

## **A QUESTION OF VALUES**

by M.A. Demers  
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On August 25th about thirty educators from around British Columbia, as well as two from Iceland, converged upon the Surrey Conference Centre for a three-day workshop on values education for children. Facilitated by Diane Tillman, an educational psychologist from California, the workshop served to introduce the fundamentals of Living Values: An Education Program to those interested in implementing it into B.C. schools.

Living Values is structured around twelve values believed to be common to all cultures: Peace, Respect, Cooperation, Happiness, Honesty, Humility, Love, Responsibility, Simplicity, Tolerance, Freedom, and Unity. The program is a collaborative effort by twenty educators from around the world who were asked by UNICEF to expand upon a publication entitled *Living Values: A Guidebook*, which included activities for children. Using this and the UN's "Convention on the Rights of the Child" as a framework, Tillman wrote five books for children aged three to young adults, with additional books for children of war, street children, and victims of earthquakes currently in process. The series won the 2002 Teachers' Choice Award and has been translated into 24 languages.

Complementing the twelve values are three core assumptions: universal values teach respect and dignity for all people; everyone has the capacity to care and learn about values; and students thrive in an atmosphere of mutual respect where they are regarded as capable of learning to make socially conscious choices. Children are thus invited to explore these twelve values; to discover and articulate what the values mean to them, their families and their cultures; to evaluate and, if necessary, deconstruct their values to make them more truly universal.

Currently in use in 67 countries at over 4000 sites, the program's success seems to attest to the soundness of the curriculum. But while these values may indeed be "universal," their definitions may not be as consistent as one might hope. And therein lies the challenge to the program: when we talk about values education, whose values are these?

Iris Mennie, a teacher with the Nanaimo School District and a participant at the workshop, defines a value as "a belief that results in a behaviour or an attribute which is universally of benefit to self, other humans and the earth at large." This definition is utopian, though, inconsistent with the reality of ethnic variations,

intergenerational differences, and gender biases. It also hides the often frightening ways in which values have been used to harm members of a group—usually women and children—or to justify violence against “outsiders.” Yet since one of the basic tenets of the program is tolerance toward all people, you have to allow for age, gender, and, most problematic of all, culturally specific definitions. So how does one incorporate these differences without compromising the declared universality of the values? How, for example, does one allow for ethnic variations without becoming ethnocentric?

This is the challenge currently facing Nikki de Carteret, a Living Values facilitator working in Jordan where the program sparked a lively discussion among her young adult participants on the issue of respect. “They asked me, ‘Are you talking the Western definition of respect?’,” says de Carteret. “In an Eastern culture, the first respect you think of is respect for your elders, and respect for the group, so the group comes first. While as here it’s about individual respect. It was a call for dialogue.”

Nevertheless, charges that the program could be used as a form of Western neo-colonialism are never far from the surface, and rightly so. “Certainly we are very careful about that,” says de Carteret. “When we did conflict resolution, for example, we discovered they have processes for resolving conflict that is tribal like Native Canadians here. And so we needed to be respectful of those processes. LV is an inclusive process, it’s a listening process, it’s a learning process.”

But what do you do when faced with a value most would consider horrific, like the recent case in Nigeria of the woman sentenced to death by stoning for having sex outside of marriage? How does the Living Values program deal with this and other values of, well, questionable value? On this issue Tillman emphatically rings a warning bell: “We must promote a philosophy which considers the importance of giving respect and dignity to every individual. So we allow the students to define the values, but protecting that are reflection points. How can you treat someone with respect and dignity and kill her? So there are limits in the program. There’s just a couple of times where there are right answers.”

Tillman also points out that the program has been carefully designed so as not to be religious or political; any modifications must be approved and must meet strict guidelines. “We look for specific things,” says Tillman. “One, violence cannot be sanctioned. There cannot be any direct moralizing; the approach must truly be

respectful to children. We actually just had someone who wanted to add a story in the chapter on unity which showed two people uniting in violence against a third person. We said, 'I'm sorry, but that doesn't meet our standards.' ”

Again, though, the issue of whose standards, whose values comes up again. And considering the complexity of implementing a values program in a single culture, how much more complex will it be to implement in a multicultural country like Canada? In a multi-religious country like Canada? The irony of discussing tolerance in the classroom while sitting at a conference in Surrey, home of the *Blue Dads* brouhaha, led this writer to lament that one of the first values children often learn is hypocrisy. There is no shortage of adults with competing agendas and the desire to impose their own, often exclusive, values on others. So while the program might be apolitical and non-religious, the issue of education is rarely anything but. Tillman concedes this can be a problem, though she stresses so far the program has only met defeat in one instance. Still, her example shows just how illogical the resistance can be: When a small group of fundamentalist parents tried to block the program from their preschool, the school's director asked them, “Which values don't you like?” The parents liked all of them. “Well then which activities don't you like?” They liked all of them. So what was the problem? The program is supported by the UN, was the reply.

Advocates of Living Values hope the program's success worldwide will overcome any opposition, and the success stories *are* quite phenomenal. Erla Björk Steinarsdóttir, a primary teacher in Reykjavík, noted her students became more loving, caring, and respectful as a result of the program, and that other teachers often came to her classroom “just to feel the change in atmosphere.” What was more surprising, though, was the “amazing” increase in their academic capabilities. The change was so marked, in fact, that the headmaster has implemented the program school-wide commencing this fall.

Success stories are not limited to children within the mainstream. Bob Bussanich, President of Associação de Assistência a Menores de Olinda, a non-profit agency in Vancouver that teaches life skills to street kids and children of the slums in Rio Doce, Brazil, raves about the changes Living Values brought to the children: less violence, more respect, and a request for school uniforms to emphasize equality. The children also developed

more concern for their environment, cleaning their small school and painting over the gang graffiti that once peppered the walls. “It just turned the whole school upside down,” says Bussanich.

Back here in B.C., Barbara Van Hee teaches at the very multicultural Carleton School in East Vancouver. Van Hee began implementing Living Values two years ago, but not thoroughly; she still feels she’s at the “experimental level” but intends to take it further in her classroom. Van Hee sees values programs as a trend in education, but worries that as such programs grow in popularity, so might the opposition to them: “I’m just nervous that the bigger it gets the more people will shy away from it. They’ll start to confuse it with religious values when in fact these are values held commonly throughout the world. It could be tremendously positive, but I think there will be people who are afraid at having all schools involved. It’s very different to take this to a small, private school than trying to implement it in a large, inner-city school.”

Tillman feels that issues over religion and such mask the real concerns facing North American schools today. “What schools really want is to stop bullying,” she says. “And we have so many drop-outs.” She cites the case of Tijuana where they taught the program for two months without telling the parents, and then called a meeting. 400 parents showed up—not because they were concerned, but because all were curious to learn why their children were suddenly eager to go to school every morning. Tillman insists the way around opposition is to invite parents to completely examine the program, “to keep the process transparent.”

Most would agree there is a fear that our communities are degenerating and that our present values, or the lack of them, is at the core of the problem. Still, how receptive B.C. schools will be to values education remains to be seen. We should remember, then, it was this very process of challenging, evaluating, and redefining what we believe in which led to better lives for Canadian women and children, of amends toward Aboriginals, of an awareness (if not always practice) of the rights and freedoms of all citizens, not just the elite. Which, perhaps, is the real trend in the world today. “In my conversations with people in the Arab/Islamic world,” says de Carteret, “we are talking about a redefinition of religion, of culture, of what they stand for. I think the whole world’s going through this process of redefinition.” Nevertheless, she has no illusions as to the pace of change, anywhere, including B.C. “Anyone who works in values education knows you can’t just go in and make it all happen immediately. You start in little ways and build and build and build.”

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Evan Seal, photographer, was at the conference and has photos. 604.250.4329

Bob Bussanich has photos of school children in Brazil.