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Faith in Core Values?

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Background

Discussing core values or their sources is not popular in British education. One can see though why some teachers might prefer to do so. Schools reflect society and if society cannot agree upon its core values, what hope has the school? (Halstead and Pike, 2006). Schools face enough challenges as it is so we can understand a certain reticence to open a conversation about the sources of values when there is bound to be disagreement. If there is disagreement in society about matters of fundamental importance, is it not rather dangerous to bring such matters up in school? Would it not be safer (and more conducive to community cohesion) to just pretend that we all agree?

Research Questions

Why is it important to discuss the sources of core values in schools? How does a successful school with a Christian ethos do this?

Methods

Arthur (2005) suggests, 'Teachers and pupils will have divergent rationales for guiding their actions, but these are deliberately left unexplained' so that 'not specifying the rationale for actions allows a community to live together and for its members to show each other mutual respect' (Arthur, 2005, p. 250-51). In other words, we have a process of 'agreeing rules without having a theory to justify such rules' (Arthur, 2005, p. 251). Although this is 'a potentially practical solution to the many disagreements in moral education' it certainly 'may not be morally right as a guiding principle in education' (Arthur, 2005, p. 253). In fact, I would postulate a direct correlation between the disappearing consensus about what constitutes the good life, and the way schooling is viewed as a utilitarian process that aids and abets the dehumanizing commodification of children. The time honoured custom of avoiding consideration of sources so that 'the values behind British education at present remain largely unknown, unscrutinized and undebated' (Copley, 2005, p.107, p.111) fails to show due respect to young citizens (Pike, 2007). In this paper a three-week case study of a successful school that respects students and discusses the sources of values is reported. Funded by the ESRC/AHRC Religion and Society Programme, qualitative and quantitative methods were employed with a focus on Year 9 (14-year-olds) ranging from interviews and observation of RE lessons to a survey of 191 students.

Frame

As a society we tend to 'promote the adoption of secular core values on the basis that they constitute a common denominator' but that while secular approaches may be capable of teaching common virtues this will necessarily 'downplay our particularity' (Glanzer, 2003, p. 300). Indeed it might appear that many secular, common schools of liberal democratic societies do not possess sufficient moral coherence to do more than promote the political values of a liberal democracy (Pike, 2008). On the other hand, 'we can identify basic, shared values that allow us to engage in public moral education in a pluralistic society' and 'pluralism itself is not possible without agreement on values such as justice, honesty, civility, democratic process, and a respect for truth' (Lickona, 1991, p. 20). While we need to recognize, 'the complex interrelationships between faith, religious identity, ethnicity and citizenship' (Baumfield, 2002, p. 82), it is, 'difficult not to view...the Christian denominations as being anything other than minority communities' in juxtaposed with the 'dominant liberal life-world' (Wright, 2004, p. 148, p. 142). Certainly, 'the Bible presents numerous examples of moral success and failure' (Arthur,

2003, p. 57) and should not be eschewed in schools (Francis, 2000) when students consider the sources of core values (Freathy, 2004).

Research findings

During focus groups students explained, 'Whether you are a Christian or you aren't, the school's core values are good values to follow' and subsequently a survey of the 191 students in Year 9 and 101 staff showed that 99% of staff and 96% of students 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with this statement. A confessional pluralism with regard to the sources of the core values is all the more interesting because the Principal of the academy is so explicit about his source for the core values, which are derived from the life, work, ministry and example of Jesus Christ. Students' ability to interpret the declared sources of core values was demonstrated in a group interview with 14 year-olds who were asked if they believed their academy's core values were, in some sense, 'Christian' and explained: 'Yeah but you know like they're values that a lot of people hold in lots of different religions as well'.

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