

The Value of Values



The definitive guide to the impact
and the inner workings of Values
in education, business and society

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Values act as a powerful gateway to a more profound experience of life.

Background

In 1993 West Kidlington School, Oxfordshire became the first school to underpin its entire life with Values-based Education (VbE). Four years later the evidence for its transformational properties could be plainly seen. The Ofsted Inspection in June 1997 reported:

'The consistent and successful implementation of the school's values policy, enhanced by excellent role models provided by staff and adult helpers, contributes significantly to standards and results in high quality relationships and excellent pupil behaviour.'

Nineteen years later, we estimate that approaching 20% of schools in the UK and numerous internationally, explicitly use or are influenced by VbE's philosophy and practice, representing getting on for 1m. students each year. I am aware though, that despite VbE schools proclaiming its success, it is still not a standard component of most schools. Why?

I wonder if you are questioning how learning about values can have such a positive impact on schools? Do values words have the positive effect claimed by VbE schools on thinking and behaviour of students? To answer such questions, I need to explain what the values words really empower.

A Gateway to the Inner Self

Values act as a powerful gateway, which leads to a more profound and enhancing experience of life - for which humanity constantly searches.

For me life-enhancing values such as resilience, peace, courage, respect, compassion and tolerance represent the optimistic aspects of our innate nature. Neuroscience suggests that using positive thoughts gives us a greater aptitude to fully develop our brain's potential. A baby's brain is designed with the incredible life-long capacity for neuroplasticity – ability to change and adapt in response to new learning and experience. Given the motivation, it is rarely too late for us to learn about positive values and invite them to inform our thoughts and actions. Each of us has an untapped potential - the capacity to be wise and altruistic.

Contaminating Influences

You may be thinking that, if everyone's so potentially wonderful, why do relationships and other aspects of our lives sometimes appear to be far from wonderful? My answer is as follows: from my observation as a parent, educator and researcher I have observed that during the maturation process of childhood we increasingly come into social contact with a range of significant other people: first our parent(s), caregivers and siblings, extended family and then members of our community.



W. Kidlington School's values sculpture.

"Our values will hold up the world."



Primary school pupils in San Salvador



Statue of a 'Kinder' child. Beth Shalom Holocaust Centre

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The influential adults we meet have almost certainly been exposed to aspects of life and relationships which have challenged and modified their world view; thereby affecting their choice of coping strategies – both positive and negative. They will have adopted attitudes and behaviours, which they use to manage the world around them so that they feel safe, in control and can survive. Such adapted behaviours become ingrained in the way we live and are seen by others as different aspects of our personality.

It is important to understand that these traits of ourselves may contaminate our basic personality – what may be termed our authentic self. This self can become hidden or masked as we learn how best to survive and flourish within our family and cultural context.

Developmental Behaviours

A child learns to respond to adults, whose adapted attitudes and behaviours start to influence how life is experienced. In this process, the child learns that to thrive and be accepted, some behavioural strategies are more successful than others. For instance, it may be discovered that having a part that aims to please, or another that wishes to do everything perfectly can make us more loved and accepted by our family. Or, that by losing our temper or being sad and withdrawn we can gain power over others. We learn such controlling adaptive behaviours to survive within a highly complex social environment - they often do not reflect our core self.

For many years I have described during presentations that each of us is born with a unique core that has the capacity to express a range of innate positive values, for instance cooperation and trust. However, this core personality experiences life events, which either have a positive or limiting effect. Challenging experiences seem to form a protective circle, a carapace, a hard shell around us. If we have multiple experiences that distress us then they create a shadow, affecting how we see and experience the world. If, as a result of trauma or distress our behaviours become challenging to others we then risk being marginalised and rejected, resulting in a negative self-image.

Affirmative Support

What is then needed to support such a person is what adults in a VbE environment do: they metaphorically cut through all the circles, addressing the authentic self with unconditional positive regard, voicing the attitude – ‘I love you but your behaviour is unacceptable’. This simple, yet profound non-shaming manner appeals to the positive aspects of the personality that seeks recognition and love. The process helps us to be curious about the reasons for our behaviour, which encourages the therapeutic healing process to begin.

My current thinking is that what I described above, which happens to individuals, also occurs in families, schools, community groups, societies and even nations. For instance, if a significant number of people feel rejected, peace-less, unloved and marginalised then this will be manifested in



Role models:
parent and
grandparent



Students at
Academia
Britanica
Cuscatleca,
El Salvador



Values
Education at
Copenhagen
School,
London

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the collective psyche, which can result in unrest, violence and war. Perhaps this helps to explain why in times of crises or unrest certain untypical types of people successfully seek political power – because they express the collective unconscious. It also alerts us to the importance for leaders to understand and act on the knowledge contained in this article.

The Role of Schooling

Such thinking convinced me that if a school enables adults and pupils to experience living in a community that underpins all aspects of its life with positive values, then the core in each adult and pupil will be encouraged to express itself in a life-affirming way, leading to a state of consciousness which I term self-leadership. I think that self-leadership should be the real aim of Education; as by its adoption it would lead to the release of a creative, dynamic energy that has never before been witnessed from the population as a whole.

If each person lived their life from the energy of their authentic self; being driven by their life's meaning and purpose, then they would be more likely to live fulfilled lives and make a positive contribution to the mental, social and economic well being of society.

The Impact of Language

Learning about, and experiencing positive values develops an ethical vocabulary, which nurtures ethical intelligence - which I think is the most important intelligence, as it nourishes the growth of wisdom and altruism, which may be considered as super

values. This values narrative, offers a new universal language, which has the potential to transform human consciousness to sustain planet Earth.

Is a curriculum based on positive values enough to encourage self-leadership? Although it is central, I think there are two other significant aspects of VbE that need to be introduced for transformation to occur.

The Impact of Modelling

The second is the ability and determination of adults to give the time and create the space to engage in the internal values work. This is essential so that they can be confident values role models for others. This entails a personal commitment by each member of staff. In my experience adults are initially reluctant to give the commitment to do this internal work, which is why when a whole staff commits to the process it is so empowering for everyone.

Such personal work requires us to be compassionate to ourselves, as we discover that so much of our thinking, attitudes and behaviour are often outside of our conscious awareness. The aim is to be open to the constructive comments of others, developing a personal acceptance, that although we are not perfect (no one is) we can still strive towards a real understanding of a value's deeper meaning.

Such an understanding then positively affects each person's thinking and behaviour, which influences the curriculum, routines and structures of the school - ultimately its whole culture.



Making our voice heard - Art work at Levenshulme School, Manchester



The experience of values - Copenhagen School, London



Role modelling through leadership - Copenhagen School, London

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The Impact of Reflection

The third aspect of VbE that acts to deepen the understanding of the potency of values is reflection. Reflection may be known by other names such as mindfulness or silent sitting. Reflective practices engage the integrative mechanism of the brain's pre-frontal cortex, ensuring that the results of our positive thinking are stored in long-term memory. Giving students time for inner reflection enhances all aspects of their work, as it naturally develops profound thinking. Reflection helps us to connect with our core self, nourishing our capacity for greater personal control and well being. In my experience those who are engaged in reflective practices are more patient, authentic, self-aware, altruistic and self-led.

Developing Wisdom

Are there examples of students who are self-led? I began this short article with West Kidlington School: I would like to bring it to a conclusion by referring to one of the many outstanding VbE schools - Levenshulme High School in Manchester. An audit report in 2016 states:

'Students say they enjoy coming to school, and for some it is a refuge and place of stability. There is a high priority placed on personal well-being and growth in this school. There is congruence in the school between the academic curriculum and the programme for personal development of the students. The latter includes understanding values such as thoughtfulness and kindness, as well as the opportunity to develop the values into virtuous behaviour. Learning about values both in Form time, and in the

academic curriculum, as well as extra-curricular events, is a constant. The students lead many of the sessions in form time as they explore the values. The vertical Form system has been developed to facilitate this process.'

This splendid example of a school committed to VbE shows that by giving opportunities to nurture our values, they in turn create a gateway through which we gain access to our authentic core self - a transformational gift to which words cannot do justice. Modelling of positive values by significant others encourages us to engage with values because we see the positive effect that living the values has on individuals and the community- we are inspired. Lastly having space and time to reflect deeply about the values and our response to them encourages our authentic self to be visible to us and to the world - a great gift, possibly the greatest.



Adults who model the positive values narrative internationally.



Levenshulme High School, Values for Life