

David de Carvalho address to Values Education Summit

27 March 2021

I am talking to you today from the traditional lands of the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation and so I pay my respects to the Gadigal Elders of past, the present and the future, who for tens of thousands of years have been, are now, and will continue to be, true educators, handing on the memories, traditions and hopes of their people.

In doing so, I should also point out that for our Indigenous peoples, the notion of “values education” would strike them as very odd, as if the formation of values in young people was somehow different from their learning about the world. For them, knowledge about the land, sea, sky, animals and plants are not aspects of geography and science, but are integrated, part of life as a whole, connecting the past, the present and the future via song-lines of spiritual and moral significance. We have a lot to learn about values education from our first nations peoples.

Disruption tests the resilience of values. It is interesting to reflect on how COVID-19 has affected our values. COVID is the greatest disruptive phenomenon we’ve experienced for decades and it has forced many of us to re-evaluate what we think is important in life. Family, friends, personal connection – things we had taken for granted previously – are now much more appreciated.

And while not directly related to COVID, the dark side of our culture’s warped attitude to physical intimacy in personal relationships has also been exposed through events at our Parliament House as well as the testimony of thousands of brave young women who have been educated at our most prestigious schools, places that often pride themselves on the approach to values education.

We have a public reckoning now in Australia on respect for women, respectful relationships and the issue of consent following a chain of shocking events sparking off a conversation that had to be had.

There is increased focus on how these matters are dealt with in the school curriculum, which we at ACARA are currently reviewing. We will be looking to strengthen the way issues of respectful relationships and issues of consent are covered.

But strengthening the curriculum should not be seen as the solution to this problem. It is not just the *having* of the conversation that it is important – it is *where* these conversations are taking place. The classroom is not enough.

What is being talked about around the dining room table, in the boardroom, or at the local bar or in the halls of parliament?

And far more important than the words are our active responses, and it these that are the product of our values. Actions speak louder than words. Values cannot just be taught, because what is taught will be more effective if it is consistent with what values are being “caught” from the wider social, cultural and economic environment in which our young people are growing up.

But what our culture is communicating is that other people can be treated as means to our personal ends. This is the bad fruit of centuries of cultural change that have elevated the status of the individual above that of the community, as opposed to seeing a healthy community as central to the health of the individual.

We are also seeing this play out in the apparent waning interest of our young people in the formal processes of communal self-government, that is, civics and citizenship in a liberal democracy. This is very concerning, as it was less than four months ago we saw evidence of how fragile the commitment to democratic governance can be, when the United States Capitol was stormed.

In December 2019, all Australian Education Ministers signed the Mparntwe Education Declaration in Alice Springs that set out a goal for our education system, that it produces young Australians who are confident and creative individuals, lifelong learners and active and engaged members of the community.

However, the results of the assessments, undertaken just a few months earlier, in the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship (NAP–CC) are cause for concern.

Alarmingly, just 38 per cent of Year 10 students reached the national proficient standard for knowledge in civics and citizenship. This figure has hovered around this mark consistently since the assessment began in 2004. It compares with a little over 50 per cent for Year 6 students.

There appears to be a worryingly low level of understanding about, and appreciation for, our democratic institutions and why they are important. These are the institutions that underpin our society's values around justice, fairness and equality of opportunity, and give our future generations the chance to shape their world.

But on the positive side, the survey results from the report paint a picture of a generation of students who are concerned about their planet and increasingly get involved in raising money for a charity or social cause, and hold high levels of trust in some civic institutions like the police and law courts.

They embrace the diverse values immigrants bring to our shores; and approximately 90 per cent of them express positive attitudes towards Indigenous cultures.

Which brings me to my final point today on one of the core aspects of values education. Over many years we've heard talk about "Australian values" and how they should be included in our curriculum and fostered more broadly in our culture.

But what do we mean by Australian values? Much has been written on this topic, but one thing is for certain – they must involve a recognition of the histories and cultures and experiences of our first nations peoples. One cannot be an informed member of the Australian community without this, and this is a key aspect of the Australia Curriculum.

I'd like to quote two people who can put it more eloquently than I can.

As Senior Australian of the Year, Dr Miriam Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, stated in her acceptance speech, “We learnt to speak your English fluently, walked on a one-way street to learn the white people’s way. Now is the time [for you] to come closer to understand us and to understand how we live and to listen to what needs are in our communities.”

And only last week in a speech at the National Museum of Australia Noel Pearson noted that as long as Indigenous peoples remain unrecognised then Australia would be “an absurdity.” He said:

“Repudiation is the enemy of recognition. In fighting against the repudiation of the country’s Indigenous heritage, no answer lies in the repudiation of its British heritage.”

So Australian values, if they are to be real, will move us to act in ways that recognize the central role that Aboriginal histories and cultures have played and continue to play in our wider history and the evolution of our nation.

The Mparntwe Education Declaration notes that learning is a partnership with parents, carers and others in the community.

We must continue having conversations like the one we are having today, together as a community and recognizing that the development of values is a partnership across generations and across cultures.

Thanks for having me today.