# Putting the Plural Noun Values in Context

Keynote Address by John Heenan: Eighth National Character Education Symposium, Turnbull House, Wellington, 18th June 2010

A couple of months ago we took two of our grandchildren; one aged thirteen and the other fifteen to the movie "Mao's Last Dancer." The movie tells the story of Li Cunxin the sixth of seven sons born, in 1961, to desperately poor Chinese peasant farmers. Despite the harsh reality of life in rural China at the time, Li's childhood was full of love. The love of his parents gave him hope and courage while his incredible work ethic enabled him to become one of the world's best ballet dancers.
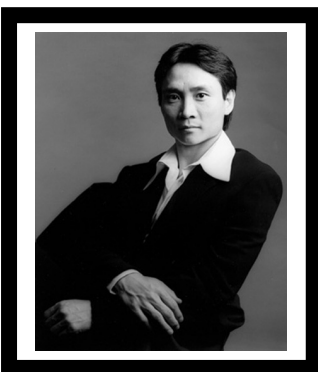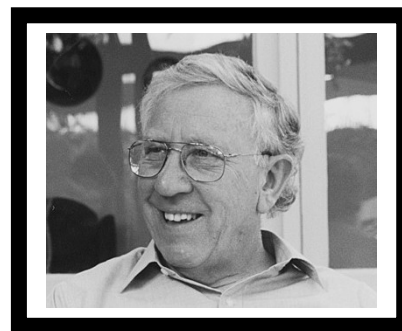
When he was eleven, government officials selected Li because of his physique to be trained at the Beijing Dance Academy. This was one of Madame Mao's pet projects. Li endured the academy's harsh training regime - practice started, six days a week, at 5.30 am and finished at 9 pm.

With incredible determination, resilience, perseverance and vision, Li graduated as one of the best dancers China has produced. He was one of the first two students allowed, under Mao's regime, to go on a cultural exchange and study in America. In a dramatic defection Li was subsequently imprisoned in the Chinese Consulate in Houston, Texas. After the movie we chatted with our grandchildren about what they had thought of it. We soon realized that, while they had enjoyed the movie at a superficial level, they had missed the significance of Li's amazing story because they had no understanding of:

- The bitter poverty of rural China in the 1960's
- The impact of the Mao's Cultural Revolution
- The power of Madame Mao
- Chairman Mao's intense national pride
- The deep distrust, at that time, between America and China

For our grandchildren, the absence of historical background reduced "Mao's Last Dancer," to an entertaining story devoid of context. For them, it was a story in a vacuum.

With respect, it seems to me that this is exactly the situation that many educators, and dare I say it, curriculum writers, find themselves in when in comes to the plural noun, values. Just as some understanding of the history of China in the second half of last century is essential to appreciate "Mao's Last Dancer," so some knowledge of the history of the plural noun "values" assists understanding its modern usage. If we had been meeting in 1877 when the first New Zealand curriculum was published we would not have used the plural noun "values" because the word had not been introduced. We would have used such words as virtues, morals or traits of character.

In the 1880's the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche began to speak of "values" in the present sense – "not as a verb, meaning to value or esteem something; nor as a singular noun, meaning the measure of a thing (the economic value of money, labour or property) but in the plural, meaning the moral beliefs and attitudes of a society." Nietzsche disliked "virtues." To him, one virtue was more of a virtue than two, and he wrote that "virtue itself was offensive." Nietzsche believed that both the classical virtues – Fortitude, Justice, Prudence and Temperance – and Judaic-Christian virtues – Faith, Hope and Love – imprisoned people. He wanted to set people free from them.

The four classical virtues are called "cardinal virtues" – not because they have anything to do with the colour red or the "Cardinals" of the Roman Catholic Church – but because "cardinal" comes from a Latin word meaning "the hinge of a door." They are 'cardinal' virtues because they are 'pivotal.' Other

virtues hinge on them. The four "cardinal virtues" – Fortitude, Justice, Prudence and Temperance – have been recognised by all civilizations and cultures. Some claim that different civilizations and different ages have had different virtues.

But that is not true. A study of such different civilizations as the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Chinese, Creeks, Romans, Anglo-Saxon and Ancient Hebrew, to name but a few, will show this. Other virtues, including the eight cornerstone values, hinge on the Cardinal Virtues.

The cornerstone values – kindness, consideration and compassion, for example, are aspects of the "cardinal virtue" Justice. In modern times much of the meaning of the Cardinal Virtues has been lost.

Prudence was practical common sense – wisdom. Thinking about what you are doing and what the outcomes were likely to be. In the language of the Cornerstone Values approach to character education – it includes respect, responsibility, the law of consequences and rational decision making. The meaning of temperance has also changed. Now it is about teetotalism - abstaining from alcohol. But temperance was about all pleasures. It did not mean abstaining from them but using them in moderation. Temperance was about going the right distance.

Justice was about much more than what goes on in our courts of law. Justice is the old word for everything we call "fairness" – *honesty, consideration, kindness, compassion, keeping your word.* *Fortitude* included two forms of courage – the kind that faces danger and the kind that 'sticks with it' in adversity. In modern language Fortitude was about having "guts." Friedrich Nietzsche, the father of values, disliked virtues because he believed that they limited, and inhibited personal freedom. This view, that virtues - objective values - restrain people from having a good time and are unnecessary restraints on personal freedom, is widely help today. In reality, the opposite is true.

The old virtues give direction and cohesion to social interaction. They prevented breakdown, strain and friction. They were there to ensure that society ran smoothly. The old virtues were concerned with three things:

1. Fair play and harmony between individuals
2. Harmony within an individual
3. The well-being of the society

Nietzsche believed that the death of virtues would set people free and allow them to choose their own "virtues." Then, he believed, there would be no good or evil, no virtue or vice. There would only be "values" – which he saw as "personal virtues." And so Nietzsche de-graded the old "virtues" into "values" in the hope of creating a new set of "virtues" for his "new man." His purpose was clear. He wanted to create a "new person" free from the shackles of external constraints.

Nietzsche's new values were about an individual's and societal moral beliefs and attitudes. Values, as the word is used today, are an amalgam of the objective virtues and Nietzsche's new subjective values. In recent days I have read of social values, national values, cultural values, personal values, moral values, ANZAC values, landscape values, commercial values, family values, school values, curriculum values, spiritual values, personal values, ecological values and community values.

I have also read that *respect, responsibility, honesty, courage, perseverance and fairness* are values. My problem is that before I can understand or participate in a discussion on values I have to discern the sense the word values is being used.

There are three facts that guide this discernment:

1. Values, as the word is now used, can be preferences or principles
2. The language of character has been eroded and is no longer objective
3. Values means what the speaker, or writer, assumes it means

Values Can be Principles or Preferences

Values that are principles are objective but values that are preferences are subjective. Values that are preferences are something "to have," in the same way as a mobile phone, long hair or white coffee are

"things to have." Values that are preferences can be changed or modified at any time; they are not set, permanent or universal. Just as it can be said of preferences, "My preferences are as good as your preferences." So it can be said of preference values, "My values are as good as your values." The individual is the judge of their worth or correctness. Preference values are subjective they are something "to have." In contrast, values that are principles are objective. They are not something "to have," but something "to be." Indeed, the most important thing to be; honest, kind, compassionate, respectful and responsible.

Objective values, things "to be" are the foundation of *character*.

Character is the excellence of such objective values as honesty, kindness, compassion, respect and responsibility. *Character is: knowing the good, desiring the good and doing the good. Character* is about personal behaviour.

Subjective values - something "to have" and objective values - something "to be" are at the opposite ends of the moral spectrum. **The language of character has been eroded**

My understanding of the sense in which plural noun values is being used is assisted if I know that the language of character has been eroded. As the use of plural noun values has become universal the language of character has been eroded and has lost objectivity. This loss of objective meaning can be illustrated by the word "gentleman" which used to denote a land owner with a coat-of-arms. Consequently it was possible to say that "John was a gentleman and a liar." "Gentleman" described a readily identifiable kind of man. "Gentleman" now means little more than a statement of approval. "Rod is a gentleman." "Gentleman" no longer has a clear objective meaning. It possesses the same order of meaning that a "nice" meal might have. A "nice" meal means only a meal that the diner enjoyed.

Values Means What the Speaker Assumes it Means. My understanding of the sense in which plural noun values is being used is enhanced if I know that the plural noun values has no universal objective meaning. Social values, national values, cultural values, personal values, moral values, Anzac values, landscape values, commercial values, family values, school values, curriculum, spiritual values, personal values, ecological values and community values. The plural noun "values" is subjective and means what the user assumes it means.

Values and Character Education. These changes in language have been mirrored in the curriculum with the move from character training in the 1960's to values education. Until the latter half of last century the development of character training was a central component to the school curriculum. The devaluing of character and the demise of character education has brought significant cultural and social changes and has had an enormous impact on schools. While the curriculum developers of the 1960's may have sought to illuminate indoctrination they simply traded the fear of indoctrination in the old virtues with indoctrination in the ideology of moral relativism.

The outcome has been that young people, regardless of their social, racial and economic background, have absorbed the unmistakable message that right and wrong are relative, that they must not be judgmental, that what is right for one person may be wrong for another. Right and wrong are personal values, never objective, and always dependent upon time, place and circumstance. Over the last twenty years, in countries all over the world, there has been an increasing interest in character education.

Values and character education are not the same. "Values education" is said to be "the process whereby students develop responsible attitudes towards others and skill in making judgements about right and wrong." "Values Education," is primarily concerned with the quality of students' thinking. It was for this reason that early values education programmes focussed on values clarification. Values education is process orientated. "Values education" has never been concerned with the formation of character or student behaviour.

In contrast, "character education" is primarily concerned with the formation of good character and consequently good behaviour. It was Plato who observed that we educate people to make them good because good people behaviour nobly. Character education recognises that character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character. "Character education" is both process and product orientated.

Conclusion

Earlier I said that the purpose of the old virtues was to give direction and cohesion to social interaction. Their purpose was to prevent breakdown, strain, and friction within both the individual and society. They were there to ensure that society; whether a family, a school or a community ran smoothly. The old virtues were concerned with three things:

- Fair play and harmony between individuals
- Harmony within an individual
- The well being of society

These are the exact reasons why the implementation of the Cornerstone Values approach to character education transforms school culture, enhances interpersonal relationship, creates a caring community and increases the quality of teaching and learning. It is not rocket science it simply applying the wisdom of the ages in a contemporary manner. The simple truth is that when objective values; call them virtues, character traits or simply cornerstone values, are undermined there is a loss of social cohesion. When that happens there is a loss of:

- Harmony between individuals
- Harmony within individuals
- Harmony within society

It is my hope that what I have shared this morning has provided a useful context for contributions that you will share today.

John Heenan
Eighth National Character Education Symposium