Moral panics in school system impact on education

Moral panics within the school system – around such issues as Safe Schools, obesity in children, boys wearing dresses – are on the rise and impacting on school education according to a University of Tasmania researcher.

Dr Grant Rodwell from the University’s Faculty of Education explores the impact of moral panics on school systems in his new book, Moral Panics and School Educational Policy.

“It’s the first time the concept of moral panics in school educational policy has been pulled together and analysed in a book,” he said.

“Since the 1970s, social scientists have frequently characterised periodical outbursts of outrage and anxiety as a moral panic.

“In these days of social media one moral panic takes over from the last with lightening pace – all the while, educators in schools get on with teaching and learning in an increasingly fraught environment.

“Research has shown young people to be particularly vulnerable to moral panics and, with the rise of social media, the impact of moral panics on school education is growing exponentially.”

Dr Rodwell said attention also needed to be given to the political sphere in light of the rise of globalism and risk-society thinking, which argues much public policy is set in a dire sense of anxiety and immediacy.

“Also, given the added impact of globalism and risk-society thinking, how are moral panics increasingly being orchestrated by politicians to achieve political ends?” he said.

The book will be launched by former Premier of Tasmania and Minister for Education David Bartlett from 4.30pm today (Thursday, 9 November) at the University’s Law Building, Sandy Bay Campus.
A Tasmanian school principal for many years, Dr Rodwell turned his attention to academe where he has been teaching and researching moral panic theory and risk-taking theory across Australian universities for more than 20 years.

“Moral panic theory in school education is not new,” he said.

“Previously, things like deviant behaviour were the focus, but nowadays it’s becoming more commonplace, and you have provocateurs such as politicians and the media feeding into it.”

In a bid to help ease the ‘panic’, Dr Rodwell said gaining a broader understanding of the influences behind the moral panics would help enable school communities to take charge of the phenomenon.

“If the school community can understand what it is, see who or what the provocateurs are, they have a better opportunity at managing the ‘panic’,“ he said.

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