

The importance of a values-based learning environment

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for
THE JOURNAL OF MORAL EDUCATION TRUST

A Day on Moral Education:

27th June 2007, Institute of Education, London

If education is to cater to the full development of the student as an individual, a member of society and a citizen of the world community, there is, to quote the Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century, or Delors report: “every reason to place renewed emphasis on the moral and cultural dimensions of education, enabling each person to grasp the individuality of other people and to understand the world’s erratic progress towards a certain unity”.

But if it is easy to say that a better future – in personal, public and political life – will include, and indeed depend on, a moral revival of some form, it is far less easy to say what educational practices will best attain this aim. On the one hand it is apparent that even widely-shared values as respect, responsibility, honesty and love will not necessarily emerge either by themselves in the individual or society, or as the result of legislation and, on the other hand, that they cannot – and indeed should not – be imposed from above. Instead, it is submitted, values, or morality, must be seen not only as the intended outcome, but also as the means towards attaining it. The way to peace is through peace, not through war. The way to inclusiveness is through inclusiveness. The way to respect and honesty is through respect and honesty, and so on.

Thus if the outcome of an educational process is to produce respectful, peaceful, honest and responsible people, then the way to achieve that is through an ethos, a culture, an environment within the school, in which respect, peace, honesty and responsibility are the hallmark of how the school community organises itself. “At the core of values education lies the establishment of an agreed set of principles, deeply held convictions, that underpin all aspects of a school’s life and work” (Hawkes). This underlines the importance that must be paid to the relationship between teacher and student – and indeed other relationships within the school community – and what characterises those relationships. It suggests that values must be seen to lie not only at the heart of the educational content, the “what” of education, but also at the heart of the educational process, the “how”, the way in which education is conducted.

While not ignoring the relationship between the personal, public and political and the conflicting demands of the curriculum or timetable, values education should not only be viewed as just another subject within the curriculum but also as the guiding ethos of education: an ethos that emphasises the importance of creating teaching and learning environments that are characterised by values such as respect, responsibility, tolerance, peace and love.

Therefore, “more than a subject, values education has to be an attitude within the whole teaching practice, involving the entire staff of the school, parents and the surrounding community in a common shared endeavour. Thus, integrating values education gives teachers another vision of their pedagogical work. In order to have a real impact, values education has to be planned as a school project, integrated into every aspect of the curriculum, pedagogy and activities, involving all the teachers as a team as well as the organizational and decision-making structure of the educational institution.” (Combes)

When this ethos is taken as the starting point, the second step is then to look at the curriculum itself and to see how values questions are inherent or embedded within the different subject areas, be they science, language, arts or others. The question becomes not so much of seeing how to add a values dimension into these fields of scholarship or human endeavour as an uncovering and exploration, a drawing out, of values inherent within them and their development and practice.

It is only at this, third, stage that one then considers how discrete sessions or periods within the school day can be timetabled to address the issue of values or morality as a subject in its own right. There may or may not be a straightforward solution to whether this finds a home within the context of a particular lesson or within a school assembly or circle time, but the point is that the first two strands of this approach stand on their own regardless of whether or not such time is made available. They may also be seen as a pre-condition to it, as values education is likely to be ineffective unless it takes place in a values-based learning environment. Thus a practical implication of any form of values education, no matter how timetabled or positioned, is that it takes place in a corresponding values-based context.

For sure, trying to give values such as respect, tolerance, love and care their rightful place within classrooms, and ensuring that they set the tone, is not a soft answer to a hard question. To a considerable degree, the issue raised is one of educator training and in-service development programmes designed to help deepen or reinforce the higher-order teaching skills and techniques that contribute to the creation and maintenance of such a values-based teaching environment. A greater awareness of their own values can help empower teachers in moving towards a school environment in which explicit values rather than explicit rules have pride of place. “The whole idea of values-based education is about teachers looking at themselves first” (Combes) or embarking on a process that begins “with self-understanding through an inner voyage whose milestones are knowledge, meditation and the practice of self-criticism”. (Delors).

The above reflects the approach taken over the past ten years by educationists using the *Living Values Education* approach which focuses on the teacher as a potential, and necessary, role model while also providing the opportunity for students to explore, express, experience and develop values and associated personal and intrapersonal social and emotional skills.

Combes, Bernard (2003). *Global Perspectives on Values Education*. Keynote address at the *Giving Value to Values Education* Symposium Hong Kong, October 2003.

Delors, Jacques, et al. (1996). *Learning: The Treasure Within*, Report to UNESCO of the International Commission on Education for the Twenty-first Century. UNESCO Publishing, ISBN 0-7306-9037-7.

Hawkes, Neil (2003). *How to inspire and develop Positive Values in your classroom*. Published by LDA, ISBN 1-85503-371-2.

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