



## Teaching Values: Naïve or Cynical?

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In August 2005 the Ministry of Education announced its intention that values are to be included in the school curriculum. A summary of these values was printed in several newspapers:

- *Diversity* – Unique cultures and heritages of Aotearoa New Zealand;
- *Community* – Quality relationships, generosity of spirit and participating for the common good;
- *Respect and Care* – Of and for oneself, others, beliefs and human rights;
- *Equity* – Fairness, social justice and equal opportunities for all;
- *Integrity* – Honesty, responsibility, accountability and being ethical;
- *Environmental Sustainability* – Respect and care for the earth and its inter-related eco-systems;
- *Inquiry and Curiosity* – Creativity, critical and reflective thinking;
- *Excellence* – Achievement, perseverance and resilience.

I subscribe to most of these values, and am particularly pleased to see concern for the common good and for the environment included. However, it concerns me that teachers in schools should be called on to teach these values, for several reasons.

One of these is that teaching values, like battling child obesity, is not something teachers can or should be called on to do in isolation. A second reason is that if there is a problem with values in our society it is a social problem, not an educational one. This is another example of society abdicating its responsibilities by passing them off to schools. A proposal that formalises the abdication of responsibility is of serious concern. A third issue is that values statements such as those above are so general that everybody can agree to them. A statement such as 'society should be fair' is uncontroversial. Where the problems arise is in agreeing what is 'fair'. For example, some people believe that taxing wealth is fair, while others believe that a flat tax rate is fair. Another issue is whether teachers have the skills to undertake such work, which is fraught with complexities both ethical and practical. Most importantly though, these proposed values are not modelled in wider society and as a result, attempting to teach them in schools will simply not succeed.

While I am cautious about the idea of schools teaching values, this is in many ways a naïve thing to say because all schooling involves values and

cannot be value free. Many of these values are invisible; teachers themselves are not even aware of transmitting them. My main reason for caution though is that teaching these values sets teachers a task that they cannot achieve and, as a result, exposes them to criticism from every side, be it for trying, for failing or for neglecting all the other things they should be doing like teaching children to read, write and be polite. My objection is not an unthinking one however, and I intend to elaborate on the statements above and suggest some alternatives that might work should our society be serious about addressing what seems to be a moral malaise.

It is tempting to say 'moral malaise in the young', but I don't believe that to be true. I think the real malaise is with adults. But is there a moral malaise? The media likes to report on so-called boy racers, binge drinking by young people, crime, and any other headline-making mayhem, but is this really any worse than it has always been? Several minor political parties campaigned in the last election on the basis of family values, but I wonder if this represents a grass roots concern about values or simply a vague rallying cry for something else. It is also unclear which particular family it is whose values we should be adopting. There are certainly some families whose values are such that I would not want to be anywhere near them.

I am going to take the position that we do have something of a values crisis in this country and that something needs to be done about it. From that assumption I intend to review the points I set out above and explore their logic.

The easiest point to argue is that asking schools to teach values in isolation from the rest of society simply will not work. The suggestion that it will, makes the assumption that children actually do the things teachers tell them to do. It is well known in teaching and learning that learners respond to classroom teaching with reference to the framework of knowledge and previous experiences they bring with them. If what they are told makes no sense in the world they live in, they say the right thing while at school and ignore it in their outside lives. It is for this reason that the worthy results of schools' values programmes need to be treated with caution. Most children know how to play 'the school' game, and a new game is always fun to start with.

What seems to be forgotten is that children at school are the recipients of at least two message systems. The first is the set of explicit messages that teachers teach. The second is the set of implicit or hidden messages that the teachers and school practices model, often unintentionally. The cars that teachers drive, the clothes they wear, and the way they speak, all pass on implicit messages to children. There are other messages transmitted in schools too, such as who doesn't wash often, who is poor, who is always in trouble, and how you have to behave to get on within the school system. A number of important educational theorists have argued that the implicit message system has a much greater effect on children than the explicit teaching.

Teachers are not being deceitful in this regard. These messages are deeply embedded in our culture. Transmitting them is what schools do. Teachers are the products of their culture, and this can create problems where teachers have children from cultures that they know little about. In general though, most teachers in most schools do their best to accommodate everyone as well as they can. Most schools try to establish cooperative values, tolerance, and respect. The reality is that you cannot run a school without these values. The problem is that these values are not modelled in wider

society, or even in the curriculum for that matter, and that is where the issue of teaching values gets tricky.

Imagine a 'real world' classroom where children were compelled to compete with each other for scarce resources, say, only enough books for half the class and sharing is not allowed. The teacher's role reduced to a regulatory minimum. This sounds ridiculous, but it is basically the ideology of the market that has been introduced to New Zealand since 1984 and strengthened throughout our society and economy up until the mid 1990s. The New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993) emphasises the importance of preparing students for the world of work in a competitive market economy. These values are now deeply buried in our language and culture, even within schools. Common expressions in advertising that emphasise choice, 'solutions', and the market place, all allude to the assumptions buried in market driven economics. This market economy places the self-serving competitive individual before all else and has little place for honesty, the common good, social justice or environmental sustainability.

Thus, it is my argument that the values proposed by the Ministry of Education are actually in tension with the core values of New Zealand society. I am not sure whether the Ministry's action is one of supreme ignorance or of extreme cynicism. To promote competition within the curriculum, and propose a set of caring values that are then supposed to underpin teaching is somewhat contradictory. I will return to this contradiction shortly and call it a values psychosis. In fact, the curriculum already contains this set of mixed messages. As well as an emphasis on competition and the market, the Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1993: 28) contains a set of 'commonly held' values that are intended to inform school activity. In contrast, the social studies curriculum document calls for an examination of the values that inform social decision-making. In my experience, and this is largely limited to environmental education, teachers who do start to examine social values find ripples of disquiet bouncing around the community and some teachers have received complaints in response to this kind of work. What this means is that teachers do not have licence to undertake socially challenging programmes. In fact, the market mechanism that allows parents to move their children to another school if they do not like the 'service that they are receiving' acts as a brake on schools and this tends to force schools towards mediocrity. It is too much of a risk to innovate. It is ironic that the market is supposed to encourage innovation but actually stifles it.

So where does that leave mainstream schools in relation to values? What schools can do is critically examine social behaviour and the values positions that lie behind different views and actions. They can explore various values positions and the behaviours that should logically follow from them. Confident teachers can also share their own values and explain how these shape their behaviour. When it comes to teaching values, though, the ground gets muddy. I cannot think of a single values statement that is not contradicted in the daily behaviour of western democracies. Murder is a crime but there are advocates for capital punishment. Gambling is regarded as a vice but is a 'product' that is advertised daily. Credit and debt are aggressively marketed in a similar fashion. Child abuse is a crime but it is often spawned by poverty that is an accepted cost of our current economic arrangements. 'Drugs' are a demon, but alcohol, even in excess, is socially acceptable. As further evidence of the

values that drive many people, including supposed role models, the media reveal an almost unending train of politicians, judges, athletes and former All Blacks, who have crossed the line in their pursuit of the excessive wealth that seems to be the only way to gauge success. In this context, which values will schools actually teach? The reality is that in trying to teach 'apple pie' values that are not modelled in wider society, teachers will just end up looking stupid.

How are teachers expected to compete with the advertising industry in teaching values that few people in society subscribe to anyway? I have argued elsewhere (Chapman, 2004) that we have a values psychosis. We assert 'human values' but largely act on a set of 'economic values'. These over-ride our human values as we move away from our family group and people we know. So, for example, we have learned to accept 'collateral damage', the slaughter of innocent civilians, as an unfortunate cost of maintaining freedom and democracy.

What the Ministry is doing here is asking schools to teach human values while society as a whole largely operates on economic values which act in complete contradiction to those human values. As an illustration of what I am saying, I am going to briefly explore the idea of environmental sustainability. I use sustainability partly because it is an area of my own special interest, but also because sustainability subsumes a number of other values such as Community, Respect, Equity, Diversity and Integrity.

In this regard, it is fascinating that the Ministry's *Guidelines for Environmental Education in New Zealand Schools* (Ministry of Education, 1999), which are not compulsory, do not contain a definition of sustainability. In contrast, the State of New South Wales has a compulsory policy for schools that uses the well-recognised definition of sustainable development as 'that which meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. This definition hangs on two key words, 'needs' and 'compromise'. Needs is pretty tough, imagine living at a level where only our most basic needs were met? But let's be real here. There are millions of people, maybe a billion, who live below this level. Let's soften up a bit on needs and say a 'reasonable level of wants', but what is reasonable? This depends on what we mean by 'compromise'. If we said the ability of future generations to meet their needs and 'reasonable wants' was compromised if they could not enjoy the reasonable level of wants that we do, that would seem fair.

The Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment released a report in 2004 on sustainability entitled *See Change*. In it, he pointed out that the rich fifth of the world's population commands 86% of the wealth, that is, of the earth's resources. If everyone were to live at the current level of the rich fifth, the resource use would rise to 416% of present levels. If we were all to live as the poor fifth do, resource use would drop to 6.5% of present. Ecologically sustainable perhaps, but it is certainly not socially sustainable. If we all lived as the middle three-fifths do, resource use would be around 20% of present. The message here, related to values, is that the world does not have a population problem so much as a problem of over-consumption by the wealthy. But currently, everyone wants more and we are depleting water supplies, fish, mineral, hydrocarbon, timber and soil stocks. This is not sustainable. So how are we supposed to teach the value of sustainability when it is flagrantly flouted

every day in every way? The over-riding message in our society is BUY MORE. It is this never-ending consumption that economic growth depends on.

So, what are reasonable wants? Is a radio a reasonable want? What about a TV set? How about a 900mm flat-screen plasma TV as the centre-piece of your digital surround sound home theatre? Is this a reasonable want that everybody can justly subscribe to? Maybe, if such an item were to last for several generations. What about cars? How big is reasonable? Is it reasonable to drive a 2 tonne 4X4 in a world where children starve? Young people ask these questions. In 1963 a Mini had an 850cc engine. Now, the V8 super-cars are an 'icon event' reminding us that we are 'sub-human' if we don't have 350 horsepower latent under our right foot. Children can see the real values on television every day or in the staff car park. In the last 40 years of the development of motor vehicle technology, fuel consumption has barely changed. The emphasis is on more, bigger and faster, not on using less.

I could undertake a similar analysis of most of the other stated values. Where in society do we model generosity of spirit and commitment to the common good? How can we talk about respect and human rights in a world where children starve to death, or equity and social justice in a world where inequity is accelerating. We talk about valuing the unique heritages of Aotearoa New Zealand when Māori have been struggling for nearly 150 years to regain an economic base removed by colonialism. What about integrity and honesty?

When I began writing this I intended to say that attempting to teach values that are not modelled in wider society is hypocritical and that it sets teachers up to 'take the rap' for social problems. And, that it is naïve of anyone, and the Ministry of Education in particular, to think this will change anything. In developing this argument, I have become harder in my view. I think that in proposing to teach such values as these, which are so clearly breached in everyday behaviour, the institution of schooling is being asked to actively lie to young people. I consider that the only ethical path educators can take is to critically examine values, but I am concerned that when teachers do raise critical questions there is a risk of social backlash. My conclusion is that this set of issues is beyond individual teachers and is one for teacher professional organizations. I think teachers collectively should refuse to 'teach' values. I also think it is time we reconsidered the role of schools in developing thoughtful and critical citizens, an aspect of education that seems to have drifted beyond the educational horizon.

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