

NATIONAL WALK FOR VALUES

A Talk by David Huppatz

We are constantly hearing reports on the radio or TV about the high level of binge drinking, use and abuse of so called recreational drugs and alcohol related violence among our young people. We often hear of the growing incidents of bullying within our schools even involving children in the early years of primary school. These are all very real concerns and we are always looking for solutions and often someone to blame. So we hear comments such as - ‘Schools are not doing enough to stop bullying’ ‘What’s the Government doing to address binge drinking?’ Well I guess we could have a tax on ‘Alco pops’, we should have greater discipline in our schools, we should have sniffer dogs at parties, night clubs or Rave venues to stop drugs entering, we should have more education programmes on the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse and the list goes on. But are these measures really addressing the problems?

What causes a young girl to go out and drink so much that she loses her self control and dignity? What drives groups of youths to commit crimes often with violence? What makes a young boy in Primary school pick on others? I heard recently a comment by a youth who admitted spending upward of \$200 each night on alcohol he said ‘I want a fun life not a long life’ To me this hits at the heart of the issue a lack of meaningfulness – a lack of purpose. We all have desire innate within us, to have a purpose, a goal – a dream. When this idealism is not given a positive focus by helping children and youth explore and experience what is meaningful in their lives, it seeks another channel. This innate idealism becomes distorted as impact at any price often with unpleasant consequences.

I believe there is a solution and it can happen within our homes, our schools, our various organizations and I suggest even our work places. It is not by focusing on what is wrong, but rather, by focusing on and developing a culture in our schools and communities in which the virtues that underpin the five core human values of Love, Truth, Peace, Right Conduct and Non-Violence that we have marched for today can be encouraged, nurtured and developed to their fullest potential in all of us.

Values education has been talked about in both in the State and Commonwealth education arena for a number of years now and projects in schools have been established with considerable Government grants. It is considered important that our education reflects and encourages the development of a set of core values. In its statement ‘Values for Australian Schooling’ the Federal Department of Education lists the following as the core values for our schools

- Care and Compassion
- Doing Your best
- Fair go
- Freedom
- Honesty and Trustworthiness
- Integrity
- Respect
- Responsibility
- Understanding, Tolerance and Inclusion

While I consider it necessary to identify the values we consider important, it is in the enacting of these values in all aspects of what we do in our lives and that reflect in our ethical practices, actions and behaviours that will have the positive outcomes.

I would like to share with you one example of the work being done in a number of schools throughout South Australia and indeed in schools across the nation in which values like Truth, Love, Non-Violence, Peace and Right Conduct are being developed and practiced in a culture of character that brings meaning and purpose to not only the students, but teachers and parents and even whole communities.

In schools I have worked with there is a commitment to develop a culture of character in which peacefulness instead of violence is practiced, where service, compassion and kindness are valued over self-interest and where friendship, respect, and courtesy become key elements of focus.

In these schools there is held the belief that all students have within the elements of character such as honesty, courtesy, compassion, friendliness, love, truthfulness and peacefulness in potential. What is needed are the strategies to assist children and adolescents to act on the best within them. Isn't the really the purpose of a true educator – which literally means “one who leads forth” – to awaken these elements of character which already exist within each of us. These virtues which enable us and those we teach to live the universal core human values.

To create this culture of character, these schools realized that they did not have to change their curriculum or introduce a special curriculum. What they are endeavoring to do is integrate the elements of these values into the existing curriculum, their behaviour management programmes, their counseling experiences, and daily classroom life. Children learn to live the core values in the context of what they experience in daily classroom life.

So what then, if we visited one of these schools that has been working on this for a number of years, might we see or hear. Firstly we would see a set of core values clearly articulated and displayed on school signs, school fences, in the foyer, in classrooms and in some cases even in the local community. (For example a school had a focus on Honesty so posters created by the children explaining what honesty is and how it is practiced appeared in the windows of local shops) These same core values would be encapsulated in the school vision statement. Such as “At this school we are committed to establishing a peaceful environment based on mutual respect, trust and unity in which we strive for excellence.” In a classroom you would see a poster saying “In this classroom we respect others and treat them with courtesy and kindness. We accept our responsibilities. We work towards unity. We strive for excellence”. In another classroom a banner which simply says “In this classroom we are all peacemakers”. In one school you would see signs around the school reading “Courtesy Corner”, ‘Friendship seat’ ‘Peaceful park’ and others.

You would hear a language being used that utilizes elements of the core values to acknowledge, correct and guide behaviour. For example instead of simply saying ‘Well done ‘ You hear acknowledgement of the intent behind the behaviour such as “ I really see your kindness in the way you help your friend” or “What you need now is to work cooperatively – What would that look like?”. By using this language to describe behaviour teachers, parents and even students, (yes they too use this language) encourage understanding and mastery of these values. Hearing these elements of character acknowledged creates a feeling of worthiness in the child, adolescent or young adult. It also means there is a focus on the good seen in each person rather continued focus on the negative. teachers set out not to catch a student doing wrong but rather seek to see the good.

You would hear children being encouraged to look for the lessons they can find in every day events so that they can discern what needs to be learned and how different choices make for different outcomes. When young people are given the understanding and confidence to learn from their mistakes every stumbling block becomes a stepping stone.

You would also see a behaviour development programme based on restorative practices. In this process the focus is not on retribution but rather on reparation. You would see young people being encouraged to take responsibility for their actions in order to make restitution which leads to reconciliation which in turn leads to restoration of relationships. As a result in these schools you would see a marked decline in behavioral issues. -where Right Conduct is the norm and students are doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason.

You would see children involved in service to each other, within the school and in the wider community through which the values of compassion, kindness, thoughtfulness and love are developed, understood and internalized.

Finally you would see a genuine interest in the uniqueness of each person. You would see celebrations and ceremony. You would see an encouragement of all the aspects of student wellbeing including spiritual wellbeing. You would see people discovering those gems within them that enable them to grow in and live out those basic core human values of Truth, Right conduct, love, Peace and Non-violence. We cannot expect young people to make the right choices if we do not give them the knowledge and tools to make those choices. Growing in these values gives them the right tools.

Young people also need example and role models. You would notice that teachers, aides, volunteers and parents endeavouring to be examples of how to live the values. In our schools and in our homes the most empowering way to create a safe, caring, respectful and peaceful environment is not only to require it but also to inspire it.

Let me finish by quoting the response of a student called Lewis who had recently transferred into one of these schools when asked what he thought was different about the school. “It’s like a new way of living. When I came to this school and I learned how to find the values within me, it was a new life. It’s like the tree reaching the sky and

everything around. In the old life I was like a sheep, able to do only one thing - follow the mob and to do what they did. That was my goal. People like the sheep are the same the all the time. They are in the same place - doing and thinking the same things day in and day out. But people like the tree have to do something different every day to get these neat new feelings. His "Place" expands. It's like collecting knowledge"

Values are important to our way of life. They guide our choices. The practice of values such as we have marched for today really does create a life worth living.