

Values

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Values are principles, qualities, or objects that a person perceives as having intrinsic worth. Every individual has a personal hierarchy of values that may include success, wealth or monetary comfort, love/companionship, a sense of accomplishment or achievement, and of course, survival. When a teacher spends time after school to help a student, he may feel he has sacrificed his own needs to the needs of the student. At the same time, he is likely to have gained something for himself—perhaps a heightened sense of self-worth or the good feelings that come with the student's gratitude. Because values influence a person's behaviors and choices, they are worthy of exploration.

When people possess what they value, they are contented. If they are deprived of what they value, they feel frustration or dissatisfaction. Humans, therefore, unconsciously behave in ways that move them *toward* what they value or *away from* anything counter to that value.

Beliefs support and reflect our values. For example, if Jenny *believes* studying harder produces better grades, she is motivated to study harder. Why? Because she also *believes* getting better grades is a way to achieve success. Success is something Jenny *values*. Through her beliefs, she has equated getting good grades with becoming successful. Is there actually a cause-effect relationship between high grades in school and success? That depends on how one defines success, but the lives of such people as Albert Einstein, Abraham Lincoln, Grandma Moses, and Thomas Edison attest to the fact that it is not *always* true.

It's often easier to identify the hierarchy of a person's values by her behavior than by what she says she values. For example, Sheila says she values higher-level thinking skills. Yet her tests rarely require students to do anything more than simple recall or recognition—skills that machine-graded multiple-choice questions can easily test.

This doesn't mean Sheila is lying. She simply has another value of which she is unaware—perhaps time to spend with her family. Taking the time to grade essay tests that assess higher-level thinking would cut into her family time. She fails to notice that she's not "walking her talk" because she *believes* a good teacher values higher-level thinking skills and Sheila perceives herself as a good teacher. Complicated, isn't it?

Conflicted Values

Teachers become frustrated when outside pressures force them to choose one value at the expense of another.

Raymond *believes* students learn most effectively in a stimulating and varied classroom environment. In his ideal classroom, individual students are actively engaged in activities appropriate to their interests, abilities, and preferred cognitive processes. They are excited about learning. Creating that learning environment gives Raymond a tremendous *sense of accomplishment* (value 1). Because of his regard for individual students, his students *like* and *respect* him (value 2). Raymond's beliefs and values march hand-in-hand and he feels good about himself and his job.

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Along comes an in-service day. A well-known educational speaker gives a forty-five-minute talk embracing all of the behaviors in which Raymond already engages. Wow! An expert has validated his beliefs and values. Raymond is elated!

At the end of the workshop, the principal makes a brief announcement. The district has selected a battery of tests that will assess student knowledge of the standards adopted by the district. The results of the tests will influence teacher evaluations. Oh, oh! Conflict of values!

In addition to valuing a sense of accomplishment and the good will of the students, Raymond values eating and keeping a roof over his head—survival! Raymond's focus is more on in-depth understanding than on the acquisition of testable facts. If he continues to teach in his typical way, the students may not “learn” all of the specific bits of information covered by the standards and included in the tests. Their test scores will suffer. Raymond's evaluation will go down, negatively influencing his professional future.

On the other hand, if Raymond changes the way he's teaching, he will lose the respect of the students. Worse, according to his belief system, he will fail to provide the most effective learning environment, so his self-concept suffers. Raymond's sense of accomplishment disappears.

At this point, whatever decision Raymond makes *must* deprive him of one or more of the things he values. Is it any wonder he feels conflicted—less than satisfied with whatever decision he makes? Teachers are often confronted with situations that threaten their sense of self-respect—an important value for most people. Many teachers have experienced similar situations that result in frustration, stress, and dissatisfaction. Understanding where these conflicts in values and beliefs lie is the first step in resolving them.

Education as Enculturation

People often speak of “cultural” or “societal” values. *Society* and *culture* are constructs—not actual entities. *Society* is a group of individual people. The *culture* of a school is the set of complex relationships among the people in the school—the students, teachers, administrators, support staff, parents, and members of the school board. Each teacher within that culture has personal values, but it's difficult to avoid buying into values many others in the immediate environment possess.

One need only read a few of the arguments for tougher standards to recognize the values that are reinforced in the minds of school personnel and ultimately, the students. Here is a statement from the New Jersey Mathematics Curriculum Framework:

*“...our students need to meet these standards in order for them to **be well prepared for careers in the 21st century, and in order for our state and country to have suitable employees in the 21st century.**”*¹ [Author's emphasis]

No mention is made of students becoming concerned, thoughtful, and involved citizens. No mention is made of the psychological and moral development of the student. *Careers* and *employment* are the values named and thus, the values taught.

Even if a “list” of cultural values existed, each teacher would possess his or her own “take” on those values. In every action, every decision, every interaction with students, teachers are teaching values. Values are part of the learned and the implicit curriculum (See curriculum articles). Shouldn't educators at least identify the more fundamental values they hold, and therefore, teach?

References

1 Introduction to the Framework, New Jersey Mathematics Curriculum Framework (1996). Available at URL: http://www.dimacs.rutgers.edu/nj_math_coalition/framework/intro.html

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