

VALUES EDUCATION: A PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVE FOR STUDENT WELLBEING

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ABSTRACT

The article explores research evidence that points to the distinctive contribution of values education to student wellbeing, including but not limited to academic enhancement. It will refer broadly to evidence from a number of international sites and then focus particularly on studies from the UK and Australia in which the authors have played a central role.

Keywords: Values education, academic enhancement

INTRODUCTION

Values education is known internationally by a number of names, including moral education and character education, among others. Each variant has a slightly different meaning, pointing to one or other distinctive emphasis. Each variant is nonetheless united in the common belief that entering into the world of personal and societal values is a legitimate and increasingly important role for teachers and schools to play. This is not an attempt to supplant the influences of the home but rather to supplement them and, where necessary, to compensate for them. International research into teaching and schooling effects is overturning earlier beliefs that values were exclusively the preserve of families and/or religious bodies and that, as a result, schools function best in values neutral mode. This research is not only pointing out the hollowness of such a belief but the potential for it to lead to diminished effects in all realms of student achievement, including academic attainment. In fact, it could be asserted that, in a sense, teaching and schooling that function in values-neutral mode might actually serve to undermine the potential effects of other socializing agencies, including families.

The Positive Impact of Values Education

Carr (2006, 2007, 2008, and 2010) has argued persistently that values and effective teaching are inextricably interwoven and that, in that sense, values education goes to the heart of the role of the teacher and effective learning for the student. He focuses especially on the issue of relationships and the moral mentoring of the teacher as being central to teaching as an inherently relational profession. There is more than a hint of John Dewey (1916, 1929) and R. S. Peters (1981) in such postulations and, furthermore, recent empirical studies have provided confirming evidence of them.

Among these studies are those of Benninga et al. (2006, 2010) that, using the California Academic Index as a guide, were able to show a correlation between high quality values (character) development and strengthened academic achievement. Davidson et al. (2007, 2010) provide explanation and evidence for a similar correlation in their linking 'performance character' and 'moral character' as integrally related in the development of personhood. Osterman (2010) offers further evidence of these joint effects in showing that it is the teacher

who both provides quality content in the context of effective pedagogy and establishes good relationships with students who enjoys the greater academic impact. In other words, establishing positive relationships with students is itself part of effective pedagogy and, in a circular effect, high quality teaching has its own positive impact on strengthening student-teacher relationships. In confirming this twin effect, Osterman (2010) cites results of a study that showed positive relationships among students were an inherent feature of teachers achieving optimal results. Studies that provide both fortified conceptual proffering and empirical verification of the inherent interconnections between values education and holistic student wellbeing, including academic enhancement, are growing in number and scope (Nucci & Narvaez, 2008; Lovat, 2011; Lovat et al., 2010a, 2011a, 2011b).

The UK Study

The above considerations comprise the conceptual foundations for the 'Values School' experimental work at West Kidlington School, UK, reported by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted, 2007) to have had positive impact on all educational measures, including academic achievement. This was in spite of the fact that the population in question has traditionally underperformed at school. In that sense, the 'Ofsted' assessment effectively confirmed that the students on which it was reporting were performing above their 'social position' and, furthermore, that the only causal explanation for this outcome provided by the inspectorate was to be found in the effect of the whole-school values program on the children.

Hawkes, former head teacher of West Kidlington School has illustrated the ways in which a values-based approach to education and learning provides an ethos in which students develop positive characteristics in their social interactions and engagement with their school work (Hawkes, 2005, 2008, 2009, 2010). Rather than viewing values as an appendage to be taught alongside other subjects, values became the platform from which curricular, policy, organizational and pedagogical decisions were made. Central to this approach was the systematic introduction of a values language, in conjunction with teaching, and encouraging students to engage in reflection for periods of time in order to better understand themselves and the impact of their attitudes and behaviours on others. Introduction of this values-based pedagogy was accompanied by curricular reforms which were directed at providing learning support for each student, including students with special needs, for their personal and academic development.

Central to the approach was the development of open, caring and supportive teacher-student relationships. The approach meant that not only were values taught explicitly and systematically, but that an environment was constructed that reflected and embodied the values being proffered. Not the least of the structure was to be found in the conscious modelling of values by staff themselves, both in their collegial relationships and their relationships with students and their parents. Flowing from a values-based incentive was a realization by students themselves that they had control over their own behaviour with attendant changes in school and classroom ambience and improved engagement, and even enjoyment, of schoolwork. Hence, the environment created by the values-based pedagogy was conducive not only for the personal and social development of students but also their academic diligence, as evidenced by the fact that the academic performance of the school was above the national average and well above that of similar cohort schools.

Farrer (2000, 2010) served as a reviewer and external evaluator of the experimental work at West Kidlington. She reported emotional stability of students as a principal benefit of the values-based approach to education, as well as clear improvements in student behaviour and the development of greater awareness of the wider community and of the consequences of their attitudes and actions on that community. She noted that the structured periods of silent

reflection in daily assemblies had a persistent quietening and calming effect and also often worked indirectly to resolve student conflicts without adult intervention and mediation. A common language of shared vocabulary enabled consensus to be reached more quickly and service type activities provided students with opportunities to enact the values taught. In Farrer's evaluation, it becomes clear why enhanced academic diligence tends to flow from such environments.

The Australian Study

Much of the evidence referred to above has also been captured in the research and practice of the projects emanating from the Australian Values Education Program. The program was federally funded, beginning with a pilot study in 2003, followed by the development of a *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* ['National Framework'] (DEST, 2005) that identified the developing research links between values education and good practice pedagogy and proposed a set of guidelines based on these links. The program then issued in a range of research and practice projects from 2005 to 2010, the most crucial of which were the two stages of the *Values Education Good Practice Schools Project* ['Good Practice Schools'] (DEST, 2006; DEEWR, 2008), the *Project to Test and Measure the Impact of Values Education on Student Effects and School Ambience* ['Testing and Measuring'] (Lovat et al., 2009) and the *Values in Action Schools Project* (DEEWR, 2010).

Within the two stages of 'Good Practice Schools', 316 schools organized into 51 clusters across the country, involving approximately 100,000 students, 10,000 teachers and 50 University academics, engaged in a variety of approaches to values education, all guided by the central principles enunciated in the 'National Framework'. Findings were disseminated at annual national forums that included keynote addresses from the two authors (Lovat at the 2005, 2006 and 2009 events and Hawkes at the 2006 and 2007 gatherings).

Findings from stage 1 (DEST, 2006) illustrated that a sound values education can be a powerful ally in the development of good practice pedagogy, with positive effects being demonstrated across a range of measures, including persistent reference to the improved environment of learning and greater student attention to the regular academic work of the classroom:

We ... found that by creating an environment where (the) values were constantly shaping classroom activity, student learning was improving, teachers and students were happier, and school was calmer. (p. 120)

The Executive Summary of the report concluded that, based on the evidence, values education has potential to impact positively on the total educational environment of a school, resulting in a number of features, including strengthened teacher-student relationships, classroom climate and ethos, student attitudes and behaviour, student knowledge and understanding and student achievement. The Stage 2 Report (DEEWR, 2008) identified clearer and more sophisticated links between the rollout of values education and the effects on both student behaviour and performance.

Across the three years in which the VEGPSP project rolled out, the nature of the evidence gradually developed from being largely anecdotal to having a measurable edge, especially as teachers began to compare enumerations of previous and present levels of factors such as behaviour disruption, work focus and attendance on the part of students. The 'Testing and Measuring' project (Lovat et al., 2009) was designed to investigate, using quantitative and qualitative methods, these apparently measurable claims. There was interest in all of the claims being made around student effects, with a dedicated focus on a range of factors which

have been identified as mediating variables in facilitating student motivation and academic engagement (Deci et al., 1991; Ainley, 2006; Davis, 2006; Ryan, 2007; Brock et al., 2008).

A mixed methods approach was adopted in order to measure some of the inter-personal and social factors associated with student motivation and achievement, with quantitative data collected and analysed over two time-periods and qualitative data collected during the second phase. The quantitative work focussed on pre and post surveys of teachers, students and parents, with the qualitative work designed to refine and explain the statistical results by incorporating more detailed information. This article explores teacher results. Survey data showed that teachers perceived statistically significant improvements on the three aspects of student behaviour that were assessed, namely, academic engagement, inclusive behaviour and responsible behaviour (cf. Lovat et al., 2010b). The qualitative data supported the perception of improved student behaviour, with multiple comments indicating that greater self-regulation of behaviour and improved interactions between students had led to more harmonious and productive learning environments. Evidence indicated that the ambience, relationships, self-reflection, and discourse germane to values education impacted positively on students' academic work habits, without any other explicit contaminating factor being present. Teachers reported (Lovat, et al., 2009) that classrooms became "more respectful, focused and harmonious" (p. 71), that school was "a better place to teach ... a better place to learn" (p. 124), that there was increased school cohesion (p.106) and that classrooms were more settled (p. 25).

Findings portrayed plausible reasons why this improved school ambience might well lead to enhanced academic diligence. Greater efforts towards self-regulation and improved student relationships meant that less teaching time was being diverted to behaviour management and more time could therefore be devoted to the core business of education. The teachers observed that these new found skills and behaviours, together with the more positive ambience created by it resulted in students taking more control over routine tasks, so adding to their self-confidence and sense of competence and this appeared to lead to more independent learning and increased intrinsic motivation. In turn, teachers reported that students were putting greater effort into their work and trying harder, striving for quality, striving to achieve their best and even striving for 'perfection' (Lovat, et al., 2009, pp. 29, 78, 98, 99, 100).

The inherent connections between these various facets of behaviour, the positive ambience that results and improved academic focus were summarized in the report (Lovat et al., 2009) as follows:

... there was substantial quantitative and qualitative evidence suggesting that there were observable and measurable improvements in students' academic diligence, including increased attentiveness, a greater capacity to work independently as well as more cooperatively, greater care and effort being invested in schoolwork and students assuming more responsibility for their own learning as well as classroom 'chores'. (p. 6)

Finally, the 'Values in Action' project (DEEWR, 2010) focussed on student voice in its report on follow up projects in schools that had a sound tradition of integrated values-based pedagogy. The report proffered:

A range of evidence supports the impact of values education on improved student wellbeing, most especially the voices of the students themselves. (p. 6)

CONCLUSION

We believe that the results of the studies reported on herein have added to a growing body of evidence that demonstrates that values education is consistently accompanied by greater self-awareness on the part of students and more harmonious social interactions in the playground and in the classroom. In this improved learning environment, one can find academic diligence and improvement occurring without any other obvious determining factor. Understood and practiced in this way, values education can be seen to be a pedagogical imperative for student wellbeing.

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