Values through Philosophy

"There are obviously two educations. One should teach us how to make a living and the other how to live" James Adams

Students are falling victim to the omnipresent seduction of immediate gratification through our advancing technologies, limiting their tolerance for distress, hence their skills and aptitudes towards negotiating to get their needs met. Without a sense of how to meet one's needs without impinging on the rights of others or our environment, we will imbalance our personal and environmental ecology.

With this paucity of needed interpersonal skills to effectively deal with others, personal and professional relationships are impacted. Growing levels of violence, greater ignorance of social justice, and expedited society fragmentation are just a few of the consequences we tend to treat symptomatically without understanding the underlying pathology.

Saving ourselves, or society and the planet we rely on for essential life resources, means we need to develop critical thinkers who can also develop and maintain contact with others, in particular when faced with adversity. It isn't enough to teach these skills without embedding them in the value systems that spawn meaningful relatedness.

And to go one step further, we cannot cultivate essential virtues that yield these important skills without fully appreciating existentially who we are and how the world works. This is similar to a corporation that lacks a mission and vision statement, policies and procedures, and a flow chart of operations. Nobody would know where they stand, what is important, or how to prioritize their work. But even more so, what is the company about and how did it come to be. Without this knowledge, how can we accurately evaluate outcomes?

Children need to understand how the world works, not simply the mechanics of engineering, science, and the arts, but also the underlying motivations that drive human behavior. In order to evaluate personal and collective outcomes we must first appreciate processes. This can only partially be taught under the heading of psychology and sociology, because these subjects are deeply embedded in idealogy that transcend conceptual thinking.

Morality, ethics, values, principles, and beliefs are all assumed to be transmitted primarily by family and secondly by community, leaving the future generation beholden to the one before. Schools certainly haven't waded deeply into these waters, afraid to infringe upon the rights of parents, which to a large degree was an important boundary that brought education and community together. And how many schools examine their own ecology and ensuing organizational health, the context in which we are measuring the success of our students?

With the erosion of our societal fabric that maintains balance in our lives, balance found in the giving and taking from our soil, the replenishment and depletion of our oceans, and the challenge of housing a growing population of humans who displace other animal and plant species, often times to extinction, we can no longer rely on the individual to be solely responsible for raising socially conscious citizens. That responsibility must be shared by our schools.

This does not by any case mean that schools ought be teaching values, in fact that would be antithetical to a more cohesive society since each culture holds often times divergent views. Schools cannot advocate any particular belief system without risking the confluence or disparity of the families who make up their schools. But what academic institutions can do is help to define a process by which this idealogy is formulated.

All our decisions, beliefs, actions….can be linked to our underlying sense of the world and how it operates. How people are interconnected with each other and the world itself, is often thought of as an outcropping of religion, however it more aptly viewed as a byproduct of philosophy.

Without a philosophical/ existential paradigm to guide us, how are we going to be intentional about our behaviors? How can we take ownership for our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without understanding of how these can to be in the first place or the volition to make alternations?

Virtue formation is not genetically encoded nor is it sufficient to assume it's a fixed entity based on our sociocultural context. The more aware we are of how we come to believe what we do and how incongruent these beliefs are with who we are and aspire to be, the more likely we will take ownership of ourselves and the world around us.

A school's job can be to help students appreciate the multitude of paths they can take to identify and formulate a paradigm that fits for them while appreciating the paths of others. In doing so they will be able to more effectively determine who they wish to be and how to navigate the complexity of interpersonal dynamics.

Thus, if we are espousing virtues to nurture a student body as a well-intended academic institution, , without helping them to appreciate how these virtues/values became figural (not everybody holds the same virtues to the same degree) and what can be done to evolve these virtues, we are only doing part of our jobs. Students need to know there are many different perspectives around the meaning of life which they can learn from, identify with, and even improve upon.

We can make an argument that following through/ doing what we say we are going to do is a universal quality we each 'should' hold in high regard, but what if a child believes that spontaneity is more important to being genuine? As a teacher dedicated to bringing out the best in our students, can we make a judgment call about which is more important? Do we know enough about where this child comes from and where they are headed to adequately prepare them for the 'right' value system?

It's intentionally and reflectively navigating our different beliefs that help us ultimately to thrive in the world. Appreciating how to examine our value system, appreciate the discrepancy between

ourselves and others, and ultimately engage in an evolutionary process that serves young people who each have their own unique challenges ahead.

To matriculate critical thinkers, we want to teach students to never accept anybody's else's should, which means starting with our own. This is not some paradoxical trap to suggest we don't know what's best for our children. Put simply the idea that teaching a child the theory behind how to solve a math problem based on the theory we are using, is more efficient that telling them the steps they must follow to solving that same problem.

Is this not similar to telling a child how to grow a tomato plant without teaching them about the origins of the soil? Why would we ever replenish the lost nitrogen, magnesium, phosphorous and hundreds of other essential nutrients if we don't know why they exist in the first place? We want to teach an understanding for how we came to be through true Socratic questioning, especially when it comes to the question of why we exist.

Similar to a therapist helping a person navigate the change process or a medical doctor helping a person activate their internal healing capacity (what medicine used to be)....we rely on teachers to help students appreciate themselves in relation to each other and the world.

Sample Curriculum

The Bhagavad-Gita

I.   How life is filled with constant choice points and without knowing how to make these important decisions, there is no way to make meaning of life.
II.   Peace in our lives requires discipline and tolerance to continuous sensory overload
III. The vastness of life can be made discernable by understanding our place in the cosmos and the interconnectedness of all living things.
    a. I.e We gain significance in our lives through our relationship to the whole, but it is the whole that's the source of meaning.

Aristotle

I.   Active critique of one's own teachers and the power of constructive debate
II.   Goodness is closely tied to function and that we understand something better when we understand it's function.
III. We chose other things- pleasure, honor, wealth, etc... partly for themselves and partly because we assume that through them we will be happy.
IV.   A matter of continuums and polarities. Generosity is a means between stinginess and profligacy; dignity between self-deprecation and pomposity.
V.   How friendships lead to connectedness which hold societies together and is essential for finding meaning in life.

Stoicism

    I.   Strong emotion compromises control. Reason and acceptance are born out of intentionality and not impulsivity.
    II.   Finitude is the nature of human life and reality.
    III.   The Epicurean synthesis by Marcus Aurelius

Confucius

    I.   Personal development as a matter of upbringing
    II.   Cultivating human excellence in a social context

Daodeging- The Dao of Life and Spontaneity

    I.   Exploration of justice and ritual
    II.   The denigration of human behavior due to calcification from ritualized social interaction
    III.   Understanding paradox
    IV.   Impermanence and harmony

Buddha

    I.   People are fundamentally selfless
    II.   The Eightfold Path & Four Noble Truths
    III.   Eliminate suffering through primal ignorance

Zen

    I.   Replace language with experience
    II.   Meditate don't study
    III.   Primordial Awakening
    IV.   Perception vs conception

Author

Dr. Jared Scherz is a clinical psychologist, the author of five books on schools and the founder of TeacherCoach. TeacherCoach is the first free PD platform that integrates all four dimensions of PD, providing the opportunity for schools to generate income on the road to financial self-sufficiency.