

Activism in a troubled world: auto/biographical and narrative perspectives on struggles for the good and beautiful.

Personal narratives re-activating humane values in education: 25 teachers in values-creating schools beyond ‘the West’ show how it’s done

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A paper with room for dialogue

Text – up to 500 words

Some people, some companies, some decision-makers in particular, have known exactly what priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money. And I think many of you here today belong to that group of people

(Greta Thunberg, Davos, January 2019).

Greta Thunberg links the loss of environmental values with rampant materialism in the rich world. She is the current spokesperson of the view that as we consume ever more resources, values like sustainability, fairness, honesty, care, respect become as endangered as earth’s 16,300 threatened plant and animal species. The health of earth’s climate and ecosystems depends on a reassertion of these ancient and common human values (Hicks, 2017), but those same values are also central to personal well-being (Deiner and Seligman, 2004). A positive future may well depend upon whether schools across the world live and teach those values.

We sought to learn about quiet forms of activism for a better world in a set of values-creating schools outside the west. Visiting primary schools in Rwanda, Ethiopia, Japan and south India we found transferrable examples of pedagogies explicitly aimed at building happy individuals and compassionate, fair and sustainable communities.

Our research used cross-cultural, semi-structured dialogues to learn from the practice of 25 well-established, effective teachers nominated by their colleagues. Lengthy, reflective discussions generated many highly personal auto/biographical ‘key-stories’, fragments of narrative explaining the sources of each teacher’s philosophy. We observed the same teachers in action and taught in their classes. Analysis of conversations and observations identified four common and inter-related themes: values, local community, relevance and the spiritual

dimension. Regardless of culture, the cherished values of these teachers related to the virtuous concepts of good, beauty, truth and justice, though few related these values to sustainability. Their values shaped views on relationships and community, defined what was relevant and were inspired and sustained by religious beliefs.

Encouraged by their institutions, teachers' key-stories were often shared with their classes. Words like love, dignity, community, justice, trust, confidence and humility characterised casual conversations in staffroom and playground. The values that brought these individuals to education, defined choices of subject, school and characterised their pedagogical style. Multiple and daily opportunities to put values into action gave their teaching common properties across highly contrasting settings: connectivity, creativity and high quality, deep, transferrable outcomes. Within such values-consistent, narrative-sensitive protected spaces, teachers claimed that positive experiences were more likely than negative ones and that they felt sustained. Above average test results in each school suggested links between positive mind-sets, effective learning and greater mental, physical and social well-being (Fredrickson, 2011).

Each classroom offered an experience of values consistency that modelled aspects of the good, but thought-to-be fantastical, society sometimes called Utopian. The philosophically united approaches of 25 teachers in highly diverse settings suggested a radical and urgent new agenda for teacher education everywhere. An agenda to confront the imperilled environmental and moral health of our world through centralising virtuous values, human emotions and the stories that unite all humanity for the good.

References

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Hicks, D. (2014) *Educating for Hope in Troubled Times*, London: Trentham

Key question from conference: *What can different lenses of gender, sexuality, culture and politics bring to our research?*

Key words: values; justice; good; auto/biography; dialogue