Action for justice: a new approach to equity

DUNCAN REID and JARROD O’NEILL explain how a proactive program at their school will empower students to take lifelong action to redress social injustices.

CAMBERWELL Girls Grammar School, a Christian school in the Anglican tradition, has developed a social justice program for years 7 to 12. The Camberwell social justice model goes beyond older social service models of involvement in the community because it is intended primarily as an educational program. Its focus is not on ‘helping those less fortunate than ourselves’ but on raising consciousness of injustices in the world and empowering students to take action to redress these inequities.

In the past, form groups were required to choose a charity or organisation and, under the guidance of their form teacher, run an activity to raise money for it. There were three fundamental problems with this model.

- It was teacher-centred, and the teachers themselves were not fully equipped or supported to coordinate the activities.
- There was little education of the student body, other than the form group who ran the activity.
- Too often, these activities were ad hoc at best and achieved little in raising consciousness.

Defining social justice

At the outset, we had to address the philosophical question: what is social justice and how does it differ from social service? While this might seem, on the surface, to be a relatively straightforward question, we found it took some time for staff to agree on what we meant by ‘focusing on injustices in society’.

While we respect the many charities that support the needs of our community, not all of them take ‘action for justice’ as their focus. We have, for example, tried to highlight that it is unjust that we, as Australians, have access to clean water, gainful employment, a safe environment and exceptional health services, while many people in Third World countries are unable to enjoy these basic necessities.

The key goal of our new program is educational. We aim to educate our students, encourage lifelong empathy and empower them to take action. The hope is that each student will continue to have a social conscience well beyond her time at school. The program has been supplemented, within the formal curriculum, by the introduction, at year 10, of a new Global Interactions unit. After completing this, students should be able to:

- read, and comment on, in an informed and critical way, current events as presented in newspapers, current affairs journals and websites
- articulate and defend a considered opinion on current events
- initiate, or lead, a campaign for social improvement.

Issues addressed in the Global Interactions unit are migration, multiculturalism, trade, work, economies, NGOs, globalised culture, climate change, environmental degradation, overpopulation, ethnicities, religion, gender and terrorism. These correspond with the eight millennium goals of the United Nations.

The hope is that each student will continue to have a social conscience well beyond her time at school.

Although the unit includes a program of planned lessons, this is frequently paused to give immediate attention to newsworthy world events as they occur during the semester. The unit thus follows a ‘cool’ rather than a ‘hot’ curriculum style. This demands a high degree of flexibility from both teachers and students with regard to subject matter.

Integrity, commitment and respect

The school has decided its social justice priorities with reference to its mission statement of ‘educating
tomorrow's woman', that is, a person who will base her life decisions on the school's core values of integrity, commitment and respect. This means our social justice program supports agencies and projects that are linked to the welfare, education, health and dignity of women; and that are inspired by the ecumenical movement of which the Anglican Church is a part. This twin focus allows the program to select certain agencies and projects over others.

Each year level is allowed to choose an organisation or project with a particular focus, in keeping with the school's guidelines, priorities and overall philosophy. Students then collectively decide on how best to respond to the needs expressed by their chosen organisation or organisations. Their goal is to increase awareness within the school community of the circumstances surrounding the organisation or organisations they have chosen. Fundraising is only undertaken if money is a prior requirement for an awareness-raising project. An example would be if a project requires students to make something, the basic materials for which need to be bought. Each year level organises and leads a school assembly to bring their project to the attention of the whole school community, before organising an event for the benefit of the project. They later organise a follow-up assembly presentation to report to the school on the success of their project. The goal of this is to ensure that students are able to take the next step in their social justice education, by further understanding the impact their actions have on others. All students are encouraged to become involved in their year level project and have the opportunity to work on whole-school projects.

There are three student social justice captains who assist the year level coordinators in coordinating the various projects. These students are also responsible for whole-school responses to one-off emergencies. Some situations, such as natural disasters, require flexibility and immediate action rather than long-term planning and commitment, so the program also allows
for a response to the immediate needs of the individuals affected, for example, by natural disasters.

Two forms of ethical concern

The model recognises two forms of ethical concern. One the one hand, there is the justice that treats everyone equally. On the other, there is recognition of the uniqueness of each person, whose particular needs cannot be subsumed under some general set of ethical principles. These two principles may seem to stand in opposition to one another: how are we to reconcile our local obligations to family, friends, neighbours and neighbourhood, with the universal demands of abstract principles? Indeed, ‘social justice’ is itself one such abstraction. Are we to desert the immediate and the local in favour of abstract principles? The various social experiments of the 20th century have demonstrated the folly and, in the end, the potential evil of this path. Too much blood has been shed in the name of very worthy abstract ideals.

But are we then to let charity start at home and never move beyond this? That would leave us ensnared in the bonds of favouritism of the worst sort, with no social conscience whatsoever. The unique other person, the distant ‘other’, must be personalised for us to interact with her or him. In other words, contacts of friendship need to be established. With this in mind, the school is beginning a letter-writing exercise for year 7 students, who will communicate with students at a partner-school in Rwanda. At year 8 level, there are visits to and from a school in Central Australia. Creating relationships is thus one of the elements in the program. We consider it important to build an environment where long-lasting connections are made, allowing a deeper understanding of the complexities of social justice issues. Continuity in the school’s social justice commitment is guaranteed by the adoption of a five-year social justice plan, in which the raising of awareness is always the main aim. It is therefore a strategic program, aiming at long-term outcomes.

The hope is, in fact, that students will have become sensitive to issues of social justice by the time they leave school, and will have the courage and energy to continue to initiate action for social change throughout their lives. This courage and energy cannot emerge simply from a theoretical knowledge about injustice. Bare knowledge of the problem or problems can have the effect of overwhelming and paralysing practical action. Accordingly, imagination is an equally important component in the social justice program. We need to be able to see the other person as unique and uniquely valuable.

Expanding student consciousness

Existential questions plague us. As a school, we find ourselves in a unique position - we are able to address the human need to want to help others. Better still, we are in a position to influence and expose many bright minds to the needs of others and the injustices perpetrated against them. Education is the key. Previous piecemeal social service activities were little more than a drop in the ocean. If we are able to expand the consciousness of our students, and encourage them to identify injustices in the world, then the drop in the ocean can become a wave of change. We view the first year of the program as developmental. We expected problems, which is why we limited how much we did. Already, we have encountered roadblocks that we did not foresee.

In the long-term, we want to ensure that what we do is thoughtful, practical and sustainable. We need to address where we want the program to go. Practical proposals now include expanding the social justice leadership program, dedicating an entire school week to social justice initiatives and expanding our exchange program to send students to the places they have been working on. It is clearly one of the most important things we do at our school.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS
Rev. Duncan Reid is Religious Education and Global Interactions teacher at Camberwell Girls Grammar School, in Victoria. He is also an Anglican priest who has worked in both parish ministry and theological education, including as head of the School of Theology at Flinders University and dean of the United Faculty of Theology Melbourne. In addition to teaching religious education and current affairs at Camberwell Girls Grammar School, Rev. Reid is currently priest-in-charge of St George’s Flemington and a research scholar of the Melbourne College of Divinity. Rev. Reid can be contacted by email at: dreid@camgirls.vic.edu.au.

Mr Jarrod O’Neill is Head of School Administration at Camberwell Girls Grammar School. His focus is on developing the Social Justice Program to encourage empowerment, a sense of responsibility and advocacy amongst the student body. Mr O’Neill can be contacted by email at: joneill@camgirls.vic.edu.au.