Connecting Character and Conduct – John Heenan

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Ministry of Education figures reveal that between 2000 and 2003 suspensions and stand downs in primary schools alone increased by 31%. The suspensions and stand downs related to alcohol consumption increased 25%, physical assaults on staff 40%, assaults on other students 33%, sexual misconduct 21% and sexual harassment 83%. (1)

These are not teenagers or even intermediate school students but eight, nine and ten year olds.

Of the 2,560 removals from primary schools in 2003, 658 were for continual disobedience, 729 for physical assaults on students, 147 for assaults on staff, 91 for verbal assaults on students and 310 for verbal assaults on staff.

The 2006 Budget includes $9.5 million over four years to improve behaviour in schools. (2)

At the end of February the New Zealand Herald reported a surge in serious violent offences by teenagers

Principal Youth Court Andrew Becroft commented:

"Everyone in the youth justice section is very concerned about violence and is watching it very carefully. Why are our boys – and they are mostly boys – becoming more seriously violent? We are seeing girls become more violent too. Eighty-five per cent of Youth Court offenders are male, but there has been a slow and noticeable increase in girls offending, especially in groups. That is a very worrying trend." (3)

The Police report that 60% of all reported offences are for dishonesty. (4)

Recently, teenagers in my home town of Alexandra trashed a sports pavilion they had hired to celebrate one of their birthdays.

When the police closed the party down some of them wandered through the town smashing letter boxes.

While we New Zealanders can be proud of many of our achievements the truth is that over recent decades we have not been replenishing the attributes of character that build social cohesion and create a just, caring and civil society.

Character, particularly the connection between character and leadership, the importance of character in education and the connection between character and conduct is one of the most important issues facing your community and mine.

The questions of the relationship between character and the free person, between character and the good and productive life, between character and the just and caring society, between character and private and public behaviour and between character and strong, wise leadership.

What is character?

The traditional understanding from the Hebrews and Greeks onward is that character is the inner form that makes anyone or anything what it is – whether a person, a wine, or a period in history. Character is distinct from such concepts as personality, image, or reputation.

Applied to a person it is the essential "stuff" that one is made of, the inner reality in which thoughts, speech, decisions and relationships are rooted.

As such, character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character.

Character lies deeper than philosophies, allegiances, and accomplishments, even deeper than virtues. Character expresses most deeply what constitutes a person as a unique individual.

Character, as rooted in the Greek word for a graphic symbol depicting a hallmark or other distinguishing sign is the indelible stamp on a person beneath all masks, poses, guises and social veneers.

Character is the core of a person – "Who we are when no one sees."

Character is constant – this consistency has been described as "the habits of the heart."

Character is more than a collection of occasional behaviours or a set of good intentions; it is rather, who we are through and through.

Character is tested in the crucible of life and often involves a personal cost.

Character is never simply inherited. Nor does it grow on its own like a weed. It has to be formed and cultivated.

Character is critical in three areas;

- Character and leadership
- Character and education
- Character and conduct

My purpose [this morning] is focus on character and education and in particular the connection between character and conduct [behaviour]. But first, a brief comment on the important issue of character and leadership.

Character and leadership

Character is central to good leadership – not just political leadership, but the leadership of mums and dads, principals and teachers, managers and administrators and everyone who influences lives around them.

Character in leaders is important for two reasons:

1. Character provides the link of trust between leaders and followers.

2. Character provides the leader's deepest source of being and strongest source of restraint.

In many instances the first prompting to do "good" and the last barrier against doing wrong are the same – character.

Character and education

Historically, education systems in every country of the world have had two primary objectives.

To help young people master the skills of literacy and numeracy and to help them become good people.

In the West those twin objectives go back through the centuries to Plato who taught that we educate people to make them good because good people behave nobly.

Plato believed that the State would ultimately reflect the character of its citizens:

"States are as people are: they grow out of human character."

Plato concluded that the renewal of the State is dependent upon the development of the individual character, especially that of the leader.

The reversal of the statistics quoted at the beginning of this paper will not come about by spending $9.5 million over four years. They will be reversed when as a nation we decide that building the character in individual students is a matter of cultural preservation and when there is an expectation of character in our leaders.

Perhaps the principal of an American High School had Plato's thoughts in mind when he wrote to his teachers about the most educated and sophisticated in mid-twentieth century Europe?

"Dear Teacher

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness.

Gas chambers built by learned engineers; children poisoned by educated physicians; infants killed by trained nurses; women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So I am suspicious of education.

My request is; help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing and arithmetic and all that schools seek to do are important only if they serve to make our children more human." [5]

Good schools and good teachers have always, and still do, consider the building of character – good people – central to their mission.

Character and conduct

Character and conduct [behaviour] are inextricably linked.

The explanation is delightfully simple.

The foundation of character is a comparatively small set of traits – objective values, virtues, or as I have defined them – cornerstone values.

The eight cornerstone values are: honesty and truthfulness, kindness, consideration and concern for others, compassion, responsibility, respect, obedience and duty [obligation].

Each, has three interrelated parts: knowledge, attitude and behaviour.

- Moral knowledge
- Moral attitude
- Moral behavior

For me to be compassionate, for example, I must first have moral knowledge – I must know what compassion is.

If no one teaches me what compassion is I will not absorb it from the air.

But knowledge, by itself, will not make me compassionate. I must also care about compassion and be emotionally committed to it. That is, I must have the capacity for appropriate guilt when I behave without compassion and be capable of moral indignation when I see others as the victims of unfairness or injustice.

I must have a moral attitude – a desire to be compassionate.

But my moral attitude added to my knowledge of compassion still does not make me compassionate.

A behavioural outcome is required before I am compassionate.

I must practise compassion in my personal relationships and carry out my obligations as a citizen to help build a caring and just society.

The purpose of a character trait is always a behavioural outcome.

These three interrelated parts of a cornerstone value - moral knowledge, moral attitude and moral behaviour can be expressed as the involvement of the head, the heart and the hand.

These objective values – cornerstone values, virtues - are inextricably linked to character.

For character too is comprised of the same three interrelated parts:

- Moral knowledge
- Moral attitude
- Moral behavior

Thomas Lickona defines character as "knowing the good, desiring the good and doing the good."

Good character involves habits of the head [thinking], habits of the heart [desiring], and habits of the hand [behaviour].

Character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character.

Character is the best modifier of behaviour.

Unless there is a change in character the best indicator of future behaviour will always be past behaviour.

If character is represented as the rim of a wheel, then cornerstone values, virtues, are the spokes.

Each is of the spokes are of equal length and spacing. They give the wheel its shape and strength.

The spokes – cornerstone values – have no hierarchical order. They work together. While the spoke at the bottom takes the weight the support of the others is essential.

The hub, which holds the spokes in position, is a special character trait duty. Duty [not to be confused with "queen and country," flags or war memorials] is obligation – the obligation to practice the objective values that are the building blocks of character.

Responsibility

Responsibility, especially as it relates to behaviour, is central to good character. It has two dimensions that have to be intentionally taught and practiced.

They are: respect for the law of consequences and the ability to make rational decisions.

Responsibility is often seen as being limited to "responsibility for one's behaviour."

Responsibility is far more than simply being "responsibility for," it also involves "responsibility to."

While imprisoned, Vaclav Havel, the internationally acclaimed playwright, dissident and president of the free Czech Republic, wrote a series of reflective letters on life to his wife, Olga. The theme of these letters is that responsibility is the key to human identity. (6)

Havel argues that it is only by responding and growing responsible that one matures and learns to stand on one's own two feet.

For Havel, **what we respond to is infinitely important**.

The Marist responds to the teaching of Karl Marx – the Muslin to the teaching of the Prophet Mohammad – the feminist to feminist writing and philosophy.

Responsibility, as the word itself suggests, is responsibility to something. It is to what and to whom the response is made that gives a person his or her identity.

Responsibility involves not only being responsible for also responsibility to.

From a teaching perspective responsibility includes the law of consequences and rational decision-making.

The law of consequences

The cast iron law of – cause and effect – [consequences] is as real as any law of physics.

Simply stated it is that – Nothing happens by accident - something causes it to happen – What happens at the beginning determines what happens at the end.

Rational decision-making

Rational decision making follows a simple three-step process:

1. Consider all the possible alternatives
2. Examine all the possible consequences of the alternatives
3. Accept responsibility for the consequences of the decision.

It is irresponsible to provide young people with choices but fail to teach them a rationale decision-making strategy.

Some of the decisions that your students make are life-altering with long term consequences that ripple outwards to affect their immediate family and school community.

Some young people are making life changing decisions – often alone and for the wrong reasons. Their decisions may have enduring and negative results.

There is no reason to believe that the findings of American surveys would be any different if carried out in New Zealand. (6)

These surveys found that students from the most affluent to the most impoverished are making decisions about how to deal with

- Divorce, parental dating, remarriage, changing family structures, and family living arrangements that disrupt the continuity and stability of their personal and academic life
- Persistent feeling of being alone and anonymous in the midst of their own school, neighbourhoods and homes
- Hundreds of hours alone or with friends, with no adult supervision or guidance
- Addiction and depression
- Feelings of being left out

- Fear of other students, teachers and other adults
- Concerns about whether they will live to adulthood

The analysis of journal responses and interview questions revealed that many young people were

- Making sophisticated decisions alone, on the basis of peer input or guidance from the media
- Living solitary lives
- Using short term thinking to make long-term decisions
- Acting out violently and hurting themselves and others
- Lacking basic academic skills, social skills or both
- Conducting themselves inappropriately, especially under ordinary everyday pressures and school life
- Reporting that parents, teachers and other adults in their lives know little, if anything about the things they worry about and act on daily

Secondary schools have an extraordinary opportunity to help young people make good decisions for the right reasons by assisting them to make the connection between their character and their conduct.

The best character education inspires young people by making them keenly aware that it is their own character at stake.

The reality is that young people feel pressure to make the right decisions but do not know how.

Attending to that involves character education.

Impulse control

Another important dimension of responsibility is impulse control.

The ability to do the right thing for the right reason automatically even under stress.

Being responsible means the consideration of the consequences of all the alternatives before making a decision.

A moral person is one who delays any impulse long enough to consider the consequences of the alternatives.

It is in everyone's interest that as young people mature they are made keenly aware that the consequences of their attitudes, decisions and behaviour may be many and varied, unexpected, complex and far-reaching

We all have regrets about past decisions that have led to consequences that we would like to have reversed. That impossibility makes it all the more important to learn early in life that our decisions have consequences from which we can not escape.

When the law of consequences is used as the basis for teaching rational-decision making process and impulse control a school also has a simple, practical and effective strategy upon which build its discipline policy.

I commend the strategies used at Taupo Nui-A-Tia College and the approach being developed by John Rutherford at the Westbridge Residential School in Auckland.

Discipline

Discipline provides the moral code that makes it possible for a community such as a school or a classroom to function.

Good order – discipline – is a characteristic of an effective school.

Discipline is not only a challenge for schools it also an opportunity to individualize the teaching of the links between the traits of character and behaviour, the law of consequences, rational decision making and impulse control.

School disciplinary procedures provide an opportunity to teach rational decision-making in real life situations.

Character education

The Character Education Partnership defines character education as "the deliberate process of developing dispositions and habits that enable us to lead fulfilling lives and build a better world."

Character education is at least as old as recorded history. Its advent probably coincides with the beginning of civilization, for it is difficult to sustain a civil society without educating for character.

Historically, civilizations passed on their cultural values to succeeding generations as a means of cultural preservation.

Until the later decades of the twentieth century character education, or character training, was seen as an essential component of schooling.

The historical view which remains valid is that character is taught by precept and example.

The cornerstones of character are primarily transmitted through relationships and the culture of a school.

The key to effectiveness is not programmes or additions to the curriculum but the creation of a school culture in which the precepts of character are taught, modelled, experienced, advocated and celebrated.

Character must inform and influence everything that happens in a school, whether in the principal's office, the sports field, the board room or the classroom.

The demise of character education

The demise of character education took place during the latter decades of the twentieth century.

There are two important questions that need to be asked about the demise of character education.

1. Was character education ever refuted and if so by whom, where and how conclusively?

2. Did character education merely die away as fashions do?

If it was the latter, this tells us nothing about its merit or falsehood.

The fear of indoctrination loomed large in the demise of character training.

Curriculum developers, strongly influenced by psychology and sociology, felt that in a pluralist liberal democracy it was inappropriate to promote one set of values that may violate the beliefs, values and rights of those holding different views.

From the 1960's character education gave way to values education.

Values are concepts that we hold to be important. Unlike virtues, values can be good or bad, objective or subjective, principle or preference.

An ethically good value such as "compassion" only becomes a virtue, when we develop the motivation and skills to act on it.

Difference between "values" and "character education"

There is an important difference between "values education" and "character education" that is not widely understood.

"Values education" is primarily concerned with the **quality of students' thinking.**

"Character education" is primarily concerned with the **quality of students' behaviour.**

It became the overriding concern of values education that programmes should not favour any particular religious or philosophical point of view. Programmes and approaches have been developed which presented as being neutral and without religious or moralistic bias**.**

It was seen as important that any values teaching be non-sectarian and non-doctrinaire.

The outcome has been that young people, regardless of their social, racial and economic background, have absorbed the unmistakable message that right and wrong are relative, that they must not be judgmental, that what is right for one person may be wrong for another. Right and wrong are personal values, never objective, and always dependent upon time, place and circumstance.

This is not a neutral position but the doctrine of situation ethics; moral and cultural relativism.

Curriculum developers in an attempt to eliminate doctrinal bias simply traded perceived indoctrination with the traditional upstanding that there are core universal values for indoctrination in the ideology of ethical relativism

Neutrality in values education is an unachievable aim.

Schools must promote some moral values if they are to work at all.

Everything a school does teaches values. Whether it is the way the principal treats her staff, the way the class teacher relates to her students, the way the school allows students to treat each other or whether or not the school chooses to discuss moral issues.

The best teachers and the best schools have always worked to build character in their students. However, in recent decades, they have been thwarted by theoretical constructions like moral relativism which do no work in practice and deny the wisdom of the ages.

Character education in secondary schools

In recent years, in countries all over the world, there has been a resurgence of character education.

Like all genuine reforms character education has started at the grassroots and has not been imposed by education jurisdictions.

The New Zealand Foundation for Character Education, a non-profit organization without religious or political affiliations, was established in 1993 to fund the preparation, publication and promotion of character education resources.

To date the restoration of character education has been overwhelmingly in primary schools.

Perhaps this is because it is widely recognised that core values are learned at a young age?

Intentional, school wide character education in secondary schools is comparatively rare – at the very developmental stage when the need is arguably the greatest.

Secondary schools must embrace educating for character as central to their mission for several compelling reasons.

1. To develop the positive intellectual and ethical potential of adolescents
2. To reduce negative teenage behaviours that injure self and others
3. To create safe, caring and effective schools

The principles of effective character education are the same for the secondary school as they are for the primary school.

The school culture and the infusion of character education into all curriculum areas are the starting point.

The secondary school can influence the character of its students by:

- By educating the whole person by focussing on student knowledge, attitudes and behaviour
- By communicating clear, consistent, sincere high expectations
- By the staff providing positive role models
- By using and requiring respectful language
- By developing a student code of conduct which reflects the values the school seeks to transmit
- By involving parents and community
- By encouraging student involvement community service

Smart and good high schools

Thomas Lickona and Matthew Davidson, State University of New York College, Cortland have developed the concept of "Smart and Good high schools."

Their report may be downloaded from
http://www.cortland.edu/character/highschools/

Their concept of "smart and good'" high schools is extracted from the historical view that education has two goals – the mastery of skills and the building of character.

Their executive summary begins.

"Throughout history, and in cultures all over the world, education rightly conceived has had two great goals: to help students to become smart and to help them become good. They need character for both. They need character qualities such as diligence, a strong work ethic, and a positive attitude in order to do their best in school and succeed in life. They need character qualities such as honesty, respect and fairness in order to live and work with others." (11)

In their introduction Lickona and Davidson pose the question.

"Are you a hedgehog or a fox?"

The question is derived from an ancient Greek parable.

"The fox, crafty and cunning knows many things, but the dowdy, porcupine-like hedgehog knows one big thing. The fox plots many different attacks on the hedgehog, but the hedgehog always does the same thing. He curls up into a ball of sharp spikes – and the fox retreats."

Sir Isaiah Berlin, asked the question in an essay in which he divided the world into two types of people – foxes and hedgehogs.

Berlin argued that "foxes" pursue many goals at the same time and see the world in all its complexity. They lack focus.

In contrast "hedgehogs" simplify a complex world into a single organizing idea – a basic concept that unifies and guides everything

In his book, "Good to Great" management expert, Jim Collins, picks up the Berlin's claims that those who build "good to great" companies are "hedgehogs." Their goals are constructed from a unique and discerning organizational insight, which they systematically pursue.

Does the "fox and hedgehog" analogy apply to schools?

Lickona and Davidson are emphatic that it does.

Under many changing pressures – assessment, compliance, increasingly diverse student populations, management of student behaviour, dissatisfied parents and the latest educational innovations – schools may feel that they do not have the luxury to be "hedgehogs."

But if schools aren't "hedgehogs" they lose focus and end up with many practices that may not help them achieve the central goals of their mission.

In a "hedgehog school" every practice is aligned with its mission.

The report proposes an overarching "hedgehog" concept that the best high schools have in common.

That education has two great goals: To help young people become **smart** (in the multi-dimensional sense of intelligence) and to help them become good (in the multidimensional sense of moral maturity).

Excellence and ethics – Lickona and Davidson call such schools Smart & Good High Schools.

Effective character education is the pathway to helping students build both excellence and ethics.

Schools with a "hedgehog" focus don't run around like "foxes" pursuing many unrelated things. Everything they do is aligned to excellence and ethics.

Does character education work?

According to research in both New Zealand and America character education has positive outcomes.

In October 2004 the New Zealand Foundation for Character Education, in association with Dr. Gael McDonald, Professor of Business Ethics at Auckland Unitec, undertook research into the effectiveness of character education in New Zealand schools. (8)

The full report is available on www.cornerstonevalues.org/nzreport.htm

The report concluded that schools that have had character education as part of their curriculum for over two years, show notable improvements in the school learning environment. These improvements include:

- Improved relationships between staff and students and between students
- Improved student behaviour
- Fewer discipline actions
- Enhanced the school as a caring community
- Increased staff stability
- Increased student attendance

Teachers acknowledged the advantages and satisfaction of teaching in a school with overt, proactive, specific character education.

Child Development Project – Director Dr. Eric Schaps –

In the United States a significant project which has been carefully evaluated is the "Child Development Project" – CDP. www.devstu.org

It is a character education programme for elementary schools.

A follow-up study of former students of CDP in middle schools showed that there continued to be widespread, significant effects favouring them.

Compared with their comparison school counterparts, former CDP students showed:

- Higher academic performance
- More positive attitudes to school and learning
- More positive attitudes towards self
- More positive social/ethical attitudes and behaviour
- Less involvement in problem behaviours
- More positive peer relationships

The hypothesized reasons for the enduring effects of the Child Development Project were:

- Persistent inclination to bond to school
- Tendency to associate with peers who are similarly inclined

General conclusions were:

- Building a sense of community promotes school bonding
- A sense of community is central to students' healthy development – ethically, socially, emotionally and academically – both short and long-term
- Sense of community can be strengthened in feasible and affordable ways

To summarise the CDP research –

1. Positive outcomes of character education in primary schools are carried over into secondary schools
2. "Connectedness" to family and school is the best deterrent to "at risk behaviour"

Barriers to character education

The case for the restoration of character education to its historical place at the centre of the school curriculum is compelling. But the reality is that there are barriers to achieving it.

The barriers are best understood in terms of C. S. Lewis's principle of "First and Second Things" (10)

Lewis suggested that sometimes our desire for "Second Things" is rendered impossible because we have destroyed the "First Things."

He illustrated the principle in "The Abolition of Man," which was first published in 1943.

He wrote that believing that we can have social cohesion and a civil society without objective values – virtues - is like believing that we can open a person's chest, remove the heart and expect all the other organs function as if the heart was still beating.

The destruction of the "First Thing" – objective values or virtues – renders the "Second Thing" – character, social cohesion, civil society – impossible.

Lewis concluded his first essay in "The Abolition of Man" with my favourite paragraph on education.

"And all the time – such is the tragic-comedy of our situation – we continue to clamour for those very qualities we are rendering impossible. You can hardly open a periodical without coming across the statement that what our civilization needs is more 'drive', or dynamism, or self-sacrifice, or 'creativity'. In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make 'people' without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." [11]

Your community and mine wants character but not the creedal order that constrains, limits, binds and obligates.

Your community and mine wants strong morality but without the emotional burden of guilt and shame.

Your community and mine wants virtue but without the moral justification that invariably offends.

Your community and mine wants good but without having to name evil.

Your community and mine wants decency but without the authority to insist upon it.

Your community and mine wants a moral community but without constraints to personal freedom.

Your community and mine wants what it cannot possibly have on the terms that it wants it. (12)

Formidable though these barriers are they must not prevent the restoration of character education to its historical and rightful place at the centre of education.

Conclusion

Character education is a reform whose time has come. And the good news is that it does not cost lots of money. The Minister of Education would receive buckets of change from the $9.5 million he plans to spend on improving behaviour in schools.

Character education is a reform that will work. Other reforms may work but high standards of behaviour and conduct do work and nothing works without them.

Character education offers hope of what schools and their communities could be.

It is a reminder of what is important.

It places "First Things First."

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