

## **Towards an expression of the spiritual in the secular curriculum**

Monica Bini – Curriculum Manager (Humanities), Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. July 2009.

### **Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (2008)**

The Melbourne Declaration claims a place for spiritual wellbeing in education for *all* Australians when it declares that "confident and creative individuals have a sense of self-worth, self-awareness and personal identity that enables them to manage their emotional, mental, spiritual and physical wellbeing".

How can the development and management of spiritual wellbeing be expressed in curriculum beyond faith based settings, so that it is indeed supported for all Australians? This paper outlines and then uses a way of articulating the spiritual that is independent of adherence to religious tradition or belief in the divine, to inform themes of secular spirituality that could be manifested in secular curriculum, and the skills and capacities that can be brought to these themes. In doing so, it aims to capture what is distinctive about the spiritual in the context of curriculum.

The Melbourne Declaration goes some way to articulating a secular spirituality when it links spiritual wellbeing to self worth, self awareness and personal identity. It takes a position that there is something distinct from the emotional, mental and physical in what it is to be human. If secular curriculum wants to claim education of the whole person, then the curriculum needs to address this aspect of being human.

### **Developing the themes of secular spirituality**

Stating what might be further said about the spiritual in a secular sense will inform how curriculum can give expression to this goal.

Some of the literature avoids defining the spiritual, as it is not only complex, but partly an experience and therefore partly ineffable. However for the secular to stake a claim in the spiritual it is necessary to show how it can be conceived without an appeal to religion or the divine. For educators, it gives them the language needed to understand the thinking behind any spiritual themes in the curriculum and to support them in engaging in discourse on the spiritual.

The spiritual is something that is perhaps better experienced than explained. It is a particular quality of consciousness that responds to the awesome in nature and the awesome in human creation or expression, where paradoxically in the experience we are drawn out of ourselves and yet deeper within ourselves. It is that part of ourselves that we are not happy with characterizing as emotion. It is, at times, linked rather with a deep sense of satisfaction or fulfillment. This sense of satisfaction is often linked to goals that are in fact unattainable, for example perfect wisdom. And yet it responds to meaning and purpose and can create meaning and purpose. The spiritual is associated with a detachment, that is, a separation from the egotistical aspects of the self, rather than the world or the other.

The Melbourne goal speaks of having a sense of self that enables management of wellbeing, including spiritual. The term 'management' suggests cultivating a certain kind of discrimination or discernment that in the first instance begins to recognize the spiritual in the self, in response to particular kinds of experiences and then is ultimately used to make choices that support wellbeing and in turn refine the self. One of the most important contributions that curriculum can make is to assist students as they develop and attend to this faculty or key skill, in what is for most, a lifelong journey.

What follows links the broad conception of spirituality introduced above with ways that this may be manifest in the curriculum. It should be recognized that many of the areas overlap and that somewhat artificial distinctions have been made to draw out distinguishing characteristics of each area.

### **Themes of secular spirituality that could be manifested in the curriculum:**

Awe and wonder:

- providing for engagement with the beautiful in nature and human endeavour, including the bigger or more profound stories, that may resonate, inspire or allow for moments of gratitude and appreciation.
- giving permission to wonder, not only intellectually but a deeper, reflective wonder.

Meaning and purpose:

- providing opportunities to serve something larger than oneself. By isolating such service from material gain, students have a chance to notice a different kind of satisfaction.
- enabling the development and expression of vision.
- engaging students with concepts such as truth, courage, including moral courage, honour and so on, and recognizing their contentious nature yet central role in human endeavour .
- allowing for meaningful self expression. In a wider sense this may be personal meaning realized in public contexts.

Being and Knowing:

- providing opportunities for students to integrate knowledge with action; to ethically bring both considered rational judgment and intuitive insight to bear on practical problems.
- engaging with concepts such as justice, compassion and other areas of ethics.
- assisting students to be aware of and attune the quality of their consciousness in action and thought, for example the level of integrity.
- supporting human dignity by for example valuing the welfare, learning journeys and stories of the students and giving them a voice in their education.

### **Developing the skills or capacities that can be brought to these themes**

What the student brings to the opportunities for awe and wonder, meaning and purpose and exploring being and knowing is important. For example, being presented with the beautiful is enriched with a capacity to notice and attend to the response of the self. Students can build skills to assist in the interpretation of experience. The key skill here is a kind of discernment or discrimination.

Developing the ability to discern or discriminate in the context of secular spirituality is particularly related to the following elements of the curriculum:

- building the capacity to notice and attend to the self and how it engages with and responds to certain experiences. For example, noticing different levels of fulfillment. This can occur not only through quiet reflection and silence but through dialogue.
- developing students' capacity to engage with and express the ineffable, for example in powerful literary and visual metaphors and other non-verbal means of expression such as dance, or design and creative process.
- assisting students in developing the language to express to others and themselves what can be said about secular spiritual experiences.
- allowing the creation and expression of what is deeply satisfying for the student, for example in athletics, woodwork or social activism. Here the student can practice and test their developing discrimination. This may ultimately impact on their choice of life pursuits as well as in a more generic way.

### **Disciplinary or Interdisciplinary?**

Spirituality can be triggered and nurtured by different things for different people and in this sense is interdisciplinary, where students are given the chance to widely explore and test where spiritual wellbeing may lie for them. Students can be invited to engage with facets of the spiritual in the context of a discipline or learning area. For example, service learning in Civics, aesthetics in Mathematics, ethics in Philosophy, or vision in History or Science. Key skills can also be developed in this way, for example through the study of poetry in English or participating in the design process in Technology. The extent to which the spiritual is brought in will be linked closely to pedagogy.

Bringing spirituality into the curriculum in this sense need not be so much about an addition to the curriculum but rather involves considering the disciplines through a particular qualitative lens. The nature of this qualitative lens does need separate documentation however, and this paper attempts to go some way towards supporting educators in this.

### **Early years learning framework (2009)**

The themes of secular spirituality in this paper were used to inform the definition of spirituality in the national Early Years Learning Framework. The framework is built around the concepts of being, belonging and becoming, recognizing that life is more than transactional. A range of groups gave strong feedback that spiritual aspects of young children's lives should be recognized. In particular it was thought that the play experience for a child had a spiritual dimension. The groups identified a need to capture in a secular way the spiritual dimension of what it is to be human.

Recognition of the spiritual is not unusual at a higher policy level - for example both the 2008 Melbourne and the 1999 Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling, or the 1957 NSW Wyndham Report (naming spiritual values as one of eight key aims for the education of

the individual). These high level statements aim at all sectors including faith based, but this aspect of the goals of schooling has not traditionally been picked up by the government sector in particular. One significant gap has been the lack of translation of this part of the goals into formal curriculum structures. This is a necessary part of the mechanism by which high level documents ultimately get delivered in the classroom. Creating a key definition of spirituality began to close the gap.

A definition of spirituality was proposed and welcomed : “*Spirituality refers to a range of human experiences including a sense of awe and wonder, a search for purpose and meaning, and the exploration of being and knowing.*”

A paper underpinning this definition was a valuable part of the process as it supported decision-makers in understanding that an interpretation of the definition compatible with the secular was possible. At the same time the definition does not exclude the faith based sector, while acknowledging that these settings may bring elements of their different religious traditions into how they interpret it.

## **Challenges**

### **National Curriculum**

The national curriculum will be accountable to the goals for schooling. ACARA’s *Curriculum Design* paper states at 4.2b that “the national curriculum documents will indicate how much learning in each area contributes to the national goals.” Articulating themes of secular spirituality may assist in the mapping of this aspect of the goals to the curriculum.

Curriculum writers have been given some discretion beyond literacy, numeracy, creativity and ICT in how other general capabilities and indigenous, sustainability and Asia related cross curriculum perspectives will be embedded into the curriculum.

The spiritual is a qualitative aspect of the curriculum that cuts across disciplines, general capabilities and cross curriculum perspectives. In this sense it is likely to be more clearly expressed in content elaboration rather than content description, although content description sets the framework that allows particular teaching and learning activities to be developed. For example if students will learn to analyse indigenous history in Australia (as a content descriptor) then content elaboration could include learning about vision and Aboriginal people of vision in this context. In Science a content description derived from the content organizer of science as a human endeavour could be something like ‘students will learn to analyse and evaluate the role of science in human endeavour’ which in turn could lead to content elaboration regarding discussion of meaning and purpose within science or what concepts like moral courage might mean in scientific contexts. The curriculum has many demands placed upon it and selection of more overtly spiritual aspects needs to be not only well informed but judicious.

Spirituality is a personal journey and teachers must be given the flexibility to work with student needs and to allow time for and response to the student voice. A curriculum dense with prescriptive content would work against this.