

***Reasons for Living:
Education and young
people's search for
meaning, identity and
spirituality A handbook***

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Published by Australian Council for Educational Research, Camberwell VIC, ISBN 0 86431 63 5 November 2006 544 pages.

Reasons for Living begins by exploring the development and psychological function of meaning, identity and spirituality in the lives of young people. This can contribute significantly to the professional

background of those engaged in the education and care of youth in various contexts.

The book then focuses on what it means to educate young people in meaning, identity and spirituality. Implications are considered for three school contexts: the spiritual and moral dimension to the general curriculum in public and independent schools; religious education in religious schools; and state-based religion studies courses.

Reasons for Living makes a much needed contribution to the philosophy of education by discussing the links between education and young people's spiritual and moral development. It also provides new insights and approaches to values education and religious education.

Fundamental areas of importance in Australian education have been held back not only by the gap between theory and practice, but also the very complexities of young people's personal development in contemporary Western culture. ***Reasons for Living*** offers a constructive and practical way forward.

It addresses Australian education, but with an international perspective; this gives a strong contextual specificity that can be the basis for interesting comparisons with practice in other countries. While aimed at practitioners in education and the helping professions, the book has much to offer at the scholarly and research levels.

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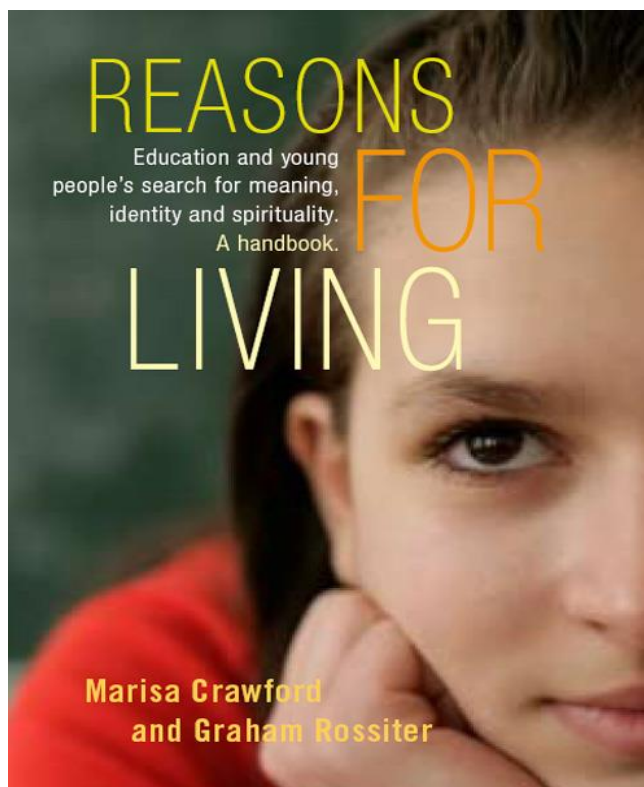
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Part I

Education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality

This part, with a single chapter, gives an overview of the arguments taken up in the book.

Chapter 1

Reasons for living: School education and young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality

Social changes, including the processes of social fragmentation and individualisation, have increased uncertainty in young people's lives.

This uncertainty underscores a need to make sense of it all, and ‘make a life’ for one’s self.

Richard Eckersley et al., 2006¹

A human being is not one in pursuit of happiness, but rather in search of a reason to become happy.

Viktor Frankl²

Read the prospectus from any school, public or independent, and you will usually find that fostering the spiritual and moral growth of students will be a core part of its educational aims. Since the inception of universal education, the concern to educate the ‘whole person’ has assumed varied but, at the core, similar objectives. They took different guises – formation of character, values, citizenship, self-esteem, wellbeing and so on – and they were revised and renamed within the context of social change, but as far as school aims were concerned, they were *de rigueur*.

If one were to be cynical, it could be said that it was all just window-dressing a problematic area. In the last twenty years, mission and vision statements have become vogue for any institution or individual worth their salt. From government departments to the local butcher or baker (in appropriately sensitive locations), mission statements have been put on public display. This in itself is not a bad thing. If the butcher and baker have particular aims in their mission statement that they endeavour to achieve, in all likelihood they as purveyors and their customers as consumers will be able to agree that the aims of the mission statement can be achieved. Not so easy with the desire of schools to educate the ‘whole’ person!

Clearly, schools should have these personal development intentions that are at the heart of their mandate to teach. But the chequered history of this aspect of education shows that it remains complex, controversial, subject to fads, and often neglected in practice. How to get it right? Now, there’s the rub.

This book proposes one way of helping to ‘get it right’. It develops a conceptualisation of the spiritual and moral dimension to education in which the constructs ‘meaning’, ‘identity’ and ‘spirituality’ – all important for young people’s personal development – can be useful in helping educators make across-the-curriculum teaching more relevant to pupils’ personal growth, and in ways that do not compromise the integrity of the subjects being taught.³

This chapter serves to introduce the argument and related concepts, which are developed in detail in the chapters that follow. It looks at problems in conceptualising and implementing a spiritual and moral dimension to the school curriculum; it introduces the three key constructs and explores how they can be used effectively in a modest but realistic way, referring to some pedagogical issues and practical examples.

Part II explores different understandings of the three constructs and considers what it means to educate in meaning, identity and spirituality. Parts III–V look at implementation within three educational contexts: the general school curriculum, Religious Education in church-related schools (with Catholic schools as the particular example), and state-based Religion Studies courses.

1.1 The spiritual and moral dimension to the school curriculum

The question ‘how can the curriculum promote the spiritual and moral development of pupils?’ has long been a concern for both government and independent schools, even if in some situations the practical attention given to it has been minimal. The study of religion as a subject has been a prominent, and often the principal, expression of this concern, especially in religious schools; in government schools in different countries, the subject Religion has had mixed fortunes. Other subjects like Personal Development, Life Skills, Philosophy and Ethics also cover spiritual and moral content; but apart from Personal Development, which has been a mandated study, the others have not been widely offered in schools. However, the intention of promoting pupils’ personal development has never been restricted to particular subjects – it is a concern of the whole school curriculum.

How to address spiritual and moral dimensions to education has always been controversial and problematic. While the *intention* to do this has generally been regarded as important, there has not been enough coherent progression from intention to practice, even though there have been worthwhile developments.

One reason for this gap between theory and practice is the natural complexity and understandable uncertainty in links between teaching practice and change in young people’s beliefs, values and attitudes. In both intention and outcomes, to educate for ‘personal change’ is at a *different level* from educating for knowledge and skills. As far as classroom dynamics are concerned, however, it is *not* at a different level, because the teaching and learning transactions remain basically the same. The intention to educate for personal change does not introduce a new reality to the classroom that sparks a quantum leap to ‘personal learning’. Teachers cannot ‘change gear’ to a spiritual mode of teaching that automatically engages students personally. The different ‘level’ has more to do with the psychological process of personal change in the students than it does with the pedagogy of the teacher. Personal change is influenced by many factors outside the classroom teaching-learning process; to be authentic it has to come freely from within the individual; if personal change is to have repercussions through an individual’s personality, it is unlikely to happen ‘then and there’, on cue, in the classroom. It is, therefore, more appropriate to use the phrase ‘education that may *dispose* pupils towards personal change’ as a more accurate acknowledgment of the intention, and hence a more realistic starting point for relevant practice.

Another influential reason for this gap between theory and practice is that various conceptions of spiritual/moral/values education across the curriculum have not been cogent and realistic enough to win the wide support of teachers. Most teachers are sympathetic to the aim of promoting student personal development, but if they are not convinced that a particular program or across-the-curriculum strategy can be carried through realistically, then implementation will fall short of what was expected. And *it will not be perceived as realistic unless it harmonises with their ordinary experience of classroom teaching and learning.*

It may be that the expectations for student personal change are too high. Perhaps it is more realistic to ensure that the curriculum and the teaching processes are pointed in a ‘healthy direction’ for personal development, rather than focus on how much personal change is actually brought about. This acknowledges that not all pupils will change as desired; neither will they all change at the same pace. But it remains important for educators to know that they are doing their best to provide the

educational environment, the values orientation, the content and process that can facilitate pupils' personal development.

Different across-the-curriculum approaches have been tried, for example seeing how studies in English, History or Science could promote some form of spiritual learning. There have been a number of generic strategies, each with its own constructs and language, such as values across the curriculum, values infusion, holistic education, spiritual education, and character education; while civics and citizenship education has across-curriculum implications, the tendency has been to treat it like a subject. At times, values clarification and self-esteem strategies have been used in different subjects, though mainly within personal development. In addition, pedagogical initiatives derived from various psychological and educational theories are said to foster some spiritual learning; examples include multiple intelligences, 'brain-based' learning theory, left/right brain learning, spiritual intelligence, de Bono's hats, and constructivist theory.

This book does not set out to add another new approach to this list. Use of the constructs – meaning, identity and spirituality – can enhance personal education in any of the approaches mentioned above, as well as within formal subjects like religion or personal development.

1.2 The search for meaning

Don't talk to me about life's seasons. Don't ask me for answers,
don't ask me for reasons.

I don't want to hear; Don't want to hear it at all.

From the moment we're born we start to die; And a man
can go crazy if he keeps askin' why.

That's just how it is. Don't look for a reason at all.

[But] There must be a reason. There must be a way, to make
some sense of it;

To try to find a reason for it all.

We're not born just so we can die. There must be an
answer, and we've got to try;

To make some sense of it. To try to find a reason for it all.

Eric Bogle

In a song called 'A reason for it all', written in the late 1980s, Scottish-Australian musician Eric Bogle expressed the anxiety people can feel about meaning and purpose in life; they can sense they are caught between feelings of despair that there may be no meaning, and a desire to find explanations of bewildering events and experiences. They need an interpretation of what is happening that will help them cope and plan a hopeful future.

For religious people, their beliefs form a core of meaning. They interpret life from a religious perspective. But for many, especially youth, religion – a principal traditional source of meaning – does not have the same cogency or credibility it seemed to have in the past. In contemporary Western societies, pluralism, pace of life and the media have affected the ways in which communities (even families) served as frames of

reference for beliefs. In a culture with an ever increasing emphasis on individualism and the ‘good life’, many do not bother to look for guidance from the traditional support structures for meaning; they may be religious in a sense, but they are too busy with work and entertainment to give much thought to overall meaning to life. Many get by with no reference to religion.

At times, for people living a life ‘under pressure’, questions of meaning will inevitably arise. But with few links to traditional sources of meaning, or because they have despaired of their relevance, they feel more on their own in searching for a view of life that will sustain them. They may use readily available meanings in popular culture, even if some of these are damaging.

The attention people consciously give to meaning in life varies considerably. This is evident in the content of their meaning and its consequences for the way they conduct themselves, as well as in the efforts made to cultivate personal meaning. People express concern that there is a contemporary ‘crisis of meaning’, whereas for others there appears to be no such problem. There is no universal consensus in diagnosing the social situation. But there are enough indications that meaning is important in human life, and that there are problems with its development and evaluation, to make questions about meaning important for education.

This book takes a value position on meaning. It presumes that a need for meaning and purpose is a defining characteristic of the human being. Communities of meaning – family, religion, social groups and the state – have a role in communicating basic meanings to the next generation, in ways that respect the emerging personal autonomy of young people. The notion of ‘healthy’ meaning is an important one for communities to develop to guide their care for the young and to inform the goals of education.

Use of the word ‘healthy’ as a qualifier of meaning needs clarification. The young need access to the core meanings of their immediate community to enable them to feel they belong. This gives a ‘starting’ interpretation of life and reference points for cultural identity – a cultural inheritance of meaning. It is a working theory that sustains their need for purpose and values; it can be confirmed or modified later as they mature and take more personal responsibility for their own meaning. At a psychological level, healthy meaning needs to be plausible and serviceable – the best the community can offer. But it should be more than that. It needs to include criteria for judging meaning: whether it is benign or harmful.

As far as a role for education is concerned, there is ready agreement that young people need initial help with information and skills for developing meaning. But when it comes to spelling out details, especially the particular meanings to be communicated, almost inevitably there will be different estimates of what is required. The communities responsible for schools (both government and independent) need some discernment structure in place to address this problem. When the content is controversial, as in meaning (beliefs and values), it will be difficult to achieve consensus; but it remains important to articulate and endorse the school’s role both as regards ‘meaning content’ and critical skills for the identification and evaluation of meaning. In Chapter 4, the notion of ‘healthy meaning’ will be proposed as a guide for informing this process.

Inevitably, a study of meaning in schools needs to include religion. In liberal democratic societies, there has long been debate about the place for religion in public

education. In the United Kingdom, religious education in the curriculum is required by law. In the United States, law requires that religion is kept out of the curriculum.⁴ In Australia, a religious education sponsored by a church or religion is permitted in limited circumstances (*Denominational religious education*). Legally, a second form of religious education – a more general exploration of religion taught by departmental teachers – is allowed (*General religious education*), but has never developed successfully in the state schools; however, ‘religion studies’ courses have been taken up by religious schools, especially the Catholic schools, with high candidature.

To ignore this second format for studying religion in government schools would be to compromise the range of cultural meanings that should be accessed and appraised by young people in that context. Hence, with regard to their education in meaning, pupils in government schools are somewhat disadvantaged. In the short term it is unlikely that religion studies will become a viable subject in Australian state schools. But realistically, how many students would choose to do this subject if it were available? (By the same token, fewer would study religion in church schools if students had the choice). But the notion of an education in meaning is not limited to a formal study of religion, so we shall give special attention to across-the-curriculum studies of meaning because of their importance for public education.

In religiously sponsored schools, it is appropriate to include religious activities as well as content in theology and scripture as part of education in the meanings of the faith tradition. Even in the context of a community of faith – and the religious school is not a community of faith in exactly the same sense as a local church or synagogue – it is important to acknowledge the natural limitations to the ‘educational’ role. The school’s educational process cannot ‘inject’ religious beliefs into pupils. The young can be socialised into the basic meanings and practices of their religious tradition from an early age, both in the family and in a local community of faith, and to some extent at school. But whether or not they will become actively involved in organised religion will eventually be a matter of their own choice. In highly secularised Western societies like Australia, many young people are only nominally connected with their religious tradition. Nevertheless, whether or not they become practising members, educational access to their cultural religious heritage can make a valuable contribution to their personal development.

One final word here about the evaluation of meaning. While the contemporary search for meaning is often said to be difficult for young people, there is no shortage of meanings available in society. The world is awash with meanings telling people how to live. This is amplified by the media, especially film and television, where consumerism is all-pervasive; it can give the impression that meaning and satisfaction in life revolve around what one can buy. Some young people feel that they are wading through a virtual swamp of ideas about what it means to be alive, unique and independent. Identifying implied meanings in culture and judging their appropriateness and potential contribution to wellbeing are therefore important skills that the young need to develop. The evaluation of meaning may ultimately be more pertinent than the concept ‘search for meaning’. This is where education is important.

1.3 Identity

A research consultation with youth in Australia in 1998 reported that three major concerns of young people were unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and identity and the search for meaning.⁵ Though apparently not as immediately pressing as the

problems of unemployment and drug and alcohol abuse, the need for young people to find ways of making meaning in their lives and developing an authentic sense of self are matters of great concern to them. While meaning and identity are felt to be important, and are bound up with their attempts to understand life, they may have vague and confused, but emotionally charged ideas of what these concepts mean. In addition, they are not sure of where to look for help, and they are not confident that adult institutions understand their questions, let alone have satisfying answers. As the report went on to say: ‘Many young people talk of lacking purpose and meaning in life. They often lack helpful role models, feeling that the world in which they live bears little or no resemblance to that from which their parents emerged.’⁶ In a changing social, economic and familial landscape, many of the support networks that existed for past generations are no longer there, or if present, they appear irrelevant.

Young people’s interest in identity is usually personal and psychological. On the other hand, the focus of community interest in identity is often sociological: the concern is to hand on the distinguishing characteristics of the community, ethnic and religious identities in particular; communities are also interested in seeing what contribution education can make to the process.

Identity is acknowledged as important in personal and social development. But what it means and how it develops are complex and controversial. For example, identity can be invoked to justify action ranging from support for a local football team to the extreme of ethnic cleansing. Perceptions of identity are often closely associated with violence. A clarification of what identity means and how this can be addressed in education should be an important community concern. As for the construct meaning, developing the notion of ‘healthy identity’ will be proposed as useful for working out educational implications.

1.4 Spirituality

As the title of this book suggests, the constructs ‘spirituality’ and ‘identity’ have been bracketed with meaning because it was considered valuable for education to address this trio of constructs together in an integrated way. All three are closely related and are important in human development; they all figure in the social sciences and they are becoming more prominent in educational discourse. But all three are notoriously difficult to define. Nevertheless, a clarification of their meaning is essential if they are to be used constructively in educational theory and practice. This will be done in an introductory way in Part II. Our purpose is to use these constructs (and related personal development themes) for heuristic purposes: to identify and analyse issues; to provide explanatory interpretations; to stimulate interest in furthering investigations; and to encourage learning.

Traditionally, the word ‘spirituality’ has had a religious connotation: the style of prayer and spiritual practice that expresses a religious perspective on life. But now, in addition to this religious usage, the word has been selected by others precisely to avoid the religious connotation. Religiosity and spirituality are not coextensive, even though for religious people there is considerable overlap. Spirituality has become a ubiquitous term covering many different aspects of personal life and culture; it is used in traditional religions, as well as in new religious movements and non-religious spiritual groups; it also figures in areas as diverse as ecology, new age, healing, health sciences, social sciences, business and education.

For educational purposes, the construct spirituality needs to be broad enough to include a religious contribution, as well as acknowledging a spiritual dimension to living that covers values, commitments and aesthetic concerns. This allows the construct to accommodate both traditional interests and new developments that are spiritual but not necessarily religious. This is useful for three reasons.

First, in Western societies, religion is not prominent in the lives of many people; secularisation is at a high-water mark. Hence a spiritual education, if it is to enhance personal development and benefit the community, has to do more than meet the needs of those who are active members of local religious groups. This applies particularly to young people, many of whom construct a spirituality without much reference to organised religion. While the young are not so likely to use the word ‘spirituality’ with reference to their aspirations in life, they tend to have more affinity with the word ‘spiritual’ than with ‘religious’.

Second, it is important not to discount the special interest that religion has long held in spirituality, or to underestimate the valuable contribution that a study of religion can make to young people’s education. Parts IV and V of the book will endeavour to show how religious education in all school types can contribute to the spiritual and moral development of young people.

Third, by using a language of spirituality that is not limited to the religious, there is a better chance of articulating the spiritual and moral dimensions to general education in a productive way. Earlier, brief mention was made of debates about a place for the study of religion in school education, but this does not cover adequately more general concerns about spirituality, values and ethics in the curriculum. The language of spirituality, together with that of moral and values education, provides a more appropriate framework for working out these concerns.

1.5 Relationships between meaning, identity and spirituality and their connection with other personal development constructs

As the three key constructs are explored in later chapters, it will become more evident that they are not distinct. There is considerable overlap; there are many interrelationships. In some instances, meaning and identity seem to be the same reality interpreted from different perspectives. But the definitional difficulties can be turned to educational advantage; their meaning and psychological functions can be explored by students.

A number of personal development constructs have been used by educators (as well as by health and welfare professionals) in their aims. These include values, self-esteem, moral development, character, wellbeing, coping, resilience, civic skills, wisdom, being cultured, lifelong learning, self-management, empowerment, virtues, faith – as well as more general terms like spiritual health, maturity, personal and social development, and religious development.⁷ All of the constructs are personal and complex; they are interrelated, while each usually illustrates some distinctive facets of personal development. It is precisely because of their personal nature and complexity that they cannot be handled in the same way as educational outcomes in knowledge, skills and employment-oriented competencies.⁸ Without doubt, they all have useful meaning and educational potential. But their multiplicity is confusing when a conceptualisation of the spiritual and moral dimension to education tries to take all of them into account at the same time.

We selected meaning, identity and spirituality as our focus because collectively they entered in some way into most of the personal development terms listed above. In addition, they met six selection criteria:

- They are of interest and importance for youth.
- They are components of a wide range of other personal development constructs.
- They all have significance for psychological development and are closely related.
- They all have cultural parallels, such as cultural meanings that highlight interaction between individuals and cultural resources in personal development.
- They have all figured as important educational goals (at least to some extent).
- They readily provide content for study both in spiritual-moral subjects and in across-the-curriculum studies.

It is not proposed that the three constructs should be used exclusively to cover the spiritual-moral dimension of the school curriculum. However, their use makes a valuable contribution to educational discourse and provides a helpful model for handling many of the other personal development concepts listed above.

We do not anticipate resolving all definitional difficulties and potential inconsistencies with regard to meaning, identity and spirituality; but their exploration in terms of personal and cultural dynamics offers considerable value for young people's personal development education.

Given the limitations of space in this book, we chose not to refer to the considerable literature of moral and values education. Nevertheless, the proposed approach makes a valuable contribution to this area even though the links with its literature have not been pointed out.

1.6 The sociocultural situation and the contemporary search for meaning, identity and spirituality

The social situation in which young people find themselves makes the search a difficult task. Their life environment does not seem as secure and purposeful as perhaps it was for earlier generations. Beliefs about life's meaning drawn from religious convictions no longer seem to hold true. In an environment flooded with ways to make meaning and to find our 'true selves', there is an urgent need to help young people learn how to think critically about the issues.

On one hand, lifestyle expectations in Western countries have never been higher. Images of the 'good life' saturate the media, and the possibilities are seductive and pervasive: 'The world is your oyster!' and if you have the right consumer goods – with the right brand labels – life is there for the taking: 'Just do it!' Freedom and individuality are prized. The suggestion that life also needs altruism, commitments, and fidelity, let alone some sacrifices, is usually notable by its absence (it is more difficult to relate these qualities to consumerism); this makes it easier to think that life can be lived without them.

While young people's imaginations have been stimulated to feel these possibilities vividly, their real life experience is often in stark contrast with their wish list. No matter how hard they try, they can never look as attractive as the fashion models or stars who set the standards of beauty and desirability towards which all aspire. Satisfying personal relationships are not just there to pick up like goods from a

supermarket. And finding a good job and career can be fraught with failure, disappointment and self-doubt.

When they look at what is happening around them, they find little to encourage hope. One education document offered the following sociological analysis. While the young would probably not use the same technical terms, many would have a first-hand experience of these problems.

On the threshold of the third millennium education faces new challenges which are the result of a new socio-political and cultural context. First and foremost, we have a crisis of values which, in highly developed societies in particular, assumes the form, often exalted by the media, of subjectivism, moral relativism and nihilism. The extreme pluralism pervading contemporary society leads to behaviour patterns which are at times so opposed to one another as to undermine any idea of community identity. Rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and the globalisation of the economy affect human life more and more throughout the world. Rather than prospects of development for all, we witness the widening of the gap between rich and poor, as well as massive migration from underdeveloped to highly developed countries. The phenomena of multiculturalism and an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-religious society is at the same time an enrichment and a source of further problems.⁹

What is particularly problematic is the new prominence of nihilistic thinking – a tendency to believe there is no meaning to life. This can coexist with a very pragmatic and materialistic outlook. Having nothing much to believe in or hope for can contribute to increasing levels of boredom, depression, drug and alcohol abuse and suicide, especially among youth.

This situation creates anxiety for adults, let alone young people. It makes the search for meaning and purpose difficult for all. It is the situation that families and communities have to address, trying to make some sense of it so they can guide children and young adults in charting a hopeful path forward.

1.7 Education and ‘reasons for living’

We do not see education as the primary means of resolving the social problems noted above. But what it can do well is help young people become better informed, and learn how to think critically about the contemporary socio-cultural situation and about spiritual and moral issues. It can help them discern the shaping influence of culture and learn how to become critical interpreters and evaluators of culture. It cannot automatically make them wise, but it can point them in the direction of wisdom.

A key to this constructive role for education is written into the title of the book (and in the song quoted at the beginning of this chapter): *reasons for living*. Fundamental to education is the appeal to reason; enhancing the capacity to think critically is central. Also, given the malaise in meaning that the young experience, and given the negative feelings many of them have about finding a satisfactory purpose in life and achieving some authentic identity, there is a need to get them to consider positive reasons for living. School education can provide a valuable forum in which they can explore constructive community meanings as well as developing diagnoses of social problems.

The emphasis should be on student-centred study and research. The educational process needs to be dialogical, not a one-way proclamation of normative community

views. But neither should it neglect these views. It should be directed at the meaning of issues – at values and politics – and not just at facts and descriptions. As well as educating the young in the critical evaluation of meaning and identity, it can provide resources that young people can draw on in constructing their own worldview.

While this proposal may sound attractive to educators, particularly those who have been involved in religious education, it is also likely to be perceived as unrealistic for general education. Hence it is important to continue arguing the case for a spiritual-moral role for general education, and to propose realistic ways in which it might be implemented.

Over the past thirty years government documentation on the purposes of schooling in Australia has increasingly given attention to the role of education in promoting the spiritual and moral development of young people. For example, in 1990, the following aims statement appeared in the NSW Government white paper on education:

Values and Education: The moral, ethical and spiritual development of students is a fundamental goal of education. It is clearly not confined to one area of the curriculum. *All* teachers, across *all* areas of the curriculum have a responsibility to inculcate in their students positive values and a capacity for moral and ethical judgment.

Government schools should actively promote the moral values which are shared by the majority of people in our community. There is merit in the clear statement of this responsibility.

In particular, this document will give greater emphasis to the link between education, work and personal fulfilment, as well as encouraging imagination, creativity, excellence and the search for meaning and purpose in life. It will give more recognition to the place of the family and family values in our society and the rights and responsibilities of parents in the area of morals and values. Greater stress will be placed on students achieving high standards of self-discipline, personal conduct and social responsibility. As recommended ... the document will also acknowledge the importance of all students developing spiritual values.¹⁰

Aims statements like this – including one in the *Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-first Century* (1999) on spiritual and moral development, and a comparable statement on values in the *National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools* (2003)¹¹ – provide a mandate for spiritual and moral education in schools, both government and non-government. This is a very positive development. But they also create problems for educators because there remains a significant gap between the aims and practice. The idea of all teachers across all curriculum areas being involved in some form of spiritual-moral education is at first sight fanciful. The challenge is to interpret the role in a modest and realistic way; teachers need clarification of what might be done as a natural part of teaching and learning procedures without compromising the integrity of their given subject matter. If not done in a cogent way, it is unlikely that such statements about values in education will win the support of educators.

While we consider ‘spiritual and moral dimension to the curriculum’ and ‘pupil spiritual and moral development’ to be the most comprehensive terms that can be used in this discussion, at present, this view does not appear to have wide or

unquestioned support – nor does it have evident opposition; its relevance remains to be tested. For many educators, the terms are obviously significant, but still somewhat ambiguous as regards their relevance to public education. This is because spiritual and moral development have not yet been conceptualised clearly enough to be accepted as more than a nominal goal. Addressing this situation is a principal purpose of this book.

Another related issue for teachers, particularly in public schools, is a concern that efforts to promote pupils' spiritual and moral development could arouse controversy. Teachers might engage students in an exploration of issues, and then realise they had no support from school and school system authorities for their exercise of professional judgment in a values education role. A mandate for some general form of values education appearing in aims documents is one thing, but if this is not followed through to a more specific mandate at school and local community level, with clearly stated implications for content, method and teaching ethics, it is unlikely that teachers will feel confident enough to proceed. Hence there is an urgent need for public endorsement at school level of the intention to engage in across-the-curriculum spiritual-moral education, together with a realistic account of how this could be implemented. There is no problem in requiring accountability in this or other areas of education. But there is a danger that excessive concerns about accountability will inhibit valuable educational activity in the spiritual-moral area. If this happens, it betrays the professional trust the community should have in its teachers, and those who really lose out are the students.

A need to clarify the spiritual and moral dimensions to the whole school curriculum in a practicable way is thus a key task for public education. If there is not adequate follow-through, then the valuable spiritual-moral thrust in recent aims documents will dissipate. Worse still, if these more personal, holistic aims for education are surrendered because they could not be realistically translated into practice, it will be even easier for the economic, employment-oriented goals to dominate education even more than they do now.

There are, however, encouraging signs of progress. In recent decades, Australian state education systems have articulated core values that should underpin schooling.¹² Addressing the spiritual and moral dimension of the school curriculum has become prominent in educational discourse; talk about values in education has become more acceptable,¹³ even if there remains ambiguity about what it means 'to *teach* values'. The Federal Government's funding of a major national values education project has been significant.¹⁴ But it goes without saying that much remains to be done to address the task of conceptualisation enunciated above.

1.8 The role for school education in relation to young people's search for meaning, identity and spirituality

Educational efforts to enhance young people's personal development do not have the same sorts of neat, credentialled outcomes as exist for regular subjects, but this does not make them less important. While knowledge and skills are involved, and critical rationality is crucial, personal development outcomes are better expressed as *hopes*. They are potential small steps in personal change that might be occasioned by classroom studies; it is not possible, however, to causally link such personal change with teaching and learning in the same way it can be done for outcomes in say Mathematics and English. No educational program can automatically change young

people personally, let alone benchmark such change with specified outcomes. Wisdom and values cannot be communicated like knowledge or facts. Educational experience can point young people in the desired direction, but a free response is an essential part of any authentic personal change. Nevertheless, articulating hopes for spiritual-moral education is helpful in guiding the work of teachers; it gives direction to the way they address issues related to meaning, identity and spirituality. It helps them see when and where they can make constructive contributions; and it can inform the concepts, language and questions used to do this.

There are some subjects whose content naturally allows for a direct study of the three key constructs – like Religious Education, Ethics, Philosophy and Personal Development (see Parts IV and V on the study of religion).

What might be done in across-the-curriculum studies is a more difficult problem to address (see Part III). A useful starting point has been to ask why some of the efforts in this direction have not been more successful; they did not live up to expectations, even though they were proposed as a ‘core’ to the curriculum. It appears that the main problem was the one described earlier: a hiatus between educational aims and teaching practice. While the intentions were sound, and while it is comparatively easy to make a list of desirable values and attitudinal outcomes, there was little tangible progress past the stage of formulating aims. Generic programs in religious schools such as ‘values across the curriculum’, and ‘values infusion’ have not won substantial teacher support, let alone achieved effective implementation (some would say that they did not manage to get an adequate level of teacher understanding, not because of any lack of intellectual ability on the part of teachers, but because of naivety in their conceptualisation). These programs presumed a framework that did not adequately fit the realities of the classroom learning environment as teachers experienced it, even though their promoters believed that they should. In addition, they appeared to presume a simple model of values communication that did not account for the complexity of values development. Such approaches to spiritual-moral education were perceived by teachers as an ‘extra dimension’ imposed on their teaching; they felt that authorities were trying to ‘inject’ a religious content into their teaching of the secular curriculum, and that this compromised the integrity of their subject. They naturally tended to resent being told that they must do this over and above their normal professional role, because they were working in a religious school. In any case, they were not specifically trained for moral or spiritual education. Many teachers may not be opposed to the idea of promoting student personal development through across-the-curriculum studies. But they considered that the official line for some of these programs gave them a status and a pre-eminence that were unrealistic; their proposed importance, and the extent of intended values outcomes, were out of proportion to what teachers knew was achievable in the classroom. In turn, they were sceptical of programs that had an almost propaganda-like feel to them; there was an apparent ‘values overkill’.

Another problem, particularly in public education, but not limited to that context, is where teachers steer towards so-called ‘neutrality’ by trying to avoid values questions. As noted earlier, they are concerned about having no school support for engaging in the discussion of controversial issues, and they are reluctant to refer to their own views in case this gets them into trouble with school authorities or parents.

The first step in approaching meaning, identity and spirituality across the curriculum is realism in acknowledging the limited role of the school in bringing

about personal change. This means accepting that personal development in these areas is very complex, and influenced by many factors. Understanding the modest role of the school is the best starting point for planning the valuable contribution that the curriculum can make. For example, we know that we can successfully teach young people quantum physics but that we cannot teach them not to take drugs! As long as people use the same language when they talk about ‘teaching values’ as they do for teaching knowledge and skills, they will continue to overestimate the school’s capacity to promote the personal or spiritual development of young people. Regretfully, this will further inhibit the limited contribution that the school can make.

As regards an education in meaning, identity and spirituality, adding yet another program with this as the title would not be the answer. Education has long suffered from the way that schools have been expected to solve social problems through the introduction of specific programs (such as courses on sex, peace, citizenship, values, work, leisure, driving, conflict resolution, and AIDS). Even though these courses made useful educational contributions, ‘over-expecting’ personal change in pupils has remained a problem.

How studies of the three constructs are conducted, and how the students are engaged are crucial. But the most appropriate long-term approach for promoting young people’s education in meaning, identity and spirituality is not to create curriculum space for studying the ‘new’ content; rather, it is to *educate teachers* in relation to their own grasp of issues in these three areas. If they have a better understanding of the issues, they will be able to bring this into their teaching–learning interactions with students in appropriate ways, both inside and outside the classroom. Teachers need concepts and language that can help young people identify and explore issues related to the three constructs. These issues are embedded in many of the topics already studied in different subjects; they do not have to be introduced from outside. The issues are there, perhaps just beneath the ‘surface’ of the content, and the young need to learn how to ‘uncover’ them.

Just identifying the emerging spiritual-moral issues is in itself a valuable exercise. It takes well-informed and skilled teachers to be able to ask the telling questions, provide relevant information, comment on examples and pertinent anecdotes, and give vital leads to young people that can engage them in thinking about and debating these issues; eventually, in their own time, they may consider personal implications. If this spiritual-moral dimension to content is not attended to by teachers, there is a danger that it will be excluded *de facto*; this could give students the impression that school education ignores these issues, or worse, that they are not worth considering.

1.9 The importance of teachers’ understanding of issues related to meaning, identity and spirituality

The first and most important step is to enrich teachers’ understanding of the human search for meaning, identity and spirituality, especially as it applies to the young. They also need to be convinced that their teaching has a valuable capacity to promote young people’s education in these areas, and thus contribute in some way to their personal and spiritual development. This presumes that if teachers have a good background understanding of these constructs, and enough professional wisdom, they should be able to follow up on related issues in their teaching, when and where this is appropriate. They need to be encouraged to address, and not to avoid, value-sensitive issues. These issues could be studied both in formal subjects like religion as well as in

a variety of other subjects. A holistic education would not quarantine the investigation of spiritual-moral dimensions to one particular subject.

In the long term, this approach may be more helpful for promoting the spiritual-moral dimension of school education than providing teachers with a ‘how to do it’ manual. It is not so much *adding* to teachers’ professional responsibilities, but *enriching* their teaching. It is bringing the naturally embedded spiritual-moral dimension to the surface appropriately. It can empower teachers to address this dimension as a normal part of good education. There are procedural questions to be considered, for example the educative place of teachers’ own personal views and commitments, and a code of teaching ethics (see Chapter 13). Also, some attention to ‘how to do it’ is still relevant for teachers who may not see how a study of spiritual-moral issues can be woven into their teaching in a seamless way.

1.10 An education that can promote meaning, identity and spirituality

Planning for a spiritual dimension to education should not neglect the students’ experience and perspective. Young people are interested in spiritual and moral issues; they search for meaning and an authenticity in personal identity. But they will not automatically be interested in an education that sets out to help them in their quest. Rather, there is a complex irony. Often, the very studies that purport to give special attention to values questions have their personal relevance subverted – students just tune out!

Much of the high esteem for school education that has grown during the first century of compulsory schooling has come from the certification of achievement. Knowledge and skills achievements are benchmarked. Certificates are essential for entrance to further education and employment. The outcomes movement has focused on employment-oriented competencies. It influences what is called the ‘mark status’ of different subjects. Subjects that are more specifically concerned with personal development (Religion, Ethics) had no such tangible or employment-related outputs. Teachers and parents may have vocally supported the ideals of a holistic education, and the importance of spiritual-moral studies, but this may not impress the students. For example, despite the official high profile of Religious Education in church-related schools, many students have a poor regard for it. Even where students like the subject, they feel it has little relevance to their lives or future employment. The emergence of accredited state Religion Studies courses for senior classes in Australian schools has improved the academic status of Religious Education but it has not solved the problem. Students can be expected to bring to Religious Education the same lack of interest in religion that is common in contemporary society.

The difficulty is not limited to Religious Education. Personal Development studies in government schools have similar difficulties. As an example, where these studies were programmed into seminars on the last few days of the school year, the low status and perceived irrelevance of the work were amplified by the hidden curriculum – the school treated this curriculum requirement as nominal.

Finally, there is another influential element in students’ negative perceptions of spiritual-moral studies which is difficult to counteract. They have an innate resistance to being told what to do in their own lives! Any school study to do with beliefs and values can only too easily be perceived as an exhortation; and this is enough for students to keep the study at arm’s length – militating against even the minimal level

of intellectual engagement that is usually taken for granted in regular subjects. It underlines the importance of making any spiritual-moral studies an open, inquiring, student-centred learning process; any approach that remotely resembles an exhortation from authority runs the risk of being dismissed as irrelevant. This is a natural problem that Religious Education in church-related schools has to acknowledge and address.

1.11 A spiritual-moral dimension to good teaching

Teachers need to be wise enough to be able to prompt students to *attend to the greater meaning of their education*; in other words, to take (and not overlook) the opportunity to find meaning in what they are studying. It will help to illustrate with examples. In a senior English literature study, students looked at the theme ‘changing self’. A teacher could ensure that all of the structural requirements in the unit were attended to; but a good teacher, who understands some of the complexities in developing a sense of self, could help students see how the feelings, thinking and behaviour of the characters in the texts were not all that dissimilar from those they encounter in real life. The teaching and learning process does not consciously probe for personal responses from the students; rather, it *externalises* the personal issues and complexities by teasing them out from the text. In the safe area of textual interpretation, the students identify and reflect on what has prompted change in the protagonists in the texts. If done well, this allows *emotional resonance* with the characters. Students can come face to face with matters like: personal change is complex and people do not always understand until later (and perhaps not even then) that some decisions lead to irrevocable changes in personal relationships; to what extent do people have control over change in their lives? what sorts of external factors bring about personal change? what is involved in progress from childhood to maturity?

It is not difficult for young people to think of comparisons with their own life experience. Teacher comments, questions and examples can help students with the textual interpretation. How the study might affect them personally is usually better left to their own reflection, even though occasionally they will talk about this in class; personal impact should not be judged by the apparent depth of personal interactions in the classroom. Nevertheless, at a later stage outside the classroom, it is not uncommon for teachers to find some students saying that they liked that study because it gave them something to think about at a personal level.

While the English studies on ‘Changing self’ focused on identity from a psychological perspective, another study called ‘Power play’ looked at the dynamics of personal power and politics. A topic like this readily leads to reflection on social and political issues. Yet another English study, ‘In the wild’, examined writers’ depictions of the conflict that has arisen from the ways humankind has perceived its ‘dominion’ over the natural world. It shows what can happen when humans do not take environmental responsibility seriously.

Studies such as these (which can be paralleled in other subjects) have the capacity to become *windows on contemporary life*, sensitising students to new perspectives and helping them become better interpreters of meaning. In facilitating these explorations, teachers educate their students in the spiritual and moral layers of life. But what they are doing is no more than being good teachers in their own subject area; they are attending to its natural spiritual-moral dimensions. It is not a separate layer of moral education added to their teaching from outside like a superstructure. It is not asking

teachers to go beyond normal teaching requirements; and it is not ‘adding’ spiritual content to the curriculum. But what it is expressing is a holistic education. It is fostering *personal learning*.

How much of this kind of teaching and learning is needed across the curriculum? It is a question that needs careful attention, one that has to do with the overall personal relevance of schooling. In a subject like Religion or Personal Development, there should be a significant amount of value-related content. In other subjects, if attention to spiritual-moral dimensions is to be a natural part of the teaching, then excessive attempts to engage pupils in this way would be counterproductive because it would undermine the principal subject matter. Subjects have a coherence in their intended knowledge and skills outcomes. Some parts of the content may occasion personal learning; much of it may not. Personal relevance is not an element that can be readily or easily injected. So, the short answer to the ‘how much’ question is ‘occasionally’. The answer is consistent with the view that the school has a limited capacity to bring about personal change.

The more insight teachers have into the development of meaning, identity and spirituality, the better equipped and more sensitive they will be in leading investigations of value-related questions that emerge in the classroom; in turn, the potential of all learning areas to have some personal relevance for students can be increased. While such an approach is ‘searching’ and not confrontative, it can challenge young people to expand their understanding of the issues; in turn, it can sharpen their focus on what impinges on their own personal development, and on what affects the social environment.

1.12 Summary: Characteristics of school education that enhance meaning, identity and spirituality

Education in these three areas is not proposed as another subject added to an already crowded curriculum. Rather, we propose ways in which the spiritual and moral dimensions of regular subject content can be addressed. The principal concerns are summarised in three clusters:

- the responsibility of communities to give young people adequate educational access to their traditions of meaning, identity and spirituality; the content constitutes spiritual resources for personal development;
- student development of an understanding of the process of construction of meaning, identity and spirituality across the life cycle;
- the acquisition of skills in the identification and evaluation of what counts as meaning, identity and spirituality, in the light of community values.

A holistic education should address these concerns. In proposing a role for school education we do not want to give an impression that we think education is the principal means of communicating meaning, identity and spirituality to the young; family and cultural experience are considerably more influential. But it can help them develop a better understanding of how these three dimensions develop and of the cultural dynamics that influence them. A shorthand for this process is an education that *explores reasons for living*; it presumes that young people’s meaning, spirituality and identity will be more healthy if it is open to educational improvement, particularly through the use of reason.

The opportunity for the school curriculum to bring about personal change in young people is limited. It revolves around helping them learn how to become well informed and to think critically – educating them to learn better from their own experience. Hopefully, they will learn how to identify wise traditions from the past, as well to appraise the social environment that has a shaping influence on people’s thinking and behaviour.

The idea of an education that will help young people become more wise, alert to the spiritual and moral dimensions to life, emotionally mature and environmentally responsible is very noble, but it must be understood in terms of the real possibilities and limitations of appealing to reason as the basis for personal change. How the school models the values and virtues it proposes for its pupils will also be an influential factor. The hope of educating young people towards wisdom, maturity and responsibility applies to the whole curriculum and is not limited to one subject like religion. Hence the importance of clarifying a holistic approach. This is one reason that teaching is aptly called a profession – in the original sense of the word: it describes the work of those whose contribution to the welfare of the community is like a vocation or personal calling.

Notes

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- 1 R Eckersley et al. 2006, *Flashpoints and signposts: Pathways to success and wellbeing for Australia’s young people*, p. 8.
 - 2 Accessed from the Viktor Frankl quotations website, May 2006
<http://www.worldofbiography.com/9124-Victor%20Frankl/quotations.htm>
 - 3 This chapter was developed from material published earlier as ML Crawford and GM Rossiter 2003, *Reasons for living: Education and young people’s search for meaning, spirituality and identity*.
 - 4 In the United States, Church–state legal language has stifled discussion about the place for study of religion in education. See for example, G Moran 1978, *What Now? What Next?* In P O’Hare (ed.) *Foundations for religious education*, p. 65.
 - 5 Bishops’ Committee for Justice, Development and Peace 1998, *Young people and the future*, p. 1.
 - 6 *ibid.*, p. 15.
 - 7 An investigation of the educational use of the construct wisdom is reported in ML Crawford and GM Rossiter 1992, *Teaching Wisdom*. Some of that material was reworked and included in Chapter 14.
 - 8 Curriculum Corporation 2003, *Values education study: Final report* (prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training), p. 175.
 - 9 Congregation for Catholic Education 1999, *The Catholic school on the threshold of the third millennium*, p. 1.

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- 10 T Metherell 1990, *Excellence and equity: New South Wales curriculum reform*. Originally appearing in NSW Government 1989, *White Paper on curriculum reform in schools in NSW*. Note that there are important parallel statements to this one in other normative curriculum documents; see note 11.
 - 11 Australian Education Council (& MYCEETYA) 1999, *The Adelaide Declaration on national goals for schooling in the twenty-first century* (the Adelaide Declaration); Curriculum Corporation, 2003, *Draft national framework for values education in Australian schools*, p. 6. The final version of the Framework was published as Department of Education, Science and Training 2005, *National framework for values education in Australian schools*.
 - 12 Civics Expert Group 1994, *Whereas the people: Civics and citizenship education: Report of the Civics Expert Group*; NSW Department of School Education 1991, *The Values We Teach*; A Refshauge 2004, *Values in NSW public schools: A Ministerial statement*; Report of the Review of the Queensland School Curriculum 1994, *Shaping the future*, vol. 3. South Australian Department of Education 1991, *Common knowledge 8–10*; Victorian Ministry of Education 1988, *The social education framework: Effective participation in society, P–10*.
 - 13 BV Hill 2004, Values education in schools. Also referred to in Department of Education, Science and Training 2004, *National values education forum report*.
 - 14 Curriculum Corporation 2003, *Values education study: Final Report*; Department of Education, Science and Training 2004, *National Values Education Forum Report*; Curriculum Corporation 2004, *Values Education in action: Case studies from 12 values education schools* (Prepared for the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training).