

Narratives, Values and Opportunities in Schools

by Ruth Deakin Crick



Young people are often caught up in situations where moral judgements are required of them, and many seem to lack the resources to consider their options in a well-developed framework of personal and community values. Ruth Deakin Crick draws on her research to outline the educational challenges faced by schools in the area of values and identifies new opportunities for Christian communities to become involved in the policy and practice of education.

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It's a Thursday afternoon in an "A" level sociology class in a Church of England Comprehensive School in Autumn '97. Nineteen seven-year-olds are participating in a research project aimed at finding out what values their school community believes in. This is an absorbing project because it's a real one and one about themselves and their friends. The students are here voluntarily and the class is lively and provocative. One of the students – we'll call him Kevin – attempts to explain what a core value is. "It's something we think is important, Miss, something that we live our lives by". "That's good Kevin," said Miss, "Can somebody give us some examples?" Hands go up around the class – these students still haven't quite made the transition to seminar style learning – "Good looking, Miss," said Andrea, "Hardworking," said Philip, "Clever," said Shelley.

Some of these youngsters are easily amongst our brightest and best and yet this interchange – taken from real life – is an example of the poverty of the language of values and morals in popular discourse. These pupils

had to be taught what a moral value was, and then they had to tell the other 900 pupils who participated in the consultation before they could begin.

Value judgement

One of the problems in schools is that those of us who teach and were trained during the last thirty years have been taught ourselves that making a value judgement in class is one of the cardinal sins. After all, we were taught that the disciplines of the curriculum were above opinion, dogma and value judgement, and acquiring scientific or historical knowledge would lead students to the purified air of certain knowledge. It was salvation through rationality – dogmatically indoctrinated into all of us unsuspecting teachers.

Funnily enough the Thatcher years, with the advent of market forces in education, have done a lot to debunk those myths. Now educational commentators talk about the "gross national product code of education" which drives education reform. The National Curriculum is often assumed to be neutral but in fact it is deeply value-

laden even though it lacks a coherent rationale. Science and technology, literacy and numeracy are key statutory components in the arsenal of weapons used to improve schools.

The narratives of liberal rationality and individual consumerism provide potent values which shape policy and practice in schools. Not that teachers are to blame, because these are narratives which shape all our lives, the Christian community included. In fact, by definition teachers are usually very moral people who care about children and who work especially hard on behalf of the underprivileged.

Most of the education reforms of the last thirty years have focused on the "how" questions of schooling. How do we improve educational standards in order to create a world class education system? How can we teach children to read, or to become computer literate? How can we decrease bullying and foster citizenship?

The most radical questions about schooling, however, are the "why" questions. It's the "why" questions which take us to the heart of the aims and purposes of schooling, and to issues

of meaning and value. It's the "why" questions which bring us into the realm of spiritual and moral development. It's the "why" questions which empower communities and individuals to develop a sense of identity and profound self-management. When the "why" questions are part of popular discourse then the language of values is richer and more meaningful, and critical thinking is enhanced.

Moral crisis

Alongside the crisis of standards in our nation's schools in the last ten years there has also been a perceived moral crisis. The appalling national tragedies involving children, alarming statistics about bullying, truancy and school failure have all provoked significant concern about how our young people are growing up and the spotlight has focused on what schools can do about it, alongside parents and their communities.

A number of government initiatives are exploring the areas of citizenship and personal and social education in schools. Since 1992 all schools have been subject to inspections by OFSTED and that inspection has included the area of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC). The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority are piloting guidance on whole school frameworks for SMSC, and its predecessor the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority undertook a substantive nationwide consultation on which values our schools should be promoting. It is very likely that the review of the National Curriculum in 2000 will include some requirements for schools to address these areas.

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority's initiative includes the delivery of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development within the curriculum. In other words, science, history and the disciplines are viewed as places where spiritual and moral development can and should occur, as well as in Religious Education, Personal and Social Education and the "ethos" of the school. How this might happen is still very much a matter of debate, but there is no doubt that

this is an area where faith communities can offer support and guidance to schools.

Core values

In Kevin, Andrea and Shelley's school the consultation resulted in a very clear set of core values which the whole school community owned. Faith in Christ was among those values because it was a church school with a predominantly church-going clientele. Other core values included stewardship, justice, truth and love of learning and now their teachers are identifying moments within the curriculum where key encounters with those core values are implicit in the teaching material. Those core values are deemed to have spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects to them and to be rooted into a worldview or belief system. For this school that is a Christian worldview and the spirituality is likely to be Christological. For another school it might be a liberal humanist worldview, or an Islamic or Jewish one.

Nevertheless there is a significant sense in which this school's core values reflect those identified by the SCAA consultation and represent the common ground which provides some coherence in developing citizenship and a shared morality in our plural democracy.

The head of the government's standards and Effectiveness Unit was recently reported as urging for "a moral code to replace God" in the area of SMSC in schools. For most faith communities that is as undesirable as it is perceived to be impossible. Provided our schools have the rights and freedoms to be responsive to their own communities then there is space for the narrative of Christianity to inform policies for SMSC both within the church school sector and outside of it. There is also space for Christian communities to become deeply involved with their schools through governing bodies, parent teacher associations and in other practical ways. Perhaps the most important starting point, however, is for our Christian communities to understand the ways in which we can "inhabit the narrative of Christianity" in our everyday public and private lives.