

15th April 2015

Character Education in Schools...Again?

Dear Education Secretary

March 24th, 2015 Character Education in Schools. I would like to draw your attention to the issue of Character Education in schools. This is once again featuring heavily in the media and we are seeing many commentators calling for a greater emphasis to be placed on character education. I have no doubt this is in the main well-meaning and progressed with good intentions but I fear that it is becoming a simplistic and meaningless answer to a range of complex problems. An answer that furthermore is ultimately damaging for many children and communities. I speak as a teacher and education researcher who has spent the past decade developing and evaluating Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes (what we previously called Character Education) with children, teachers, parents and education professionals. These programmes were driven by the same conversations that are currently happening; our children are at risk, they are unprepared for the world of work, they don't have the life skills necessary, rates of mental health in young people are too high. Similarly these programmes were introduced as a way of inoculating our children from the ravages of modern society. The SEAL programme was the major initiative and cost the Government over 40 million pounds between 2005 and 2010. The research from Manchester Institute of Education identified that it had null results. Even more importantly I am concerned that once again we find ourselves in a place where adults are deciding that children's inner selves should be socially shaped in a certain way; a way that many adults would refuse to accept and would in most likelihood not achieve if they were willing to do so. When we talk about character we use the terms resilience, reciprocity, social skills, motivation yet these are not universally understood and accepted. They are complex terms meaning different things to different people at different times in their lives. If we are building resilience in schools what is it we are making our children resilient to, the rampant free market? Lack of full time employment? If it is these things is it not the core issue we should be tackling rather than again developing a school sticking plaster that will just leave children confused and further labelled? In conclusion my research with children suggests that young people are consistent in what they see as important to their development and it is not character. It is free space to play not controlled by adults or under surveillance. It is having the space to participate in non-measured open activities with family and friends. It is free play, conversations, time with those they feel close to. My advice would be to focus on the bigger picture, offer young people a future that delivers security in housing, education and health. One that reflects their true needs (not what business says their needs are), trusts them, stops constantly measuring and labelling them and gives value to the important things in life that cannot be measured economically. If you do that you will see what you understand to be character grow and grow in young people freed from the tyranny of fear and anxiety over their future.

Yours Faithfully,

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