

TEACHING SOCIAL JUSTICE

James Smith Page

Abstract

James Page outlines the social justice programme within the wider religious education programme at Emmaus College in Rockhampton, and explains some of the difficulties and challenges involved.

Article

It is true to say that social justice is one of the vogue areas of current education. Educational journals contain numerous references on what can be achieved through social justice education. It is a challenging area, although also one with many potential difficulties. At Emmaus College we have developed a social justice programme within Religious Education which, we think, meets both the challenges and difficulties within any programme.

The programme commences with the theological grounds for social justice, as well as an examination by students of individual experiences of injustice. From this we proceed to examine various areas of social disadvantage in Australian society, including the unemployed, single parents, the Aboriginal Australians. The programme concludes with a global overview of world poverty and world underdevelopment.

One challenge of social justice education is in confronting the many prejudices within our community, including prejudices amongst many who claim Christian allegiance. The specific challenge comes from understanding such prejudices. Prejudices are learned behaviours, and for the teacher, they are also behaviours which can be understood and unlearned.

Understanding seems to be the key. Prejudices often come from the personal experience of injustice by the individual student. It is important to listen to the objections raised by students on any individual issue, and to address these. This way we communicate the importance of social justice, including justice within our College environment.

Another area of challenge which we find in our social justice programme is in the stereo-types which we may promote. It may be true that a particular group is disadvantaged. However, promoting an image of a group as a sub-class can work to confirm that very image. It is important, rather, to emphasize the positive aspects of any group.

Education on Aboriginal issues is one case in point. It is possible to talk about the great disadvantages and injustice suffered by Aboriginal peoples. However, it is equally important to discuss the positive contribution Aboriginal peoples can make to Australian society, to discuss the depth and fabric of Aboriginal culture and spirituality.

Aboriginal society, therefore, is given some of the respect and dignity it so rightly deserves, and from which Europeans have so much to learn.

The final area of challenge for social justice education is the personal one. Talking about justice within Australia and within our world is always a very threatening activity for any teacher, as our lives are invariably so interwoven with our world of exploitation. The challenge is continually before us as teachers to examine our lifestyles and values, in the context of a world of great injustice and need.

The above are just a few of the issues and questions which confront us in teaching the social justice programme at Emmaus. It is a difficult programme. It is one which confronts the teacher into many dangers. However, I believe it is also a very sound and positive programme, one which also, hopefully, sums up what Emmaus is all about.

J.S. Page