

Social action and character education



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What's the idea?

Pupils in school need opportunities to engage in social action aligned to the school's values. Core educational purpose often focuses on the school-leaver as the end product. An alternate approach might instead involve imagining students a decade after they leave school. What might they be doing in their late twenties? How would we want them to be living their lives?

This approach is aligned with an honourable tradition of liberal education, that 'Nothing is worthy to be the aim of education, unless it is also worthy to be the aim of a man's [sic] life for here and hereafter...' (Grubb, 1903).

In contrast, many contemporary sources of impetus for school leaders can be quite peripheral to such goals.

What does it mean?

Elliott (1994) argues that there is often a conflict between a school's actual values, those it professes, those it manifests and those it markets.

In this context, curriculum design takes on a completely new meaning: pupils may indeed learn what we teach but, more significantly, they learn by how we teach (Brady, 2011).

Our actions as school leaders must be consistent with our values. Our provision must be aligned with our purpose (Thornberg, 2008). If we want those values to endure beyond schooling, then pupils must be engaged in activities that specifically align to this objective

Effective provision for this kind of values education has been promoted (Hersh et al., 1980) through a number of approaches. Evidence suggests active engagement in social action secures the most enduring impact on the learner.

What are the implications for teachers?

Equality – the lived experience of all students needs to accord with the taught values of equality.

Environment – climate warming represents an impending existential threat and this demands a visible response.

Global justice – relative wealth brings privilege and injustices that require action.

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