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Articulating a Language of Character

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Background

The 2007 Learning for Life project bid contained some important observations analysis that is relevant to the current situation. James Arthur pointed out that 'the social efficiency and scientific management paradigm is still a powerful influence on the practice of education in schools, and is deeply embedded in teachers' enduring and hidden beliefs and values.' However, education is in fact much more than the acquisition of employment skills; it is 'a total lifelong process involving families, schools and employers in a political and social framework concerned with personal well-being, moral sensitivity and the flourishing of human society.' This entails the discovery or recovery of '*a language in which we can publicly discuss and personally appreciate human character.*'

In this document, character is defined as an interlocked set of personal values and virtues that normally guide conduct. 'Character is about who we are and who we become and includes the virtues of responsibility, honesty, self-reliance, reliability, generosity, self-discipline, and a sense of identity and purpose.....our argument is that active character development is not simply about the acquisition of academic and social skills: *it is ultimately about the kind of person we become and want to become. (my italics)* It is about human beings having a purpose that is beyond being an instrument or tool in social processes. This is not achieved within a vacuum; in order to become a person, an individual needs to grow up in a culture, and the richer the culture the more of a person he or she has a chance of becoming. This culture must include the spiritual and religious dimensions of life.'

Character is therefore about being rather than doing or having. As Emerson put it: 'as we are, so we do', and Plutarch reminds us that 'character is habit long continued.' The following has been attributed to Gandhi:

'Watch your thoughts: they become words.
Watch your words: they become actions.
Watch your actions: they become habits.
Watch your habits: they become character.
Watch your character: it becomes your destiny.'

This makes the progression from thoughts through words, actions and habits to character very clear. The Learning for Life project insisted that good character is essential to human wellbeing, from which it follows that education of persons of good character is equally important. Character develops from practising virtues such as 'courage, loyalty, generosity,

affectionate concern, and hard work' so that they become habitual. These qualities, when practised in a school, effectively define and create the school's ethos and culture at all levels – leadership, management, curriculum and pedagogy.

These terms will be familiar to teachers but the important question is whether they are current in the language of the school and properly understood by pupils. Some schools will have defined their own values and the school will make sure that they are prominently displayed and may even have a policy of implementing these more actively.

Much current discourse is expressed in the language of skill development. As a culture we demonstrate a certain reluctance to use the language of virtues, which may be associated in the secular mind with our Christian heritage. However it is important to note that the language of virtue goes back at least to Aristotle, and therefore forms part of our common inheritance from Greek culture.

It is not enough for values and personal qualities to remain implicit within a school context. Schools play an important role in the development of character and values in young people and should take responsibility for working these out and embedding them in the school ethos. Pupils should be able to define these values and seek to embody them in their everyday interactions. An example from West Kidlington School is discussed below. In the case of Wellington College, the values chosen by the community were courage, integrity, kindness, responsibility and respect. The important point is for each school to carry out such a consultation exercise and keep it under regular review.

A Good Childhood, the 2009 report for the Children's Society by Richard Layard and Judy Dunn is subtitled 'searching for values in a competitive age'. The subtitle might also contain the word individualistic, as the diagnosis includes the prevalence of an excessive individualism in UK society. The chapter on values and beliefs begins by stating that they define what we live by, how we behave, and what our purpose is in terms of both morality and aspirations: 'they represent our vision of the person we would like to be.' There follows a statement of generalities about consensus values about reciprocity, fairness, not harming others and being kind and helpful.

In a recent book, *Rationality + Consciousness = Free Will*, Judge David Hodgson devotes a chapter to value judgements, elaborating the notion of natural imperatives appealing to an objective reality beyond human evolution and culture, and arguing that the overriding such imperatives are:

- a) Do the right thing and don't do the wrong thing
- b) Rationally determine what is the right thing and what is the wrong thing
- c) Act out of care for all persons

He moves on to generally applicable *prima facie* natural imperatives as:

- a) Do no harm
- b) Act justly
- c) Act honestly
- d) Fulfil commitments
- e) Act in a life affirming way

He points out that the first four of these imperatives arise from the basic imperative to act out of care for all persons, but that they may on occasion conflict. He adds that acting kindly, loyally, cooperatively and tolerably are included by implication in the imperatives stated.

Finally, Hodgson suggests two further occasional natural imperatives:

- a) Do good
- b) Improve yourself (this will enhance your ability to do the right thing, rationally determine what is the right thing and do good)

The reason for spelling out these natural imperatives is that they provide a more systematic restatement of the generalities contained in *A Good Childhood* and an appeal to universal human values. Articulations of these values have traditionally been drawn from religious belief, but they can also be stated in secular terms. The development of values only arises through reflection and practical interaction with others, including parents, relatives, teachers and peers. This is especially important at a time when fewer young people are influenced by the churches and there is less formal religious observance in schools.

In practical terms pupils and teachers could discuss:

- How they decide what the right thing to do is
- What it means to act justly and honestly
- Why it is important to fulfil commitments
- How they act with care and compassion towards others
- What they understand by acting in a life affirming way
- Why it is important to do good
- What makes a good person
- How they might improve themselves

This would provide a comprehensive agenda over a few weeks that could also be written up by pupils individually. This will also help them clarify their use of the language of character as discussed below.

The Good Childhood report also mentions the programme of values-based schools, and specifically West Kidlington Primary School, where Dr Neil Hawkes was head. Hawkes identified sixteen values, each of which acted as a word of the month and the basis for assemblies and other lessons as well discussions arising over behaviour. Note that these are nearly all expressed as

nouns rather than adjectives, as concepts rather than dynamic expressions of behaviour that students can use about themselves.

The central question that students had to consider was: 'What am I like when I am the person I would like to be?' This is a good question that could act as a point of departure in any school.

The values were:

- Respect
- Caring
- Responsibility
- Cooperation
- Trust
- Tolerance
- Understanding
- Patience
- Courage
- Honesty
- Humility
- Gratitude
- Hope
- Love
- Peace
- Generosity

The report recommended a significant change of heart in our society where adults stand up for 'the values without which a society cannot flourish.' This means teachers and parents acting more consciously as role models and being able to explain the importance and relevance of the values listed above.

This West Kidlington programme can be seen as a response to the consistent finding, also mentioned in the report, that young people lack a language to talk about character and values. However, as the experience of our Learning for Life programme discussed below has shown, young people can understand and use a common language of character and values if presented with the opportunity.

The Language of National Curricula Aims

The aims of the national curricula have recently been recast in terms of desirable capacities and skills. In Scotland, the Curriculum for Excellence is in fact based on the virtues of the Scottish Mace - wisdom, integrity, justice, compassion - translated into the 'four capacities' of confident individuals, responsible citizens, effective contributors and successful learners. The

English national curriculum of 2008 restates confident individuals and successful learners while amalgamating the other two capacities under active and responsible citizens. The vocabulary is largely secular, using phrases such as making a positive contribution to the wellbeing of present and future generations, achieving potential, promoting high aspirations and ambition and a commitment to 'considered judgement and ethical action.' The social virtues of tolerance and respect are specifically mentioned, and are clearly desirable in a multicultural society.

Looking at the Learning for Life definition above, only responsibility is actually specified, while empathy is implied. There is no mention of honesty, self-reliance, self-discipline, generosity and a sense of identity and purpose implied in the obligation to provide for pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development. Nor is the development of virtue or goodness articulated anywhere. At most, the virtues are civic and there is a good deal of emphasis on skills required for productive employment. Courage, which arguably underpins all the virtues, is also absent from any list; without moral courage, few noble aspirations are attained. This kind of focus on functional skills and capacities can tend to limit students' vocabulary and correspondingly their self-awareness and 'potential for sympathetic concern.' This reinforces the case made above for schools to undertake their own values review, even if they use the West Kidlington or Australian example given below as a point of departure.

One example of a successful international values initiative - Nine Values for Australian Schooling - was launched in 2005 during Dr Brendan Nelson's tenure as Federal Minister of Education in Australia. They are described as follows:

Nine Values for Australian Schooling

1. Care and Compassion

Care for self and others

2. Doing Your Best

Seek to accomplish something worthy and admirable, try hard, pursue excellence

3. Fair Go

Pursue and protect the common good where all people are treated fairly for a just society

4. Freedom

Enjoy all the rights and privileges of Australian citizenship free from unnecessary interference or control, and stand up for the rights of others

5. Honesty and Trustworthiness

Be honest, sincere and seek the truth

6. Integrity

Act in accordance with principles of moral and ethical conduct, ensure consistency between words and deeds

7. Respect

Treat others with consideration and regard, respect another person's point of view

8. Responsibility

Be accountable for one's own actions, resolve differences in constructive, non-violent and peaceful ways, contribute to society and to civic life, take care of the environment

9. Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

Be aware of others and their cultures, accept diversity within a democratic society, being included and including others

This is useful in spelling out the implications of the words used, and resulted not only in improved behaviour but also in higher academic standards. The subsequent government scrapped the programme but tried to hold in place the measures directly related to higher standards. Judging from the evidence presented in Dr Anthony Seldon's recent Priestley Lecture in the University of Birmingham, character and values education is closely correlated with improvement in academic standards; this is not surprising given that the development of qualities such as focus and self-discipline would naturally lead to better results. The Australian government may live to regret this move.

A practical example

My own experience of a language of character is based on the development of a values poster award from Sir John Templeton's Laws of Life Essay Contest, launched in 1987. In the mid-1990s, Sir John published his book *Worldwide Laws of Life*, and a new edition of the book was published as *Wisdom from World Religions*. The format is 200 sections to be studied over 40 weeks with 5 sections per week. Each section begins with a quotation or maxim followed by some commentary interspersed with stories and quotations. At the end of each week there are questions for reflection. I originally conceived the idea of an online course based on Sir John's book. In order to implement this, I indexed his book and came up with forty values and qualities divided into four sections:

- **Personal development**
 - Positive outlook
 - Gratitude
 - Love

- Enthusiasm
- Happiness/joy
- Perseverance
- Generosity
- Honesty/integrity
- Humility/modesty
- Wisdom
- **Principles for successful living**
 - Creative thinking
 - Learning
 - Focus
 - Hard work
 - Ideals/vision
 - Purpose/goals
 - Courage
 - Friendship
 - Confidence
 - Self-discipline
- **Resilience (turning things around)**
 - Problems > Solutions
 - Potential > Actual
 - Loss > Gain
 - Pessimism > Optimism
 - Worry > Moving on
 - Mistakes > Learning
 - Anger > Calm
 - Put it off > Do it now
 - Fear > Fearlessness
 - Stress > Stillness
- **Personal relationships**
 - Co-operation
 - Responsibility
 - Empathy
 - Trust
 - Kindness
 - Forgiveness
 - Respect
 - Loyalty
 - Listening
 - Openness

With the help of DC Thomson, I designed a learning process in the form of a large and colourful A2 poster with different sections. In the first part, students had to identify the three qualities from each main section above that they thought most important and write a short commentary on their top choice. Then there were boxes to list their favourite quotations and describe their favourite story. The next task was to select an inspirational figure who embodied some of the qualities chosen by the student. Finally, there was a large section for personal reflection—this was effectively the essay— and a small section introduced later on, personal plan. The whole piece of work was transcribed onto this large poster, and could therefore be displayed. Schools liked the poster format, and the idea soon caught on with 20 schools and 2,700 participants in the first year. This has since grown to more than 25,000 a year.

At the same time, each theme or quality has its own page on our website, so that students could click on the quality and go through to the page. Each page has a maxim or quotation at the top and bottom, then some text from Sir John as well as some of the stories and quotations he selected. We also introduced a number of Aesop's Fables, and The Hare and the Tortoise as well as The Bear and the Travellers proved very popular. A feature of the site was that many stories and quotations were in boxes that the students had to click in order to open, thus encouraging active participation. In addition, quotations were accompanied by biographies so that students could learn something about the life of the person whose words they had just read – for instance Ralph Waldo Emerson, Seneca, William James, Eleanor Roosevelt and many others. In some cases this could have a powerful effect: on the Confidence page we had a famous quote from Helen Keller – ‘life is either a daring adventure or nothing.’ Students were intrigued to find out who had said this and therefore clicked on her biography and were astonished to read her story. This helped them reflect on their own situation in relation to Helen and to count their blessings. Indeed, gratitude is a quality especially emphasised by Sir John.

Returning to the choice of qualities, student feedback indicated that they found it quite difficult to decide which three were the most important in each box, as the process of thinking this through led them to the conclusion that all the qualities listed were important. This is an important insight in itself. It also begins to help them realise that what really matters is who they are who they become as people. This process enhances their self-awareness and self-knowledge: students themselves tell us that they would never have discovered some new things about themselves if they had not done the exercise. The method used here is to provide a positive framework of choice that helps make tacit self-knowledge explicit by eliciting responses from the students rather than telling them what to choose – and every answer is valid in its own terms.

For the last two years, we have been focusing on the Inspire>Aspire Programme - exploring Olympic and Paralympic Values. For this, we designed a new poster format using the same principles, but this time applied specifically to the three Olympic values of excellence, respect and friendship and the four Paralympic values of courage, determination, equality and inspiration. So the main object of the exercise became, for the student, how to apply these Olympic and Paralympic values to their lives.

This time, on the grounds that they might be easier to understand, we structured adjectives rather than nouns under the values as follows:

Excellence

- Focused
- Enterprising
- Ambitious
- Purposeful
- Creative
- Organised
- Wise

Respect

- Patient
- Tolerant
- Open-minded
- Reliable
- Considerate
- Good at listening

Friendship

- Cheerful
- Trustworthy
- Forgiving
- Generous
- Caring/kind
- Loyal
- Appreciative

Courage

- Honest
- Confident
- Resilient
- Positive
- Resourceful

- Fearless
- Optimistic

Determination

- Persistent
- Decisive
- Self-disciplined
- Enthusiastic
- Hard-working
- Committed
- Calm

Equality

- Selfless
- Flexible
- Cooperative
- Approachable
- Modest
- Fair

This time we made a slight modification. Rather than asking students simply to rate the importance of a quality, we ask them to assess what they were best at and what they needed to work on in two separate boxes. We believe that this has enhanced the effectiveness of this part of the intervention by directly relating these qualities to the students themselves rather than making a more abstract judgement.

Instead of the essay, we asked students to address five questions:

- 1) What kind of person you want to be?
- 2) What you want to be good at?
- 3) What you want to achieve in your life?
- 4) What do you want to contribute to others?
- 5) How are you going to achieve your goals?

This provides a much more focused and structured reflection where students can draw on their answers to the personal qualities and inspirational figure sections to work out in more detail what kind of person they want to be. Researching an inspirational figure help students identify the qualities developed by remarkable individuals and the ways in which these qualities contributed to their success. The overall process can be described as inspiration to aspiration, hence the title of project Inspire>Aspire.

The most recent embodiment of this poster methodology focuses on the development of a sense of global citizenship in the context of the Commonwealth Games to be held in Glasgow in 2014. Here the qualities are

structured differently again, using a framework combining the aspirational outcomes from the Commonwealth Games with the four capacities of the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence.

Active - Confident Individuals

- Principled (imply moral courage)
- Persistent
- Positive
- Optimistic
- Reliable
- Cheerful/joyful
- Generous

Connected - Responsible Citizens

- Trustworthy/honest
- Caring
- Responsible
- Loyal
- Appreciative
- Committed
- Understanding

Sustainable - Effective Contributors

- Patient
- Modest
- Cooperative
- Enterprising
- Thrifty
- Visionary
- Resilient

Flourishing - Successful Learners

- Ambitious
- Hard-working
- Creative
- Open-minded
- Curious
- Self-disciplined
- Purposeful

My experience shows the value of providing a positive framework for reflection that can be adapted according to the context. I have developed similar matrices for purpose, inspiring teachers and hospitality. Naturally, the choice of virtues and qualities to highlight is crucial, and I do think it helpful to subdivide these in similar ways to what I have done.

One can summarise the poster process as follows:

- 1) Critical self-reflection on one's own virtues and personal qualities leading to enhanced self-awareness and empathy – each person has a list of their strong points and what they need to work on
- 2) Relating these virtues and qualities to an inspirational figure of real substance and how they helped this person to outstanding achievement – this translates theoretical concepts into practical living
- 3) Sourcing and commenting on inspirational quotations as maxims for life and living
- 4) Choosing an inspirational story that has an important message for life
- 5) Translating this inspiration into aspiration by focusing on key questions relating to what kind of person you want to become and what you want to achieve and contribute to others
- 6) Solicit feedback on what the young person has learned, which helps them reflect on the value of the whole process

The existence of different levels of achievement (e.g. bronze, silver, gold) and corresponding assessment criteria enables older students to progress to a more complete understanding and explicit articulation of virtues and qualities.

Other Practical Possibilities and Recommendations

A stimulating exercise is suggested by former US Congressman and entrepreneur Ed Foreman. You ask students to think of a person they admire and call out adjectives that characterise these people. The teacher writes these all up on the board, then asks the students to say whether these are skills or personal attributes. It turns out that 90% of the responses are personal attributes and qualities, which can prove an eye-opening realisation. I tried this myself at Stowe School with interesting results.

Schools may want to follow the example of Wellington College by undertaking an exercise to discover the moral and perhaps intellectual virtues most valued by the school community, involving parents in the process. Sometimes the school motto can provide a useful starting point. This exercise could be repeated every three years to keep the process alive and ensure that each generation of students had an opportunity to contribute.

Another and more detailed possibility would be to use the Jubilee Centre fourfold framework, choosing the top 6 to create your own matrix.

The Moral Virtues

The Intellectual Virtues, Values and Skills

The Civic Virtues, Values and Skills

The Performance Values and Skills

These could then form the virtues and personal qualities section of a values poster exercise so that each student could work out their own top priorities. Teachers and parents could be invited to take part and a selection of posters exhibited at a discussion evening.

Schools will also wish to consider how to promote their chosen values and virtues, linking them to the arts, sports, cultural and extra-curricular activities related to the choice of inspirational figure. This also provides a context in which to distinguish celebrities from inspirational figures of real substance. Distinguished alumni from the school can provide an important role here as they started from the same place where pupils are now.

Appointments, awards and prizes announced in the press could also be a real life point of departure – such as Nobel and Templeton Prize laureates. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Pope Francis are good recent examples. Another idea would be to consider the careers and qualities of those in the Order of Merit. Is their undoubted professional distinction mirrored in an equally distinguished character? What are their core values? Alternatively, different kinds of people can be chosen who exhibit a particular class of virtues, whether moral, intellectual or civic.

Conclusion

Given the finding that young people lack a common language of virtues and values and the fact that our culture encourages young people to turn outwards and neglect their inner lives, it is culturally vital to redress these imbalances. Character education has a significant role to play and engaging with the language of virtues and values is an excellent starting point.

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