

Values and virtues

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In recent years, education departments and schools have placed a highly significant focus on values.

Yet, there has been far less emphasis on how individuals could actually reach these values. Values, defined as “principles or standards of behaviour”, are often espoused as a “school’s moral compass”. They are usually regarded as general goals to work towards, which can drive conduct. If values are considered the goal, then virtues are the way to get there.

Virtues are more specific and explicit than general values, in reflecting individual human characteristics. Aristotle is credited with saying, “*a life of virtue not only creates happiness for individuals, but contributes to the well-being of the community*”. What emphasis does your school place on virtues?

Most school websites list core values and then claim that these selected values underpin all that their

school community does. Some schools further claim that the values “are enacted daily by each member of the school community as they interact with each other”. But are they? Espoused ideals or standards of value are often a long way from actual individual behaviours. Too often, there is a rhetoric-reality gap.

Virtues are individual character traits which express and embody values. Virtues prescribe ethical character. For example, you might say that you personally value “financial security”, yet cheat on your income tax return to improve prosperity. The supposed value of financial security will be ethically weak and hypocritical, unless it is underpinned by the virtues of honest gain and hard work.

The Australian Government has developed a National Framework of Nine Values for Australian Schooling. These nine values – Care and compas-

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The starting point for a school is to identify the values and virtues that the whole school community can agree to aspire to

sion; Doing your best; Fair go; Freedom; Integrity; Respect; Responsibility; Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion; and Honesty and Trustworthiness – reflect the Government’s philosophical commitment to “a multicultural and environmentally sustainable society, where all are entitled to justice” (Australian Government, n.d.).

One school in the Northern Territory focusses on a different school value each term. They run a Values Program, which is “*taught each term on Wednesday of week 8 for an hour*”. Can values really be taught effectively, by simply allocating one hour’s tuition, once a year to a specific focus topic? Simply teaching the theoretical content describing a particular value, even if it includes some relevant illustrations, would likely be ineffective.

By way of example, consider the best way to teach the value of ‘respect’. Suggested behaviours to be encouraged would include; listening carefully when others speak and not speaking over the top of another person; being polite to others; avoiding negative talk, put downs or gossip; and treating others equitably, regardless of personal circumstances or characteristics. Such behaviours have to then be consistently reiterated, recapitulated, modelled and championed in all aspects of classroom and playground activities, not just given mere lip service in a one-hour class session.

I visited a local secondary college recently and was impressed that although I was a stranger and mere visitor to the school, each student I passed acknowledged me with a smile or a friendly respectful greeting of “Good morning Ma’am”. When I mentioned this to the principal later, she said, “Oh, that’s great to hear. It’s something that we emphasise to the students from Day One. We talk about it in our assemblies, we discuss it in home classes, we model it in the playground. When we talk about respect, we use this as an example – it’s simply not OK to walk past another adult or teacher without a friendly greeting. It’s become part of our culture now.”

Tim Costello, former CEO and current Chief Advocate for World Vision, claims that most companies’ advertised values are the same. He suggests that organisations should focus their consideration on their virtues, to understand what is really important (Costello, 2017).

Have you taken time to identify which specific virtues actually support your school’s particular values? Encourage your staff to find meaningful connections between their own individual virtues and your school’s overarching values. Also remind them of the importance of leading by example.

Educators will understand the powerful impact of modelling a concept. The most effective way to teach about values and virtues is to lead by example. Starting from the school leadership, through all staff and then to students, model the behaviours and virtues which underpin the values which you esteem.



For example, your school might say it values integrity and use words such as honesty, truthfulness and incorruptibility to describe this value. Take a moment to conduct a personal values audit. Does your own behaviour model your value of integrity? Do you follow through and keep your promises, doing what you say you will do? Do you own up to mistakes and work hard to prevent them from occurring again? Do you use funds, materials and equipment for their intended school use, not personal use?

Aristotle recognised the worth of virtues for whole communities. The starting point for a school is to identify the values and virtues that the whole school community (staff, students and parents) can agree to aspire to. Then ensure that these values and virtues are clearly communicated. They should be regularly restated in a variety of ways and in differing contexts. Virtues are “caught not taught”, so look for ways to model behaviour which students will want to emulate. Tell stories, and give tangible examples which communicate your values and promote commitment to the virtues you esteem. Catch students doing the right thing, and offer public praise and encouragement when you notice virtuous behaviour.

References

Australian Government, Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, National Framework: Nine Values for Australian Schooling, http://www.curriculum.edu.au/values/val_national_framework_nine_values.14515.html.
Costello, T 2017 Christian Heritage College, Leadership Lectures, August, Brisbane.

Courage is not simply one of the virtues, but the form of every virtue at the testing point.

C. S. Lewis

Humility is the solid foundation of all virtues.

Confucius