

A Call to Character

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A publication of:

The New Zealand Foundation for Character Education Inc.

ISBN 0-473-08104-0

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Once there was a rug merchant who saw that his most beautiful rug had a large bump in its centre. He stepped on the bump to flatten it out – and succeeded. But the bump reappeared in a new spot not far away. He jumped on the bump again, and it disappeared for a moment, until it emerged once more in a new place. Again and again he jumped, scuffing and mangling the rug in his frustration. Finally, he lifted one corner of the rug and out slithered an angry snake.

In many ways this old folk tale illustrates the predicament faced by communities throughout New Zealand and the rest of the Western World.

Deep down, we know that something has gone wrong at the heart of New Zealand Society. Yet, despite our best endeavours and all our good intentions social indicators show that things are not getting better.

Since 1960 our population has increased by 33 per cent; the gross domestic product has more than doubled; and the government spending on education and health has risen dramatically. We are living longer, we are healthier than we have ever been, we are probably richer and more technologically sophisticated than most nations. But during that same period of time there has been a 400% increase in violent crime; a 400% increase in births outside marriage; a tripling of children living in single-parent homes; the suicide rate of teenagers is four times higher and for one divorce in 1960 there are now six.

In that same period there has been an extraordinary rise in sexual crimes.

Violent offenders are getting younger. In March 2001 the Police Department reported that violent crime by those aged between 10-13 years had increased 250%.

Every household in New Zealand now pays \$400 each year to cover the cost of shop lifting; there are nine reported burglaries every hour and one car is stolen every twenty minutes.

There has been an astronomical increase in school suspensions - most for disobedience.

These are not only indicators of deep-rooted changes in the community, they are enormous economic costs and the cause of incredible personal suffering.

What do these indicators tell us?

They tell us that we have work to do.

Intuitively, most of us feel that decline of these social indicators has something to do with "values."

But the very word "values" is part of the barrier to understanding our predicament. For the word "values" means all things to all people. So that any discussion of "values" is likely to be as productive as eating jelly with our fingers.

Had this article been written one hundred and twenty years ago the word "values" would not have been used because the word had not then been invented.

Up until the 1880s the word "value" was used only in the singular to mean; to hold in high regard - "I value the opportunity to share these thoughts about character" or the economical worth of something - "The value of farm land in Southland is increasing."



One man, the German philosopher Nietzsche, introduced the plural “values” to the vocabulary of the Western World.

Nietzsche believed that the classical and Judaic - Christian virtues imprisoned people and that people should be free to choose their own virtues.

These new personal virtues he called “values.”

Nietzsche was so excited about his invention that he considered it to be the greatest event in human history. At last people would be free from the shackles of virtues.

There would be no good or evil, no virtue or vice. There would only be personal “values” and through them a “new” person and a “new” society.

About fifty years later, C.S. Lewis, one of the greatest minds of the twentieth century, undertook an exhaustive study of cultures and civilizations. He included the Ancient Egyptian, Old Norse, Ancient Jewish, Babylonian, North American Indian, Hindu, Ancient Chinese, Roman, Christian, Greek, Australian Aboriginal, Anglo-Saxon, Stoic and Ancient Indian - and identified eight objective “values” [virtues] which they all held in common.



Lewis concluded that these objective “values” (honesty, generosity, duty, justice, mercy and fairness) were built into all human beings and that society was foolish not to take them into account. He said these “values” were as vital to communities as the heart is to the human body. How absurd it would be, for example, to remove someone’s heart and still expect other organs (like the brain, liver and stomach) to keep working. Lewis’s point was that if we fail to pass on to our children clear standards of right and

wrong, of what is admirable or ignoble, then we must share the blame if our communities eventually fall apart.

When writing of this in 1943 C. S. Lewis penned my favourite passage about education.

“And all the time - such is the tragicomedy 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-reliance, or “creativity.” In a sort of ghastly simplicity we remove the organ and demand the function. We make men 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 gelding be fruitful.”

These men, Nietzsche and C. S. Lewis, represent the two faces of the modern word “values.”

“Values” as we now know them, can be either preferences or principles, which are the opposite ends of the moral spectrum. Both have consequences and they too are opposites.

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

The solution to our predicament is not as simple as the rug merchant in our folk tale found his to be. But neither is it as complex as we may think and it is implemented at the same “grass roots” level.

We have to rediscover that character counts!

That the solution to our predicament will not come from on high through legislation or regulation but from the grass roots. The solution will be rediscovered person by person, family by family, school by school and community by community.

For a start each of us must accept some responsibility and commit ourselves to do something. As adults we can not condemn the behaviour of young people if we are unwilling to model and commit ourselves to allowing young people experience and observe good character.

After all, adults teach by what they are.

We must expect that those who hold public office will be models of good character.

We must rediscover that the best “values” teaching makes young people keenly aware that it is their own character that is at stake.

The solution is not to try and reclaim some mythical golden age when things were supposedly simpler and more honest.

Responsible adults know that we can’t turn the clock back. We can’t be old fashioned.

But we can refashion what our forebears understood better than our generation.

They understood that character counts!

They understood that character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character.

They understood that there is a connection between such objective “values” as honesty and truthfulness, kindness, care and concern for others, compassion, obedience, respect, responsibility, duty - and character.

Such “values” are the cornerstones of character - hence the term cornerstone values.

Cornerstone values are principles that are consistent, universal and transcultural.

They work in three parts.

Take for example, compassion.

If I am to be compassionate I must first know what compassion is and what compassion requires of me in my relationship with others. But knowledge of compassion does not make me compassionate.

I must also care about compassion. I must be emotionally committed to compassion and have the capacity for appropriate guilt when I behave without compassion and be capable of moral indignation when I see others victims of injustice.

I must have the desire to be compassionate.

But knowledge plus desire does not make me compassionate.

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

Compassion, like all cornerstone values involves the head - knowledge, the heart - desire, and the hand - behaviour.

That explains why many well intentioned and well-funded education programmes fail.

These three parts of a cornerstone value - knowledge, desire and behaviour - are inextricably linked to character. Good character is the excellence of such cornerstone values as honesty and truthfulness, kindness, consideration and concern for others, compassion, obedience, responsibility, respect and duty.

Character is "Who we are when no one sees."

I find that a wheel is a helpful illustration of the relationship between cornerstone values and character.



The rim of the wheel represents character. The spokes - all of equal length and spacing - represent the cornerstone values. They give the wheel form - its shape and strength. The hub, which holds the spokes in place at the centre, is a unique cornerstone value - duty.

We moderns have problems with duty. We have lost most of its meaning and tend to think of duty only in terms of war memorials.

But duty is much more - duty is obligation. Duty, as the hub of character - is the obligation to be honest and truthful, kind, considerate and caring - in one's relationship with others.

Duty is as much about violence and abuse as it is about war memorials or flags - it is our obligation to our children, our elders, our forebears, our community and posterity.



Without question, parents are the first and most important teachers of character. Nothing can ever replace the home as the place where character is taught and observed. There, with or without parents' help, children during their earliest years begin developing character. This is both a conscious and unconscious process that takes place simply by watching parents "being."

Historically, schools also saw character education as a primary responsibility.

Until recent decades, schooling had two main objectives - to help young people master the skills of literacy and numeracy and to help young people to be good.

That aim of helping young people to be good went back through the generations to Plato who observed that we educate people to make them good because good people behave nobly.

“Building Character through Cornerstone Values” is an indigenous New Zealand approach to character education. Although it is rooted in the research and writing of C. S. Lewis its origins were at Waihopai School, Invercargill. There, following the reforms known as “Tomorrow’s Schools” and the provision for local learning objectives in a school charter, the board of trustees resolved to make building character through cornerstone values, the school’s only local learning objective.

The approach - not a programme - seeks to work with homes and the community to build character by precept and example.

The teaching content is intentionally limited - the eight cornerstone values, the law of consequences and rational decision-making.

The methodology is not lecturing or moralizing but creating a school culture in which young people experience and see cornerstone values modelled.

The approach recognises that cornerstone values are communicated through relationships.

The approach is not an addition to the curriculum. A “clip-on” like the extra traffic lanes on the Auckland Harbour bridge. Rather, it uses all aspects of the school - the curriculum, the culture and management to promote character.

The approach informs and directs everything that happens in a school - whether in the principal’s office, the classroom, the board meeting or the playground.

The approach balances knowledge - the head, attitudes - the heart, and behaviour - the hand.

There are two reasons why a school and its community would want to implement the Cornerstone Values approach to character education. The first is to restore what a school may have lost. The second is to conserve what the school may have retained.

Kew Primary School, Invercargill, provides an example of restoration. The principal was spending a disproportionate amount of his time dealing with students' behaviour problems. The situation had become chaotic.

He began to question why such disruptive behaviour was being tolerated. Why was the staff having their energies sapped by disruptive behaviour that prevented other children from learning? Although they had all tried hard to modify unacceptable behaviour, there had been little change.

With the support of the staff, trustees and parents the principal restored character education to the centre of the curriculum and transformed his school.

Today, Kew School is happy, ordered and effective. It uses no external agencies to support the management of children's behaviour. And the turn around has not cost a lot of money.



Kew School became the first to be awarded the use of The New Zealand Foundation for Character Education's registered logo. The logo symbolises a school's commitment to building character through teaching, enforcing, advocating and modelling cornerstone values.

Weston School in North Otago, the second to be awarded the use of the registered logo, is an example of a school that has implemented Cornerstone Values to conserve what it already has.

Weston did not face the challenges of Kew School but recognized that unless it conserved the qualities that had created its ethos, pressures from social change in the wider community and the popular culture would destroy that ethos.

The interest of the Weston School in the Cornerstone Values approach to character education stemmed from an initiative by the Mayor of the Waitaki District Council and through him the Waitaki Safer Community Council.

The principal of Weston School makes an important observation about the impact of the Cornerstone Values approach on a school.

He says that the impact is both small and large. Small because it does not add to the curriculum but large because it has such far-reaching influences and implications.

Like the ripples from a stone thrown into a pool.

By informing and directing everything that happens in the school Cornerstone Values creates a culture that adds new dimensions to relationships. The relationships within the school and the relationships between the school, the home and the community.



Parents are encouraged and affirmed and teachers find that the management of the classroom is simplified.

Kew and Weston schools provide wonderful models of what refashioned character education can achieve.

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.

“Building character through Cornerstone Values” offers hope of what communities and their schools could be. It is a reminder of what is important. It places first things first.

The New Zealand Foundation for Character Education Incorporated is a non-profit organisation which was established in 1993 to fund the preparation, publication and promotion of character education resources.

The Foundation is funded from grants, donations, the sale of resources and seminar presentation fees.

Donations to further the work of the Foundation for Character Education are welcomed and appreciated.

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