and contentious issues. There is safety in the structure ... students know their roles. (DEEWR, 2008, p.121)

Meanwhile, the teacher coordinator concluded that the pedagogy clearly “... plays a role in improving students’ communicative abilities as well as deepening their

understanding of different world views and different values perspectives” (DEEWR, 2008, p.121).

## **Conclusion**

The Australian Government has been active in organizing events and projects relevant to addressing the pressing issues around Islam and its integration or otherwise in Western societies (DEST, 2007; 2007a). As in many Western societies, Islam is now a major religious force in Australia, being significantly larger than a number of traditional Christian denominations and growing exponentially faster than any Christian denomination. Because profiling done on Western-based Islamist extremists has often exposed an unhappy school experience as at least one indicator of ineffective social integration, the Government initiated a project designed to examine the experiences of young Muslims in Australian schools with a view to improving them wherever possible. Appraisal for happiness and wellbeing in the school was set against the terms of the national Framework for Values Education (DEST, 2005). Findings from the project were disseminated in the form of a showcase wherein the project investigators outlined key findings and teachers and pupils involved in the education of Muslim youth, in public, religious and specifically Muslim schools, conveyed their experiences.

Among those conveying personal experiences was a young Muslim pupil who spoke of some of her earlier unhappy experiences in a school that had not been so sensitive to intercultural issues, least of all to dealing with them. She contrasted these experiences with more recent ones in a school that set out to address her needs as a young Muslim in a polyglot society and used the National Framework to do this work. Hence, values concerned with acceptance, respect, care, integrity and social responsibility were targeted for attention by way of modelling and transacting, and the

issue of Muslim/ non-Muslim dialogue was managed in this context. The result for her was an increased sense that her culture was respected and she as an individual had something distinctive and of value to add to her polyglot society. In a word, she had no need of radical Islamism to provide a security or identity that was not guaranteed by her wider society. The words that summarized the role that the school might play in providing such a guarantee were around the notion that schools are places where individual and societal futures are rehearsed. They are, among other things, ‘engine rooms’ of multiculturalism and integration, sites where we learn not only the grammar of formal literacy, but also the ‘grammar’ of respect and cooperation.

Words such as these provide the perfect counter view to those earlier beliefs confounded by values education research that the school was inherently limited in what it could achieve owing to the overwhelming power of heritage and disadvantage. In contrast, these words match the findings of updated research about the power of quality teaching, school ambience and especially values education to make a difference in the lives of all student cohorts, including those suffering the negative effects of being from a minority and often misunderstood religious culture. Among other things, they are words that illustrate the potential of values education to be crafted to address effectively some of the major and most relevant issues of learning that confront our schools and, if we can believe the evidence before us, to do this in a way that enhances all aspects of learning, including academic achievement.

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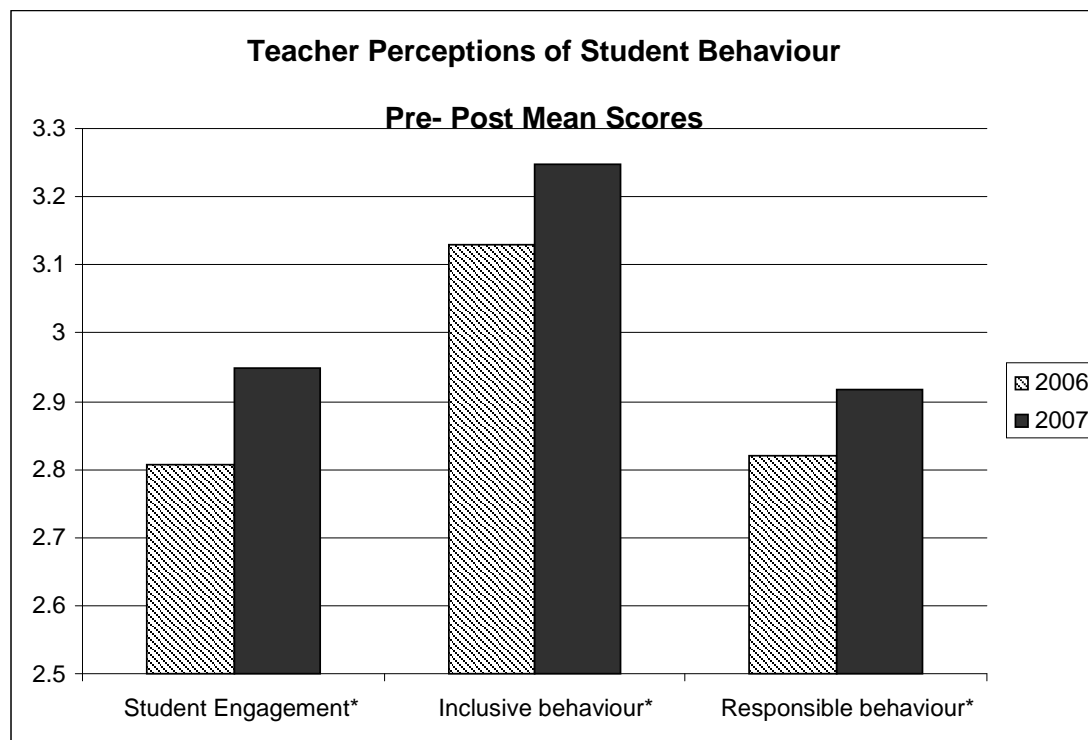
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**Figure 1. Pre-post comparison of teacher perceptions of student behaviour**

\*  $p < .05$