

What is Values-based Education?

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A society holds together through the quality of its shared values (virtues), which are produced through a shared conversation. (Sachs, 1997)

What appears to be missing from many schools and society at large is a shared vocabulary, based on shared positive human values, which can provide a sense of direction and vision about how to create a stable moral society. The purpose of this article is to argue that teaching about positive human values (e.g. respect, honesty, compassion, care, humility and responsibility) improves the quality of education in schools. Such work creates values-based Education. A values-based school seeks to promote an educational philosophy based on valuing self and others, through the consideration of a values vocabulary (principles that guide behaviour) as the basis of good educational practice. This process is called Values Education which can be further described as:

a way of conceptualising education that places the search for meaning and purpose at the heart of the educational process. It recognises that the recognition, worth and integrity of all involved in the life and work of the school, are central to the creation of a values-based learning community that fosters positive relationships and quality in education. (Alive, 2007)

My experience, as a former Headteacher of West Kidlington School in the UK, is that when a school seriously develops the moral and spiritual aspects of the curriculum (that is, those that positively contribute to the inner world of thoughts, feelings and emotions of the teacher and the pupil), the school community become more reflective and harmonious. The effect on individual pupils, of developing Values Education, is that pupils take greater personal responsibility for their learning and behaviour.

My research, undertaken at Oxford University (Hawkes, 2005), indicates that the most effective teachers of values are those who work to be more self-aware and take time to reflect on the deeper meaning of the values being emphasised in the school. Self reflective work by teachers is seen to have a powerful impact on pupils, who appear to make a connection between what the teacher says and what she does. Such teachers are authentic, meaning that they seek to achieve congruence between their thoughts, feelings and actions. They are aware that they have the potential (as we all do) to be consumed by negative emotion (e.g. anger) and for this to be inappropriately translated into action. Developing reflection as a tool to aid self-control enables both pupil and adult to behave in ways that reflect positive human values, such as compassion and respect. Teachers describe their own positive behaviour as walking their talk: living their values. Such reflective work leads to teachers' developing a deepening understanding of the values words. They also have a clearer perception of their own attitudes and behaviour, and seem willing and able to model the values. Teachers believe that the pupils will learn from their positive example. Therefore an outcome of my research is the view that the process of Values Education must begin with adults (what could be described as the work before the work), before adopting it in the curriculum. From the evidence, it would

appear that Values Education cannot be taught in isolation from the teacher's own thoughts, feelings and behaviour. It is therefore important for all who work with children to pay attention to looking after themselves, physically, mentally and spiritually. Such wise selfishness then enables the adult to be a positive role model.

Teaching about values affects teachers thinking, and consequently the way that they teach. Teachers are not neutral with regards to values, as values are embedded within their attitudes and exhibited through their behaviour. This implies that, in order for there to be consensus and consistency of staff expectations and behaviour throughout the school, a whole school Values Education policy needs to be introduced, based on my blueprint for Values Education. This blueprint is explained on professional development/training days.

The blueprint enables a school to create a structure for Values Education that fosters a climate for learning that makes the role of teachers easier. Teachers believe that the reason for this is that Values Education fosters good interpersonal relationships. They consider that consequently this helps to raise pupil self-esteem and confidence. The result is that the pupils produce quality work, respect staff and are well behaved.

Teachers in values-based schools report that teaching about values has a positive effect on what they term, the inner world of pupils. They think that by talking about their feelings, pupils learn to express themselves more clearly, control their behaviour, and empathise with others (all aspects concerned with the development of emotional maturity). The teachers believe that the pupils learn about values by talking about them in the context of good teacher-child relationships. They believe that repetition and reinforcement of the values words, across the curriculum, is important for reinforcing their meaning. The evidence to show that the pupils understand the values is demonstrated by their use of them in everyday conversations. Pupils appear more aware of their behaviour in the playground and out of school. This contributes to the establishment of a positive climate for teaching and learning.

An important conclusion of my research concerns the introduction and development of a values vocabulary. This vocabulary acts as the platform on which pupils and staff develop, and deepen, their understanding of issues concerned with ethics and morality. It appears that the systematic introduction of a common vocabulary encourages reflective thinking, which leads to more positive and ethically-based behaviour. Also, frequent repetition and regular discussion about values reinforces their meaning, with the result that they are more likely to be internalised in the sub-conscious. This in turn reinforces the pupils' positive dispositions and acts as a check on behaviour. I argue that it cannot be assumed that such a vocabulary will generally be introduced to children, unless schools plan to do it through the curriculum.

Values-based schools aim to encourage pupils to be reflective by teaching a technique called reflection or silent sitting, which gives space and time for pupils to focus their minds, allowing their intrapersonal intelligence to be enhanced. Pupils are seen to be able to sit still in personal reflection for extended periods of time, a perceived outcome being that they became more aware of their capacity to

determine their own behaviour in a positive way. The evidence indicates that the success of this is influenced by the staff modelling the behaviour. In school assemblies, for instance, staff model the behaviour expected of the pupils. The pupils therefore model their behaviour on that of the teachers. Teachers believe that if they are reflective it has a positive influence on their own behaviour, enabling them to be more effective. Teachers consider that they are more careful about how they present ideas to children because of Values Education. They maintain positive attitudes that give affirmation and positive reinforcement to the pupils. The teachers believe that the pupils were more likely to reach their academic potential in a class with values-based discipline.

A key aspect of a values-based school appears to be a greater emphasis on the development of good quality relationships between staff and parents. The teachers recognise the vital importance of the role of families in educating children. They emphasise the importance of developing open, sensitive, active, positive teacher-parent relationships. The development of Values Education is shared with parents through newsletters and parents' evenings. This ensures a positive partnership between home and school.

Behind my thinking lies an understanding and assumption that Values-based Education is far more than a process of instilling values in pupils. It is concerned with the very meaning and purpose of education; a statement about the quality of education that can be achieved and the impact that this can have on society and the world. With this view of the role and purpose of education, schools that adopt a values-based approach can positively influence the development of positive values, which sustain a civil, caring and compassionate society.

The pioneering Quiet Revolution at West Kidlington School is now being reflected in the curriculum development of many schools throughout the world. Notable examples can be seen in schools in Australia, The United Kingdom, The Seychelles, Jamaica, Belgium and Holland.

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