

Report of 18 June 2015 Meeting

Royal Society

Southern Highlands Branch

Speaker: Michael Parker, Headmaster, Oxley College, Burradoo, 2576

Topic: Ethics and Thinking Program for Schools

The audience of 75 people who attended the Southern Highlands Branch June lecture on Thursday evening had to brave extremely cold, dark, wet conditions to take their seats at the Performing Arts Centre, Chevalier College. They were aware that the media had been heavily involved in discussions and reports of ethics in schools for previous weeks, and so made the effort to hear this extremely relevant and timely lecture. The committee members had engaged this speaker many months ago for the 2015 program, and were quite surprised and delighted that the lecture was scheduled quite coincidentally with the media coverage.

Michael Parker opened his lecture with the question, “Would you rather your child was smart or good?”. Participants could respond with one or the other, but not both. This question was then used as the opening to the issues to be discussed. He said that when this question was posed to parents in general, the majority response was that people would prefer their children to be good, if they could choose only one answer. Of course, this outcome raised many more issues on people’s own ideas of what constituted “good”.

Parker spent quite some time examining the continuum of behaviors that are understood by people to lie within the concept of “ethics”. At one end of the spectrum lay the authoritarian approach, where the rules of behavior were laid down with iron bars and could not be challenged. Children being taught this way were told what was right and wrong, and were not free to challenge the advice. At the other end of the spectrum was the permissive approach, which Parker described as a swamp, where children were free to roam with no guidance on thinking whatsoever. The vast middle ground lay between the two ends, and the many positions available there were classed as the liberal positions. In these states, children were given information relevant to situations, so that they could better make an informed decision on matters before them, based on their own critical thinking.

Keeping young students interested in ethics and thinking would appear to most to be a challenging task, but as the lecture progressed it became clear to all that Parker’s skills in this area were second to none. An example he gave was of his own “discussion tennis”, where students are given a controversial subject for discussion, then move physically to the side of the tennis net where they feel their view lies. Students holding the opposing view take the other side. In a very orderly way, ideas are thrown back and forth over the net as the discussion advances, and participants can walk to the other side if they feel they have enough evidence to make them want to change their mind.

This strategy also has the advantage that it clearly demonstrates to students that when new information comes to hand, there is nothing wrong or weak in changing one's position. Parker carried out this exercise with a group of volunteers from the lecture audience. What an excellent strategy that was to demonstrate that the process of engaging students in critical thinking can be so enjoyable. No wonder students in his ethics and thinking classes are not simply pining for lunchtime!

Michael Parker has done much to share his innovative strategies with a wider audience, through the release of his highly successful books. In 2012, he published *Ethics 101 :Conversations to have with your kids*. This book has since been published in 2013 in USA. His second book in the series was *Talk With Your Kids: Big Ideas*, followed by *Talk With Your Kids: Ethics*. His talents do not lie solely in the world of Education publishing. He has had two novels published, including a young adult novel which was shortlisted for the NSW Premier's Award in 2007, and a children's picture book, *You Are a Star*, which was published with Bloomsbury in USA in September 2012.

Anne Wood