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Spiritual education in secondary school: A Deweyan and existential approach

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The various chapters in this book address how spiritual education might be provided in particular contexts. This chapter is making its contribution by engaging specifically with the secondary school context. Currently about two-thirds of Australian secondary school students attend government schools. Therefore it is important that attempts to address how spirituality might be actualised in high schools must give attention to the largely secular nature of the majority of these environments. In addition to this there are other important aspects which must be considered such as the much contested natures of both spirituality and education and also, the nature of adolescence. In order to engage meaningfully with all of these in such a way as to offer an approach to spirituality which is specifically educative, able to have its significance recognised in secular contexts and be relevant for adolescents in secondary schools, I shall adopt a Deweyan perspective because his philosophy is most valuable to help us to understand that spirituality does not come from a realm other than the one in which we find ourselves and therefore it is not something external that must be added on to education. Rather, spirituality here is understood to be intrinsic to the very practice of education itself.

To engage meaningfully with each of these important aspects of the secondary school context as identified above, I shall be recommending a particular existential approach to spiritual education which is able to address them all. The first of the aspects to be considered will be that of education because this is considered here to be the most important one which is able to give sense and direction for the others. Spirituality, spiritual development and spiritual education can be considered to occur in various situations. However when addressing schooling and the various curricula offered within schools, I argue that the most important dimension for us to acknowledge is that of education. If education is not recognised as being the primary discourse or practice to be present, then we may be providing curricular experiences related to spirituality which are not educative but something else, like conditioning, training or indoctrination. After exploring the nature — or spirit — of education, I will then give consideration to spirituality and to existentialism and then finally to how a particular
existential spirituality might be most significant for the secondary school context, drawing upon examples from my own experience in the classroom.

Setting the context: the spirit of education

Without a clear understanding of education (rather than simply learning), the experiences which are provided in secondary schools – whether to promote spirituality or other dimensions – will lack clear criteria as to what might make them specifically educative rather than some other sort of experience. The practice of education is often described as a praxis indicating that it involves both a practical side of activity – such as the ‘doing’ of teaching and learning – as well as an intellectual or theoretical aspect which represents the understanding of why the activities ought to happen the way that they do. Framing educational practice as praxis prevents it being reduced to the application of simple techniques and maintains the importance of the presence of the practitioners as persons, who must actively make decisions regarding what is best to do. Fairfield (2000, p. 81) who embeds his understanding of education largely in the works of Dewey, describes education as a dialogical praxis in which persons are involved, and this involvement he describes as “the ‘spirit’ of education”. This section will now examine this spirit of education more closely in order to provide an outline of the context in which spiritual education in secondary schools must occur and it shall do so similarly to Fairfield, by primarily drawing upon a Deweyan perspective.

Education, for Dewey (1985), is primarily recognised as involving growth for each individual. Consequently teachers and curricula cannot impose this upon students because “it is something they do” themselves (Dewey, 1985, p. 47). This is not just any sort of growth like an increase of expertise in a narrow specialisation but rather must necessarily enable further growth for persons and society. Persons must be able to have an increased capacity for interpreting the meanings of experiences. While Dewey clearly accentuated the importance of individual learners, his approach should not be reduced to one of child-centeredness because his primary concern was upon the reconstruction of society on a global scale. Dewey (1989, p. 80) argued that “social cannot be opposed in fact or in idea to individual. Society is individuals-in-their-relations.” Avoiding a potential social/individual dichotomy, the manner in which he considered such a reconstruction of society to be possible was through the enablement of individuals to participate in life more meaningfully together – hence his promotion of democracy. This distinguishes his approach from other perspectives in education which are influenced by Marxism such as critical pedagogy, as these tend to focus upon improving society primarily through institutions rather than individuals. While Dewey (1988, p. 49) considered that society could be reconstructed through individuals committing themselves to communitarian practices which are more
democratic in nature, he shared very similar concerns with many other educational theorists identifying that mass culture—in the USA of his day as well as what can be seen in Australia today—works against the spiritual and personal growth of individuals and which, in turn, stifles the possibility of reforming and improving society.

Dewey (1934, p. 77) clearly recognised that the powers which invoke inequalities and oppression are clearly “on the side of the status quo” and so, one of the main characteristics of a curricular experience which is educative is that it ought to enable learners to challenge, question and test the status quo. Experiences which do not offer such challenging opportunities are not able to be considered as educative. Dewey is not alone in promoting this as a criterion of an educative experience. Richard Pring (1988, p. 42) also has concluded that because the educative development of persons necessarily involve social and political aspects, such a person “must be a challenge to the status quo.” Again challenging the influences of mass culture is recognised to be a key characteristic of educative experiences according to a number of other educational theorists. Michael Apple (2004, p. 20) uses the term hegemony rather than mass culture in order to identify it as the “ideological saturation [which] permeates our lived experiences”. Dominant culture is recognised by Apple not as something external to students and to schools but rather is something which affects the way we think and the way we come to interpret, make sense of and value particular aspects of life. Without being able to question, challenge and critique the status quo, Lawrence Stenhouse (1967, p. 50) similarly has claimed that mass culture, so prevalent in our society, will “overdetermine our reactions”. In order to be liberated from such a constraining and overbearing influence learners must be able to think, criticise and create.

The ‘hidden curriculum’ which Apple (2004) and others warn us of, is therefore comprised of activities and experiences offered by particular teachers who regard their lessons to be politically and value neutral, and therefore as objective and also right/true, because, by default, they promote the status quo in society by failing to critique it (Shor, 1992). Education is inescapably a political practice (Biesta, 2006; Giroux, 1997) as well as a spiritual one because it always appeals to some notion of what society and a meaningful and ‘good’ life ought to be like. Consequently Apple (2004) argues that curricula which specifically offer educative experiences are those which avoid the unquestioning acceptance of information and knowledge described as authoritative and ‘objective’ and instead focus upon whose knowledge it is and who it benefits. However this is difficult for us as teachers to address, and given the dominant culture of schooling in the West, Apple (2004, p. 11) acknowledges this difficulty explaining that it “requires a good deal of plain old hard ‘intellectual’ work” because “we are unused to looking at educational activity ethically, politically, and economically, not to say critically”. It is difficult as teachers to provide experiences
which are educative. However, educational praxis – or the spirit of education – is typically characterised by difficulties and challenges which are able to promote growth mostly through the process of critical inquiries.

For Dewey the key process for educative experiences is inquiry, that is, students participating by being interested and who have clear understandings as to the overall purposes of activities and who are thinking in order to test, challenge and try out things for themselves. They don’t just focus on the means or the ‘how to’ of activities, but they are also aware of the end purpose or the why of the activity. That is, they also participate in the big picture aspect of what makes inquiry activities significant for their own lives, not just possibly relevant for the development of job skills for example. This focus is readily able to allow spiritual education to occur across the curriculum. Learners are not aiming to simply ‘get the right answer’ or ‘true knowledge’ because once they have obtained/acquired/constructed knowledge they then can do away with the questions (Heidegger, 1968) and also their thinking becomes ‘swamped’ (Dewey, 1985, p. 165). Instead through educative inquiry, their meanings which they conclude offer themselves as working hypotheses or ‘warranted assertions’ (Dewey, 1991, p. 15). Individual and personal understandings made through this approach are not to remain as only subjective, personal or private meanings because this can lead to a form of dogma, but there is to be a “personal sharing” (Dewey, 1985, p. 154) with peers for the purpose of continuing to have one’s ideas critically tested and to have them extend beyond immediate, personal and empirical contexts.

However, claiming to adopt a Deweyan approach, Richard Rorty (1999, p. 118) argues that “socialisation has to come before individualisation” and he makes reference to the conservative E. D. Hirsch, author of Cultural Literacy, to support his view. He concludes that “Hirsch is dead right in saying that we Americans no longer give our children a secondary education that enables them to function as citizens of a democracy.” Rorty (1999) recommends that secondary curricula ought to have the same function as those in primary schools, where students simply become familiar with what society’s elders regard to be true, “whether it is true or not”. Founding his understanding upon Hirsch – rather than upon Dewey – he clearly asserts that secondary curricula should not offer opportunities “to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true” (Rorty, 1999, p. 118).

In contrast to Rorty, Fairfield (2000, p. 75) is very critical of Hirsch’s highly conservative understanding of the curriculum. He also criticises Hirsch for evoking a religious ethic in order to establish “consensus values” such as altruism, the golden rule, civic duty, diligence, patriotism, and loyalty. This has a most important implication for curricula which are designed to offer spiritual education because many (Best, 1996, 2000; Wright, 2000), through attempting to privilege a religious approach over an
educative approach often lose the "spirit of education" and, consequently, often offer experiences which are not educative (Fairfield, 2000, pp. 81, 93; Merry, 2005). While notions of the golden rule, duty and loyalty might appear to be virtuous on a superficial level, these nevertheless can also be characteristics of what Bauman (2000) refers to as the 'ethics of obedience' because they have been so profoundly demonstrated by the 'good' Nazis in the 1930s and 1940s. Such 'religious' attributes cannot be considered as, necessarily, having educative value for spiritual development. This is because by default they discourage learners from challenging the status quo values of the dominant culture which in turn might improve life in society and work towards making it more just, fair, worthwhile and good.

A Deweyan approach to curricular experiences which are specifically educational in spirit, do not focus so much upon the outcomes of learning in terms of epistemology, that is, what information, knowledge or 'truths' have to be learned, nor are they behaviouristic in the sense of what skills learners must perform. Rather Dewey's approach is more ontological in terms of what sort of persons are learners becoming and if their way-of-being enables them to continue to grow and indeed desire to keep growing and learning. This focus on the continuity of growth necessarily requires that education be also a social and moral practice in order to sustain this long-term aspect.

By reviewing this particular conceptualisation or spirit of education which is primarily but not exclusively developed upon a Deweyan perspective, we are now more able to develop a clearer understanding of spiritual education that is most appropriate for secondary schooling. It cannot be of the conservative sort as espoused by Hirsch and Rorty as this would curtail opportunity for students to test ideas themselves and therefore promote the authority of the status quo with its inclination to continue to maintain current practices of injustice and oppression. A spiritual education suitable for secondary schools, which is not going to frustrate adolescents by being authoritarian in its approach and limit opportunities for them to exercise their own meaning-making capacities, must be able to offer experiences to learners which encourage them to test the significance of the big ideas which are able to give sense and purpose to their lives. The sort of spirituality which lends itself to a context of this sort will now be discussed.

The nature of spirituality and existentialism

Now that we have more clearly outlined the context of education in which spiritual education is to occur, it is thought valuable to discuss in further detail, understandings of spirituality and existentialism. Spirituality can be recognised to have various meanings as demonstrated no doubt, through how the various contributors of this book understand it. Nevertheless the majority of the meanings of spirituality refer to
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It as a searching activity to find or give sense to, and a meaningful purpose for one's life in particular or to all of 'life' in general. This search can therefore sometimes be divided into an existential or terrestrial (Yalom, 1980) question, i.e. 'what is the meaning of my life?' and a universal or cosmic (Yalom, 1980) question, i.e. 'what is the meaning of life?'

While the concern associated with spirituality is to be able to give sense and purpose to how one's life is to be lived, identifying spirituality as primarily a searching activity characterises it as a process rather than as a collection of content to be transmitted by the teacher and 'learned' by the students. Being a searching (or researching) activity, spirituality is understood as a form of inquiry and is recognised as such via learners questioning, trying, challenging, testing and even experimenting (Dewey, 1985, pp. 146-158). The experiences offered through the curriculum are therefore given meanings through the students who participate in them. Dewey has argued that the meanings of experiences develop through questioning. Questions themselves arise when there is a problem or something of interest to us which appears unresolved and uncertain. Spiritual education requires problems, dilemmas, uncertainties or even feelings of angst, in order to have the environment in which questions can be generated on the part of the learners so that the inquiry activities can be led by their questions. This is in contrast to traditional curricula where Shor (1992, p. 26) observes that the students' 'role is to answer questions, not to question answers.'

Spirituality should not be construed as pertaining to a different, separate, even higher 'realm' as distinct from a realm of physical matter. Through a Deweyan perspective, we understand that life is made up of but one realm – that of existence. By transcending this potential dichotomy between the spiritual and physical, Dewey did not reduce concerns of the spirit only to what we can identify with our five senses as does Positivism. Dewey understood that the spiritual aspect is what gives our lives unity in all of our various activities, it gives us sense, purpose and direction. In his later works he referred to these as ends-in-view, which he regarded never to be set in concrete but should always be available for re-evaluations. He was against learners having to passively wait for various ultimate truths to be delivered by authorities who may or may not also make the claim that such truths have been supernaturally revealed to them from a realm beyond the one in which we find ourselves. Dewey's transcendence of a fragmented realm view of reality means that learners ought to be encouraged to actively inquire and explore what might be considered to be good and meaningful for them. While this approach might initially appear very individualistic, we must remember that Dewey's focus was upon society as a whole. Therefore each person has to give an account to all her neighbours regarding the ultimate purposes that she believes are good for her to base all of her activities upon, because eventually her neighbours are going to experience the consequences of her actions in one way.
or another. In the high school environment, learners should be becoming aware of the cause-effect relations between individuals and the environment in which we all share. This aspect also requires a moral aspect to be made clear in our own spiritual development (Webster, 2009).

Understanding that the spiritual has a presence with the physical has important implications for spiritual education. In order to become spiritually educated, learners are not required to transcend their presence in which they find themselves in an attempt to try and leave their physical bodies behind and transcend into ‘another realm’ in order to become more spiritual. Through this perspective I am arguing that spirituality refers to how our embodied lives are being lived – especially as evidenced through the consequences of our interactions with others and the environment as a whole.

From the foregoing discussion regarding the spirit of education, we can see that in this context spiritual education is more ontological than epistemological. Instead of pursuing content or even statements of ‘truths’ (Carr, 1995), spiritual education can instead address the personhood of learners, i.e. the sorts of persons we are becoming, how we relate in our relationships and how we live our lives. This approach to spirituality is very akin to the existential approach promoted by the Christian philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1992, p. 203) whose pseudonym Johannes Climacus provocingly claimed that “subjectivity is truth”. By this he understood, like Nietzsche, that objectivity can only ever be an approximation, therefore the most important aspect of living is to be found in the way or how we believe rather than on whether we have obtained the correct fact or what of objective truth – which can only ever be something impersonal. Kierkegaard clearly understood the importance of the individual making her own meanings by which to commit her life. This requires active inquiry and responsibility. Consequently, we can readily appreciate the compatibility of such an existential approach with Dewey who similarly understood that our communities consist of individuals-in-our-relationships as discussed earlier.

Through much of the literature surrounding spirituality, the dominant themes consist of a search for the meaning and purpose of life, in particular of one’s own life. Such a search is not seeking some abstract principle which may constitute the ‘truth’ of the meaning of the universe, but rather is something which offers the seeker some personal significance to her own life and how she is to live a meaningful and purposeful life. Such a quest involving life’s meanings and who one is, is understood to be existential (Raeper & Smith, 1991, p. 59).

Existentialism has had a great many meanings attributed to it but significantly it pertains to individuals seeking meanings of personal significance rather than other philosophical schools which seek to pursue universal and objective truths which extend beyond the individual. According to Oaklander (1992, p. 3) “existentialists are not
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primarily concerned with human life in general, but with the life of particular existing individuals." This tends to originate from personal feelings of angst regarding one's very existence and the potential meaninglessness of life and, therefore, in responding to this, existentialism has been described as a "spiritual medicine" (Morris, 1990, p. 2). It is much more than a purely cognitive or intellectual affair to be concerned with our existence because it pertains to ourselves as concrete existing persons rather than only as cognitive or "thinking" beings (Macquarrie, 1972, p. 15). Consequently Barrett (1990, p. 17) concludes that "the meaning of religion, and religious faith, is recast in relation to the individual." This is not to do away with religion but rather it is to question and inquire into religion in order to seek personal significance. It, therefore, brings together both the concerns of the meaning of the world/universe as well as one's personal life, that is in Yalom's terms, the terrestrial question 'what is the meaning of my life?' with the cosmic question 'what is the meaning of life?' where, as Britton (1969, p. 20) observes, "nothing is left out."

Quite significantly then, existential spirituality pertains more to ontology – the way of being in the world – rather than to epistemology. It depends upon the personal participation of individuals and cannot be found in school environments of a traditional nature where knowledge is attempted to be transferred from prepared materials to the learner in a one-way monologue. This is why Kenyon (2000, pp. 12 & 18) explains it as involving "being a new story" rather than simply having one, where "what is important is whether I am participating in the unfolding of my story or only drifting along, having it written for me." Quite clearly then, like pragmatism, existentialism is a practical philosophy which is "to be lived" (Cooper, 1999, p. 21) rather than only studied intellectually in a passive fashion. We can readily appreciate, then, that an existential approach to spirituality is one which is highly consistent with a Deweyan approach to education. The following final section shall describe how an existential approach to spiritual education might be enacted.

Existential spirituality for a secondary context

One of the ongoing challenges for teachers who wish to offer spiritual education in secondary schools is whether a specific 'space' should be opened up in the curriculum to provide for this or whether spirituality is something which lends itself as a cross-curricular phenomenon which can be engaged within a number of situations. As educators working in different secondary schools, we will respond variously to designing our own curricula depending on the nature of our own context. There is no one singular 'right' way to provide for spiritual education. What I would like to offer in this section are some ideas for providing curricular experiences to promote spiritual education which is existential in nature and is aligned to a Deweyan approach to education.
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Spiritual education ought always to be embedded in the spirit of education itself. If this is clearly articulated for the learners at the beginning of the year – in whatever subjects we are responsible for – this will help establish the climate throughout the rest of the year which is conducive for spiritual education. In the first week of the school year it is always most valuable to engage with the notions of education and what it might mean to be an educated person. Various big picture themes can be dealt with such as what does it mean to be educated? What sort of liberation does education offer? Who are we and what sort of persons are we becoming? What is truth and how might we have the confidence that we are actually dealing with truth rather than something else? Who should have more influence on what experiences are provided in the classroom – the teacher, student, government or society in general? And the perennial 'so what?' question of why we have the school curriculum in the first place – what, after all, is the meaning of life and how does the curriculum contribute towards this? Adolescents tend to be more forthcoming that younger learners in wanting to ask and know why they must engage in the particular curriculum which is being provided for them. Addressing the significance of what education offers in general and what our own subject in particular has to offer them at a particular time of year helps to encourage their participation in inquiry activities because they have a clearer vision and appreciation for the purposes and why they might be significant for them personally.

While the themes mentioned above lend themselves to experiences of spiritual education which can be addressed across the curriculum, it is also possible to provide a particular stand-alone course for spirituality. A particular curriculum for spiritual education can be offered but one needs to be quite creative in how this is structured if one is working in a largely secular context such as a government school. In this situation personally, I have advertised such a course as consisting of sessions in philosophy. The reason behind adopting the term philosophy rather than spirituality is because, in such a pluralistic and predominantly secular environment, this can be much more appealing. In addition, from the first section of this chapter which discussed the spirit of education, it can be appreciated that education is generally philosophical in nature. Philosophy is therefore highly regarded in UNESCO's report titled Learning: The Treasure Within where it is clearly recognised as offering value for education “because (of) its role in forming that critical outlook which is indispensable to the functioning of democracy and history...” (Delors, 1998, p. 61)

I have been surprised by the number of students who have volunteered their time to attend these sessions especially as many were year 12 students who were preparing to complete their final assessment tasks for secondary school. As it is very difficult to predict where the interest of the students will take the conversations each session, I have been interested in providing a responsive curriculum that is able to cater for
their interests rather than my own and so I negotiate with the students what the next topic will be at the end of each weekly session. After running these sessions a few times, I am able to offer a rough outline of topics at the beginning of each year which is listed as:

What is philosophy?
What is truth?
Who am I?
What is the educated person?
What is good & evil?
Fate versus free will?
Does God exist?
The individual versus the state
The meaning of life.

While this list might appear to consist of my questions rather than those of the students, they nevertheless summarise many of the concerns that students have raised in the past and I have found that they also continue to offer some direction for inquiries because they identify problems and dilemmas that students are generally already grappling with. These broad themes are also partly found in Frost’s (1962) book titled Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers. Indicating a most appropriate approach for an existential perspective, Frost (1962, p. 1) himself states, “Your philosophy, then, is the meaning which the world has for you” and it is with this that an inquiry can be embarked upon in which the personal meanings of the learners have a clearly significant role to play. By acknowledging the ‘personal’ in this approach it makes the notion of philosophy itself less threatening and more participatory in nature, and indicates that the sessions are to involve less about teachers and texts transmitting content compared with the students actively making their own meanings.


I consider it to be important to include these sources here to indicate the fields of intellectual material that we draw upon in order to engage with the various aspects of education, spirituality, secularism and adolescence which have been identified above as these may also inspire similar projects. While not exclusively either existential
or spiritual, many of the various questions, ideas and issues that are raised in these sources certainly lend themselves very well to such themes. Students have commented that the selected readings from these have helped assist them articulate their own feelings on profound matters.

In attempting to centre inquiries which promote spiritual education I have set two assignment tasks. The first addresses ‘Who am I?’ and the second is ‘What is the meaning and purpose of my life?’ One of the most famous philosophical concerns within Western culture and which dates back to Socrates is for each of us to ‘know thyself’. Coming to understand what one’s identity is through inquiring into ‘who am I?’ is also recognised to be a most significant quest for the adolescent years as issues of personal identity seem to centre at this period of the development of youth and their associated behaviours (Splitter & Sharp, 1996, p. 20). Existentially the educative and spiritual value is not to ‘arrive’ at a particular answer to this question, but rather it enables an exploration of how to live the question well. It involves how to make sense of a variety of responses which are indicative of a way-of-being or way of becoming.

As I have argued elsewhere (Webster, 2005) many adolescents in secondary schools confuse a seeking of personal identity with mere identification. Consequently many associate themselves with sub-cultural fashions in order to label themselves with a particular identity. However, such associations are only superficial markers of identification rather than identity. The first assignment task offers adolescents the opportunity of spiritual education in with they are able to grow in an educative sense to develop a more critically informed sense of self-identity.

The second assignment task explores and attempts to articulate the meaning and purpose of one’s life, while resulting in an actual product which the students construct in most creative ways, indicates for the students that such a task can never be ‘completed’ and handed in. Students are quick to appreciate that this is a life-long quest and is one which we can refer to regularly throughout other parts of the school curriculum.

In offering a very brief outline of our most common tasks for inquiry and a list of some of the resources used I have endeavoured to indicate how it might be possible to actualise spiritual education of an existential sort which is most suitable for the secondary school context. This is because such an approach is firmly embedded in the spirit of education as outlined by Dewey. Anecdotal evidence suggests that it is able to offer significance in a largely secular context and has proved most engaging for adolescents.
References


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