

What is education for? Clive Belgeonne, Development Education Project, Manchester

"Education influences and reflects the values of society, and the kind of society we want to be."

This is I feel an inspiring quote to begin a discussion about what education is for, in that it recognises the role of education in shaping the kind of society we are, but also *'the kind of society we want to be.'* In my experience of working with hundreds of teachers and trainee teachers, most are unaware of where this quote comes from, and yet it is the first sentence of the 'Values, Aims and Purposes' of the National Curriculum. The original version of the National Curriculum (which Kenneth Baker has admitted was more or less made up on the back of an envelope) had little about what education was for, but the revised version included three and a half pages of values, aims and purposes, which emerged from contributions from a range of individuals and organisations.

This is probably the most thought-provoking part of the National Curriculum, yet it seems most teachers and trainee teachers do not read it, as they have become battered with the notion of content 'delivery' and consider too little why on earth we are engaging in the process in the first place and where it might be leading us. Is there not some connection between the fact that the most 'educated' societies are also those that are causing the greatest destruction to the planet in terms of our heavy footprints?

I recently co-ordinated a project on 'Learning for Sustainable Cities' working with educators in the UK, India, Brazil, Canada, Italy and the Gambia, looking at how young people could engage in making their schools and neighbourhoods more sustainable. A key issue for all partners in early discussions was values education (it is an explicit part of the curriculum in India). I have developed a workshop on 'Learning Values', which I have run with a wide range of people involved in education. When reflecting on the quote above, most are concerned about the values that predominantly influence our society and which our society currently reflects. They also have strong opinions about the values needed to develop "the kind of society we want to be" (Generally teachers feel our current values are predominantly negative: materialistic, individualistic, celebrity-obsessed etc. The kind of - more positive -values they would like to see are: ecologically conscious, caring, sharing etc.)

The (English) National Curriculum also describes the sort of values that education should be trying to develop through the curriculum (including the ability to work "for the common good"). Most teachers agree that these are important values, and if you ask them to choose one they feel is important to them as an educator, they will often choose "The ability to challenge prejudice and stereotypes". If you ask them to think how they might go about assessing whether in their time at school pupils have learned or examined such values, they are unsure. Asked what their responsibility is for helping to shift society from current to more desired values, teachers are usually uncertain of their role. Many teachers are worried about exposing or imposing their values.

There is also the issue of whether we have shared values. The National Curriculum incorporates (in the Appendix) a set of values that are supposed to be agreed by our society, after much consultation with different faith and secular groups. Some have criticised it for being "motherhood and apple pie", yet it shows a common starting point (as does the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights).

There is no agreement on how such values should be assessed. Though I am not suggesting that everything in education should be pinned down and attached to targets, many feel that too many of current assessment procedures are quantitative and not qualitative. John Keast
Of QCA has said:

"We must learn to measure what we value, not just what we can measure."

Farrer (2000) describes the project set up by Headteacher Neil Hawke in one primary school in Oxfordshire, which has been 'teaching' values for about 10 years. The school community agreed what their core values are, and they are now listed and 'taught'. There is a 'Value of the week'. Newsletters are sent home which inform parents how they can engage in discussion about the values; school assemblies and lessons focus on the value of the week as much as possible. Evaluation has shown that it is the parents and teachers who have learnt the most, as they have to re-evaluate so many of their own values by discussing them with those who take a child's view (see also Hawke 2003).

Perhaps all schools should be encouraged to debate what they feel are their core values with their school community, as the above school did. One primary school I know did this as part of a curriculum review; the staff

concluded that values, citizenship and PSHE were the most important parts of the curriculum, and that literacy, numeracy and subject knowledge should contribute to this end.

Many schools have worthy Mission Statements, but do they actually try and assess whether the values, attitudes and behaviours of staff and pupils match up to them? Should this not be a part of a school's self-evaluation process?

There has been much in the news recently about the poor teaching of citizenship. I have asked hundreds of teachers and trainee teachers if they consider themselves teachers of citizenship. Generally it is only the few studying it, or given an allowance for it, that say they are. Yet there is considerable evidence that teachers have more influence by who they are than what they teach - it is certainly true of my best teachers. The teacher as role model is a powerful way of imparting values. Many teachers do not seem to want to recognise that they are teaching citizenship from the moment they enter the school gates (and beyond in the wider community).

The UNESCO report on Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2002) recognises this important link between values, attitudes and personal behaviour, as well as the need to engage in community based learning:

"Indeed, among the most successful programmes are those that avoid the belief that awareness leads to understanding, understanding leads to concern, and concern motivates the development of skills and action. Instead, the key ingredient of success is to start from the questions, issues and problems that concern young people themselves, and to help them develop 'action competence' through community-based learning. Action competence brings the capacity to envision alternatives, clarify the values and interests that underlie different visions, and make choices between visions. This includes developing the skills to plan, take action and evaluate needed in active and informed citizens. Action competence brings knowledge, not just of the problem and its symptoms but also about its root causes - how it impacts on people's lives, ways of addressing it, and how different interests are served by different sorts of solutions."

Recognising our role as global citizens and how we put values into action for the benefit of people and planet seem to me vital and urgent issues for education in the 21st century.

References:

'Learning Values' Activity <http://www.dep.org.uk/scities/WholeSchool/values.php>

Frances Farrer, [A Quiet Revolution: Encouraging Positive Values in Our Children](#), Rider 2000

Neil Hawkes, [How to Inspire and Develop Positive Values in your Classroom](#), LDA 2003

UNESCO, [From Rio to Johannesburg: Lessons learnt from a decade of commitment](#), 2002
http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=5202&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html