

“The Role of Personal Values in DEIJB”

By C. E. Olds

The Occasion

Recently, I returned to my junior boarding school alma mater, Rectory School in Pomfret, Connecticut. There, I delivered the keynote address for the 2024 Martin Luther King Jr. Day of Service. The title of my talk was “Forgotten, or Unheeded Words: The Relevance of MLK Today.” Following my address, I conducted two workshops in the afternoon. The second one focused on identifying values as a means of understanding aspects of one’s identity.

The Exercise

My decision to organize the workshop around the topic of personal values was not arbitrary. Knowing that students in grades 2-4 would be the sole participants, I needed to find a theme that they could easily grasp and confidently talk about, given their limited experiences. While the second graders were somewhat tentative, the third and fourth graders responded to my questions with alacrity.

Instead of obliging students to identify themselves by race, class, gender, or religion, I hit upon another strategy: *talk to students about personal values*. The exercise I designed consisted of seven parts:

- 1) Introduction and explanation of the central question: *What is the advantage of knowing what your personal values are?*
- 2) Group definition of a *value*; we arrived at “a quality or principle that is desirable.”
- 3) Call-and-response definition of 20-30 personal values (e.g., academics, cooperation, dependability, fairness, gratitude, happiness).
- 4) Students select *five* of their favorite or most important values from a predetermined list.
- 5) From those five values, students choose their top three.
- 6) Students compose their answer to the central question: *What is the advantage of knowing your personal values?*
- 7) Students voluntarily present their answers to the group.

The Takeaway

As the group dispersed and students began to work individually on #4-6 above, I talked with the fourth-grade teacher “Mrs. Z.” She said that she enjoyed my presentation and work with the students. In particular, she liked my fresh approach. Mrs. Z possessed enough perspicacity to see that I was encouraging her students (and would soon be encouraging others) to think about personal values as a way to prepare them for *later reflection on* and *exploration of* their identities.

Since 2010, my consultations with and workshops for independent schools from California to Colorado, from Pennsylvania to Connecticut have led me to conclude that genuine diversity is not rooted in race, gender, class, religion, etc. The diversity-inclusion-belonging that schools advertise is a silver-tongued mantra that echoes relentlessly, but lacks the charm or inspiration to launch students or teachers on a quest to find answers about who they are, by what means and why they should seek a common purpose with others, and to what extent they can expect others to accommodate their social and intellectual needs.

To check or fit oneself into a labeled box might be a logical or even necessary first step toward self-exploration, yet it alone cannot guide one toward a deeper sense of self. Admittedly, the labels and pronouns used in diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging (DEIJB) preclude the possibility of asking more meaningful questions about oneself or imagining oneself in a way that transcends mere descriptors like *black, white, Asian, multiracial, she, he, they, Christian, Muslim, international, or upper-class*.

Mrs. Z who also served as the faculty adviser to Shield (Student, Happiness, Inclusion, Equity, Leadership, Difference), a group of students who “wanted to discuss equity and inclusion more thoughtfully at Rectory,” acknowledged the limits of defining oneself by one or more of the aforementioned labels or categories--including others that were not mentioned. She pointed out that, after self-identifying with a particular DEIJB label, students tend to stop there and abandon thinking or talking further about whom they are. The self-identification that defines so much of the DEIJB enterprise shortcuts and circumvents a critical or philosophical inquiry of oneself. DEIJB promotes the acceptance of different ways of *being* or *living*, but remains indifferent to the real content of *being* or *living*. Mrs. Z confirmed that some of the students in Shield do not open up about themselves as much as they could, that they do not have much to say after choosing or proclaiming their DEIJB label.

When I introduced Rectory’s elementary students to a DEIJB workshop without mentioning diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, or belonging, I provided a safe,

comfortable space in which they could learn about human qualities and principles, and how to identify and evaluate them. Mrs. Z immediately recognized the value of my focus on personal values. She saw that guiding students into a discussion about values prepared them to have deeper, more meaningful conversations with themselves and others about personal identity, which itself must be an *activity* and not simply a *name*.

Our declarations of names and labels cannot and must not replace the *feeling* and *thinking* that accompanies a genuine quest for knowledge of self as opposed to a trendy strategy of self-branding or a “woke” tattooing of dormant souls.