

VALUING INDIVIDUALS

RESOLVED that 'learning difficulty needs' be a high priority in the mission and ministry of Lutheran schooling in the LCA.
1997 LCA General Synod, Croydon Vic

Through the attendance of this severely disabled child, other students within the school have learnt a great deal about disabilities, tolerance, love, and care. Indeed we have found that (these) students ... can add a dimension of breadth and depth to the educational life experiences and give more blessings that they receive.
Article by Elaine Nitschke in The Lutheran 22 November 1998

We respect individual gifts and differences ... Lutheran schools are caring communities where each individual is valued ... Our schools cater for a wide range of abilities. We ... provide programs for Gifted and Talented students and Special Education needs.
BLS brochure 'What makes a Lutheran school distinctive?'

... taking an A student and getting them to achieve As is not as impressive as taking a C student and helping them produce Bs ... good education is not always measured by statistical comparisons and league ladders ... If life is like a box of chocolates, perhaps schools are like a bag of pumpkins. We can't judge their quality based on appearances alone. In a good bag, we have to look beyond the surface to find the best.
'Quality' by Richard Hauser - Headmaster's address to Good Shepherd Lutheran College, Noosa, Presentation Night 1997

Schooling should be socially just, so that ... students' outcomes are free from the effects of negative forms of discrimination based on sex, language, culture and ethnicity, religion or disability; and of differences arising from students' socio-economic background or geographic location.
The Adelaide declaration on national goals for schooling in the Twenty-first century
April 1999

These quotations make it very clear that Lutheran schools must take social justice issues seriously. They are a cloud of witnesses to the importance of valuing and affirming differences, and they summon us to work to this end to the best of our abilities within available resources. Will we hear Christ say to us 'When you showed patience to the ADD student, empathised with the aggrieved and stood up to the bully, you did it to me'?

This year my class celebrated its fortieth year reunion. As I renewed acquaintances with people, some of whom I had not seen for 30 or 40 years, I reflected on what they had done with their life. Who would have guessed the diversity of stories that were told that weekend? The question I kept asking was how does one judge success. Was it achieved by the:

- professors of world renown
- inventor honoured by the government
- person who sat with his wife through her last fight with cancer
- courageous conscript who died in Vietnam
- mother who nurtured six children

The list went on as each shared their story. Individual differences were affirmed and concern shown for those whose lot had not been easy. It would have been patently unfair if one person was not listened to or told that their story was useless.

Specifically, through its schools the Lutheran Church of Australia offers a program of Christian education which ... strives for excellence in the development and creative use by all students of their God-given gifts. The Lutheran school is committed to serving its students by providing quality education which ... develops their God-given abilities as fully as possible.
The LCA and its Schools

A feature of Lutheran schools is valuing and striving for excellence in education. Our students are empowered and inspired to achieve beyond what they thought they were capable. However there can be a genuine tension between valuing excellence and honouring meritorious achievement, and at the same time, being inclusive and praising what is seemingly of little value.

Social justice means valuing differences and affirming the dignity of each individual. Christ has given us many examples through the widow's mite, the Good Samaritan, Zacchaeus, and the lost sheep. We are above all motivated by his love for each one of us. If he did not have a social justice policy he could not possibly have included us and certainly we would have had no claim to make on him. It is because of his creative and redemptive work that we are to value all people and it is through the work of the Holy Spirit that we can respond to the unique individuals in his creation.

Because of all of this, I wish that:

- Lutheran schools sent as many students on community service projects to Papua New Guinea, Indonesia or our Aboriginal communities as go on school visits to the USA or New Zealand
- bullying was not the issue it is in too many of our schools and that there was a zero tolerance policy of this evil
- all schools had meaningful grievance procedures so that the disempowered staff, student or parent was always heard
- somewhere a group of Lutheran schools worked

Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.
Matthew 25:40

together to form a well resourced unit for students with severe special learning needs

- Australian Lutheran World Service was regarded as a major focus for school community service fund raising projects and through it our students developed a genuine appreciation of, and sensitivity to, global poverty and the extensive needs of by far the majority of the world's population
- Lutheran schools had a special emphasis on acknowledging and appreciating the value of Aboriginal cultures to Australian society and helped their students contribute to genuine reconciliation
- the additional funding that most of our schools will receive through SES funding will be spent to make them more accessible through lower fees or fee relief.

I did not want to write this article and felt that anything that I wrote would be bland and full of motherhood statements. However, my secretary simply put before me the documents from which the quotations on this page come and said that this is important. We certainly have made some pretty powerful affirmations in our documents and writings as educators. Our rhetoric is clear. Now it is time for action.

I praise God for the good work that is being done in Lutheran schools through genuine and spontaneous response to needs. It is not easy to balance survival as a school with healthy enrolments and a positive image in the community, whilst at the same time, ministering to those whom no one else wants, or who will place a seemingly unrealistic burden on limited resources. However, social justice must be more than words.

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