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Abstract

This paper suggests possible ways for teachers to develop students' personal meaning in public school classrooms. We discuss why schools should move beyond a focus on narrow performance standards and help students address the mysteries of life in our universe. We show how a personally meaningful curriculum is an integral one that emphasizes multiple dimensions of knowledge, enduring understandings, and the development of a moral imagination. We conclude that by using four educational keystones (gratitude, justice, imagination, and transcendence) we can educate for personal meaning without imposing our own worldview and belief system on our students.

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Harro Van Brummelen, Kimberly Franklin, Monika Hilder

Summary: This paper suggests possible ways for teachers to develop students' personal meaning in public school classrooms. We discuss why schools should move beyond a focus on narrow performance standards and help students address the mysteries of life in our universe. We show how a personally meaningful curriculum is an integral one that emphasizes multiple dimensions of knowledge, enduring understandings, and the development of a moral imagination. We conclude that by using four educational keystones (gratitude, justice, imagination, and transcendence) we can educate for personal meaning without imposing our own worldview and belief system on our students.

Though the academic authorities are actually proud of conducting everything by means of Examinations, they seldom indulge in what religious people used to describe as Self-Examination. The consequence is that the modern State has educated its citizens in a series of ephemeral fads.

—G.K. Chesterton, Nash's Pall Mall Magazine, April, 1935

After a grade 6 public school class traced Nelson Mandela's biography, one student wrote this diary entry from Mandela's perspective (Huget, 1999, pp. 29-30):

**Dear Diary,
Now that I have finally got out of prison I have a grandchild and I get to see my lovely wife, Winnie. This is just like I said, "There is no easy walk to freedom anywhere and many of us will have to pass through the valley of the shadow of death again and again before we reach the mountaintop of our desire." Though I do feel deeply sorry about all those kids and babies that got killed, I wish I could have been there to stand my ground and say, "Amandla!" (power)Yours truly,**

Yours truly,

Nelson Mandela

P.S. Always remember Amandla!

The teacher, Sharon Wieler Huget, reflected on how the learning had created space for personal meaning in this student's life (Huget, 1999, p. 30):

The student's poetic images of the "valley of the shadow of death" and the "mountain top of our desires" are phrases she includes from her own knowledge, adding them to the words she heard the character of Mandela say, "There is no easy way to freedom." Her concluding statement indicates her identification with Mandela and I believe a personal desire to be that kind of a person—one who will stand up for others, even though aware of what that action may cost. In a limited way, she glimpses the fate of another person, far removed from her own experiences, and is able to articulate the experience as her own.

Huget wanted to open up space for her students to explore their identity, values, and beliefs. She walked alongside as they searched for meaning and wholeness in their lives. Throughout her curriculum, she helped her pre-adolescents reflect more self-consciously about what they felt, believed, valued, hoped, thought, and did. She emphasized awareness of self and of others, and of how students responded to others' perspectives and needs. Through wide-ranging open-ended strategies, she helped students understand and develop their heart and soul as well as their mind, so that their lives and relationships would be more reflective and more caring. Deepening students' self-knowledge within such a context, Huget believed, would improve and enrich overall learning (Huget, 1999).¹

Huget frequently used a narrative approach as she

helped her students become more deeply human. She wanted her students to recognize the story in themselves and be able to listen to the stories of others. With Coles (1989) she believes that “. . . in story, word becomes flesh” (p. 128). Stories, like human life, are holistic, lead to emotional identification, and deal with the mystery of life in others and in oneself. Stories help students carve out a direction for their lives. As such, narrative-based learning can create an atmosphere that fosters a search for truth, wholeness, and spiritual meaning (Huget, 1999). As Nash (2002) puts it, “Our stories help us to understand our histories, shape our destinies, develop a moral imagination, and give us something truly worth living and dying for” (p. 201).

The Quest for Personal Meaning in Schooling

Using narratives is only one way for students to search for personal meaning, albeit a significant one. But no matter what strategy is used, educating for personal meaning strikes out a path that differs from the current widespread pursuit of narrowly defined performance standards. The latter may structure schools as task-oriented workplaces—but ones that diminish students as human beings. Wisdom, thought, and careful deliberation are then often reduced to information absorption and skill attainment in ways that restrict the universal human quest for shared meaning, truth, and the transcendent. Intriguingly, contrary to what is happening in schools, in what has been called the most significant trend in business leadership and management today, workplace consultants suggest that employees should practice and apply spirituality in order to derive more meaning and inspiration from work (Kanchier, 2003; Wong, 2003). Yet North American schools have curtailed the diverse ways humans have made sense of the world, and have limited students’ opportunities to develop a passion for meaningful vision and purpose, and to embody values of integrity, respect, compassion, and the spiritual. We fail to touch the deeper resources of the human spirit and kindle the fires of the soul (O’Sullivan, 1999).

To give an example, government-mandated programs in the Canadian province of British Columbia ignore quests for personal meaning. Its required K-12 personal planning curriculum recognizes the importance of students’ academic, physical, emotional, and social growth. Even this program, however, designed to focus on human self-reflection, goals and growth, fails to

take into account that students’ personal decisions and actions are guided by underlying beliefs and values, and by worldviews that are informed by searching for meaning (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 1995 and 1997). Such curricula—as well as the pressure on teachers to teach to high stakes tests—steer young people away from grappling with the basic issues and the very dimensions of their lives that would provide them with purpose, insight, and wisdom. They fail to have students contemplate and encounter the fundamental mysteries of their own lives and of the universe. Palmer (1999) notes that “The price is a school system that alienates and dulls us, that graduates young people who have had no mentoring in the questions that both enliven and vex the human spirit” (p. 6).

Yet young people often want to talk about their quest for personal meaning. They ask questions such as the following (Van Brummelen, Koole and Franklin, 2004):

- Who am I and what is the purpose and meaning of my life? What does it mean to be human? Why am I here? What is my identity and place in society? How can I experience fulfillment?
- How should we live together? How can I connect meaningfully with others? What values should bind us together? How can we build a more compassionate, peaceful, and just world?
- What do I believe? What is the core of reality? What is good and worthy of my attention and trust? Does a God exist and how do I know?
- What is the meaning of suffering and death? How should I deal with and respond to experiences of loneliness, powerlessness, violence, and domination? How do I maintain hope?

If schools are to be places of learning where we nurture students for meaningful, evocative, and expressive lives, then both the content and the structure of learning need to be rethought. Teachers need to foster engagement in personal and communal stories within an open, participative, and supportive community. Teachers must encourage their students to investigate opportunities and alternatives about what life in society could be like, contemplating with their students the awe, wonder, and mystery of the universe and nurturing a life of moral and spiritual significance. Huget’s classroom gives one example of what such learning might look like. We want to explore several other

promising curriculum approaches before we suggest some keystones of learning for meaning.

Creating Space for Personal Meaning in Curriculum

The curriculum straitjacket is the price exacted for believing that education is about assessed performance on specified content. . . . Between the precision of tests and the raw variety of classroom life lies a vast gulf. (Holt, 2002)

It is the mark of an educated man that in every subject he looks only for so much precision as its nature permits. (Aristotle in Dearden, 1968, p. 68)

The Day of Ahmed's Secret (Heide & Gilliland, 1990) is a delightful picture book that details a day in the life of a young Egyptian boy who carries the weight of a pleasurable secret he can't wait to tell his family at the end of his long, work-filled day. At one point in the day, Ahmed is sitting in the shade of a wall, in the middle of Cairo, having a "quiet time." His father had insisted on this practice since "if there are no quiet spaces in your head, it fills with noise." During his "quiet time," he dreams of crossing the desert one day, considering its oceanic nature and the adventures of camels and their riders. He also thinks of his secret: he learned to write his name that day. This meant that his name will "last longer than the sound of it," like the old buildings in the city. His quiet time created a space of personal meaning in his otherwise arduous and tedious day. However, even when not "sitting quietly," he links his everyday experiences to people; to his sense of self worth; and to the sights, sounds, and smells of his city and to his sense of deep connection to his culture and history. Everything he does, which to others may appear meaningless, is infused with philosophy, character, tradition, and moral choice. This story is a beautiful metaphor of what it means to design curriculum that has space for personal meaning. Such a curriculum entails activity that is intentional yet unpredictable, both personal and communal, intrinsically oriented towards the good and naturally inclined towards the search for more (McIntyre, 1997). Such praxis starts with a philosophical grounding that rejects a narrow, quantifiable, achievement- and coverage-oriented curriculum that remains unrelated to students' lives. Rather, it welcomes deep understanding and hope, imagination and wonder, values like gratitude and justice, and the unexpected and dissonance (Holt, 2002; Groome,

1998; Palmer, 1998). It is a praxis that begins with contextualized learners and asks how their lives can be enriched. It celebrates the transformational relationship as teachers and students share a learning journey. It recognizes that teaching at its best nurtures the human qualities of living and learning and the heart's cry for significance and meaning. It can be education that, as it transcends the everyday commonplaces, is "for life and for all" (Groome, 1998, p. 14).

Unfortunately, such a curriculum praxis is more and more difficult to implement today. Holt (2002) suggests that our schools can be equated to fast food restaurants. The search for linear and quantitative curriculum standardization has squeezed the life or "nutrition" out of the curriculum, resulting in narrowing and constricting learning. Holt therefore suggests a "slow school movement" that has a commonality of approach that is expressed uniquely. He is convinced that such a movement is the only possible way for schools to improve learning for students and our world.

Developing an overall curriculum design for personal meaning is beyond the scope of this paper. However, we want to point to three promising curriculum strategies that may enhance students' quest for personal meaning: (1) emphasizing enduring understandings, (2) recognizing multiple dimensions of knowledge, and (3) implementing clearly focused, integral units. Each strategy can personalize curriculum without individualizing or weakening it. Each can lead to values, meanings, and understandings that promote a world of gratitude, caring, justice, love, and joy. Each provides opportunities for evocative pedagogical practices such as journaling, reflection, response, story, and transcendence. Moreover, each supports educators' needs to plan intentionally in ways that help students contemplate the meaning of being.

The first curriculum strategy that contributes to this is to structure courses and units around deep, enduring understandings. Bruner (1960) said that we must develop an awareness and appreciation of carefully wrought, fundamental understandings and ideas, although he limited these to the underlying principles that give structure to subject disciplines. Wiggins and McTighe as well as Erickson have taken Bruner's notion several steps further. Wiggins and McTighe (1998) define an enduring understanding as a linchpin idea of lasting value that anchors a course or unit, one that

requires uncoverage and offers potential for engaging students. For instance, an enduring understanding for a middle school unit on media communication might be that the media, by constructing contrived “realities,” promote certain themes and biases that both reflect and shape society. Erickson (2001) similarly believes that a focus on key concepts and principles of a discipline can provide a meaningful context for deep understanding and transfer of knowledge. In designing a concept-driven curriculum, teachers move up the structure of knowledge tree to concepts, principle generalizations, and enduring understandings, rather than immediately moving down to facts and skills. This process allows teachers to prioritize what content is truly important—principles and understandings that can be applied personally and connected to other significant learning. Facts become meaningful when taught within the context of critical understandings. Assessment strategies also become more authentic and transformational when teachers ask students to represent their deep understandings rather than regurgitate memorized content. Van Brummelen (2002), for instance, describes a twelfth grade English course that deals “with issues such as the nature of humanity, the role of faith in human life, the meaning and nature of thought and knowledge, and the ultimate purpose for human existence—or if such a purpose even exists (p. 152).

Dee Fink’s taxonomy of significant learning (2003) suggests a second promising curriculum strategy. Although writing for a postsecondary audience, his multiple dimensions of learning apply to all levels. They reflect learners’ needs to find personal meaning and coherence, with significant learning experiences leading to lasting change. Students must “become meaning-making beings, rather than simply meaning-receiving beings, . . . and that means that they need to spend time reflecting on the meaning of the experience and new ideas that they acquire (p. 106). Such a process, according to Fink, begins with establishing goals in six dimensions of significant learning:

- The caring dimension: What do I want my students to care about after this unit of study so that they make it part of their lives?
- The human dimension: How can my students develop a better understanding of and vision for themselves or others through this unit of study?
- The foundational knowledge dimension: What are

the basic understandings that my students need to know?

- The application dimension: How will my students apply their new basic understandings and their critical, creative, and practical thinking and skills?
- The integration dimension: How can I help my students see and understand the connections with other ideas, realms of ideas, and realms of life?
- The learning how to learn dimension: How can I help my students engage in inquiry and be more self-directed, intentional learners?

Like Bruner, Fink is seeking deep understanding of foundational knowledge. He recognizes, however, that the other dimensions help to ensure such deep understanding—much more so, for instance, than Bloom’s taxonomy. The dimensions are not hierarchical but interactive: “Achieving any one kind of learning simultaneously enhances the possibility of achieving the other kinds of learning as well” (p. 32).

Van Brummelen (2002) also promotes personally meaningful learning when he emphasizes a third strategy that complements the foregoing ones, the construction of what he calls integral units. Such units are informed by thematic statements built around enduring understandings, key abilities, as well as basic values, dispositions, and commitments. Responding to oft-superficial curriculum integration, he provides the use of a chart used to brainstorm unit development. This chart encourages teachers to discover natural and significant interrelations among the various realms of knowledge (e.g., mathematical, physical, biological, psychological, aesthetic, analytical, lingual, social, economic, legal, ethical, and confessional). By identifying key values in the realms applicable for the topic, the unit will include not only meaningful connections that go beyond a particular subject but also values that are relevant for life in society. This enables the topic to advance enduring understandings needed for living in the world we want. The unit of study then becomes “integral” because it has a unified focus that is rooted in the worldview, tradition, and related value choices implicit in every curriculum decision.

These strategies are just three of many curriculum approaches that can inspire students as they explore the importance of gratitude, justice, imagination, and transcendence in their lives. Curriculum, designed using such strategies, prioritizes space for personal meaning—which equips students to interact with the

world around them with compassion and creativity.

Literature, Moral Imagination, and Personal Meaning in the Curriculum

Having looked at some general approaches to curriculum, we now give an example of how personal meaning can be promoted in and through the teaching of one discipline. How can literature teachers help shape a better world? How can they deal with controversial issues such as prejudice, war, and the environment on the basis of enduring understandings and defensible principles? In a conflicted and often irrational world, how can we foster in our students the capacity to hope and exercise creative courage? In short, how can we create space for teaching the moral imagination through literature?

High school students often complain about the depressing nature of much of the literature we teach. They are concerned over moral principles or the lack thereof: “Why do intelligent, educated people commit acts of violence?” As teachers we are also haunted by the suspected link between a utilitarian and rationalistic education and the outcome not only of unimaginative thinking but of materialism and ethical malaise. Do we teach literature, as Guroian (1998) argues, for theoretical, intellectual, and stylistic purposes while we ignore literature’s most serious purpose to teach virtue? Are we failing to equip students with what they need most: literary nourishment that facilitates the development of moral and spiritual well-being? As Chesterton already observed almost a century ago, school children are only taught to care about facts they can use for their own advantage and are “never taught to desire the truth” (1910, p. 233). Perhaps Chesterton’s assertion is an exaggeration. But to some extent utilitarianism leads to curriculum praxis without moral imagination and, as such, hinders the development of personal meaning.

Education for personal meaning is nothing new. John Locke (1693) is only one of many thinkers who have said that most important in education is the growth of virtue and wisdom, and that only fools would prefer scholastic prowess at the expense of these. Education for personal meaning has become more challenging in a post-modern intellectual climate ambivalent towards the nature of truth. This issue calls for the educator’s response at every turn. For, in some way or other, we

are always teaching students how to live, and it is more honest to admit that we are than to pretend that we are not. Perhaps we can agree that we cannot afford to ignore teaching enduring values such as hope, gratitude, courage, and justice.

The term “moral imagination” encapsulates the theoretical position that any effective, life-shaping ethical education must engage the imagination. It is one thing for teachers to rationally impart a vision of the Good, whether through argumentative discourse like Plato, or through moralizing didactic as in the cautionary tale tradition in children’s literature. But it is quite another thing to have readers fall in love with the Good and want it. While we can coerce learning through homework and tests, this strategy has limited value unless we also nurture lifelong, passionate learners. In Gardner’s (1978) words, “Morality by compulsion is a fool’s morality . . . the highest purpose of art is to make people good by choice” (p. 106). The important educational question then is, “How do we teach so that students may fall in love with the Good and want it?”

In view of the strong tendency to privilege rationalistic, technological discourse over the imaginative and the affective in education, the importance of the link between imaginative literature, pedagogy, and moral education cannot be over-emphasized. Stories do it best because they engage the emotions as well as reason through the imagination, leading the reader “inside” the experience of moral goodness. Thus we educate not only for cognitively knowing the Good, but for wholly loving and wanting it—with the “feeling intellect” (see, for instance, Egan, 1986 and 1997).

For example, the novelist Richler attested to the “dangerous” power of fiction to deconstruct one’s enemies and to subvert socially and/or personally constructed political perception (Hilder, 2005). In his reflections after reading Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* at the age of 13 in 1944, Richler, a Jew, was converted from “devotedly wish[ing] every German left on the face of the earth an excruciating death” to identifying with his fictional enemy. Richler commented, “Obviously, Hitler had grasped that novels can be dangerous, something I learned when I was only 13 years old. He burned them; I began to devour them” (1986, p. D1). Teachers need to consider how storytelling that engages the emotions and imagination can help dissolve exclusivity, as it did for Richler—and so help foster

humane thought and attitudes.

How do we create space for teaching the moral imagination through literature? First, we need to review the literary diet we offer our students. Do our choices offer students an imaginative experience of encouragement and hope? Do we encourage them to explore ethical issues? Also, we need to reassess our teaching. Do we honour the individual voice? the quest for spirituality? community? Below we give five principles for creating space for teaching the moral imagination through literature (Hilder, 2003).

1. It is crucial that students experience goodness that isn't moralizing or boring. For example, readers who have experienced the joy of having a romp with Aslan in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, or of riding with the unicorn Gaudior in L'Engle's *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* have had a meaningful encounter with Goodness.
2. Students need to explore moral courage. This can be fostered by literature and imaginative responses that celebrate the precarious necessity of acting courageously in order to be loving people. For example, in L'Engle's *A Wrinkle in Time*, we are given the sonnet as a metaphor for courageous living. Life is a lot like a sonnet: we are given a difficult form, but what we say in the lines is up to us.
3. Teachers need to highlight the concept of life as an ethical journey where we are growing stronger or weaker, better or worse, in making ethical choices. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy is a masterful example. Perhaps we need to have a greater sense of urgency in this and, with our students, like Shasta in Lewis's *The Horse and his Boy*, work out the possibility that "If you funk this, you'll funk every battle all your life. Now or never" (Lewis, 1954/1975, p. 157).
4. Moral imagination is most powerful when informed by a pedagogy of humility. Explore with your students the heroic reversals where the so-called weak and foolish succeed in subverting the power-mongers. For example, it has been noted that the popularity of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* stories has to do with its imaginative experience of "hope that in an age where moral goodness does not seem important and where evil is on the rise, one little nerdy person, not terribly smart or good-looking, can make a difference" (Griesinger, 2002, p. 478).

5. Nurture is central to any work of the moral imagination. Students need to engage in responding to the problem of evil and suffering with an attitude of nurture: "Art begins in a wound, an imperfection—a wound inherent in the nature of life itself—and is an attempt either to learn to live with the wound or to heal it" (Gardner, 1978, p. 181). Explore the process from wounding to possible healing with your students.

The highest mandate then for literature teachers is to nourish the moral imagination. It is, therefore, imperative that all should be educated through literature to become mature, moral beings whose lives search for personal meaning. George MacDonald (1893) argued that though few students will or need to develop an artistic faculty, "all should understand and imagine the good" (p. 41). Education that omits educating the moral imagination is a failure and "morally irresponsible" (Noddings, 1995, p. 182). In a sense, to borrow from John Lennon and Paul McCartney's *Hey Jude* (1968), to shape the world we want through the scope of literature, we need to "take a sad song—and make it better."

Some Keystones of Learning for Meaning

The examples of curriculum approaches that we have discussed lead us to posit what we believe to be possible keystones of learning for personal meaning. A keystone is the top stone in an arch on which all the stones depend. Without keystones, arches collapse into a heap of rubble. In education for personal meaning, we believe that there are a number of such keystones. Such keystones evoke desirable ends, vital contexts, and effective means for learning for personal meaning. Without them, learning tends to collapse into heaps of fragmented pieces of information and isolated skills. There are many possible keystones. For instance, the apostle Paul enjoined us to live in faith, hope, and love—which could certainly provide a framework for personally meaningful learning. Here we have chosen four keystones that have surfaced in the previous sections of this paper: gratitude, justice, imagination, and transcendence. Choosing different keystones will yield varied arches of learning. We want to explore in this section how these particular four keystones support a learning arch that leads to meaningful learning.

Living in gratitude is to appreciate, delight in, and be

thankful for the positive experiences, realities, and possibilities of life. Wolterstorff (2002) shows how gratitude lies at the foundation of a meaningful existence. Teachers and schools must model and breathe a spirit of gratitude, finding its manifestation in the appreciative use of things around us, in joyful delight and delighted joy. They ought to cultivate meditative reflection on the immense richness of the wisdom, justice, and goodness that are exhibited around us, and help students to exercise acts of gratitude. Nurturing an atmosphere of gratitude contributes to an attitude of hope, that wellspring of motivation that exists deep within us. Gratitude as a keystone allows the opportunity to seed hope. And without hope, learning as well as life becomes a dull, misty, and purposeless meander.

A second keystone of learning for meaning is a passion for justice, a concept that C.S. Lewis (1947) pointed out to be an ideal of the Tao that undergirds all major civilizations. The Judeo-Christian view of justice expresses this universal principle in terms of shalom—harmony, peace, and complete well-being throughout creation. This begins with all persons being treated with dignity—and having the responsibility to treat others the same. More than that, justice demands “participation in struggles to transform sociocultural arrangements that cause people to be hungry or homeless, oppressed or victimized” (Groome, 1998, p. 363). Inside the classroom, Groome adds, teachers must care especially for the “poor”—whether that be the poor in spirit, the emotionally poor, the personality poor, the intellectually poor, or the economically poor—and promote fairness for all. We also encourage school students to ask, “Who is suffering due to injustice? Why? What went wrong? How can brokenness be restored? How do I respond and why?” (Van Brummelen 2002). We carefully design our curricula and pedagogical practices to ensure that they do not contribute to oppression. Where feasible, we also have students do some direct work with the poor or oppressed, and we carefully debrief such work. The search for personal meaning must include a search for the promotion of justice, personally, in our communities, and throughout the world (Groome, 1998).

Imagination, a third keystone, takes us to a deeper level of awareness of what is happening around and within us. It incubates, illuminates, inspires, replenishes, and verifies. Imagination—including the moral imagination—connects and nourishes the body, mind,

heart, and spirit. In the classroom it cultivates personal meaning in unique and vital ways. It opens up life in a different and often a deeper way. It helps students explore the potentialities of new understandings, insights, and meanings. It awakens the human spirit and human response in ways that linear, rational thinking cannot do. Yet, regrettably, imagination is downplayed in today’s schools. But to flourish, teachers must nurture and cultivate it in all subjects (not just in the fine arts). They must encourage students to unfold their imagination and creativity in an atmosphere of trust, free to express new ideas and opportunities. Then they can begin to use their creativity as a gift to the world (Naiman, 2003). Imagination is a keystone for personal meaning, both in the classroom and in our culture.

The final keystone we want to mention is transcendence. Transcendence involves rising above the everyday dimensions of life and their usual limitations. Human beings as scientific observers have become alienated from themselves, recognizing that classical modern science describes only one dimension of reality. Ex-President Havel of the Czech Republic has commented on this: “There appear to be no integrating forces, no unified meaning, no true inner understanding of phenomena in our experience of the world” (Havel, 1994, p. 2). Yet we are becoming more aware that we are “an integral part of higher, mysterious entities.” Respect for human rights means nothing “as long as this imperative does not derive from the respect of the miracle of Being, the miracle of the universe, the miracle of nature, the miracle of our own existence” (Havel, 1994, p. 4). The transcendent is that with which we are mysteriously linked. The transcendent can put human beings in touch and communion with the “beyond” of everyday life. It is a crucial avenue for nurturing learning for personal meaning.

Underpinning and permeating our curricula with gratitude, justice, imagination, and transcendence is one way to help our students become more compassionate, committed, creative, and holistic human beings, able to contribute to a democratic society in just and visionary ways.

Conclusion

A linear, instrumental, rationalistic approach to curriculum and learning will subdue if not crush the human spirit. On the other hand, an approach that

encourages and enables students to address the big questions of life and that embodies a quest for gratitude, justice, imagination, and transcendence can enhance long-term personal meaning. We have sketched some possible approaches that shift the curriculum paradigm in that direction. And we showed how an emphasis on the moral imagination in literature can help deepen and enhance human life.

But is it possible to nurture such meaningful learning in schools today? Doesn't the need to meet pre-set performance standards for knowledge and skills undermine individual attempts to provide a more meaningful curriculum? Do teachers themselves understand and experience the need for personal meaning sufficiently in order to help students in their personal quest? And don't teachers who try to do so face burn-out with increasing bureaucratic demands and larger class sizes?

Admittedly, teachers face barriers requiring courage and imagination. However, Sharon Huget, like many other teachers, continues to grow and demonstrate that it is possible to retain enthusiasm (which literally means being filled with the transcendent, the spiritual), and to overcome obstacles as she nurtures personal meaning in her students. To attempt to do so is an affirmation of the heart of teaching through which educators can offer life-giving hope and affirm the human dignity and spirit of their students.

Coda

The original draft of this paper was presented to an international education conference whose theme was "Learning and the World We Want." Over the past few years, through both presentations and publications, we have deliberately set out on a path to open up possibilities in public education to explore spirituality and personal meaning, spheres that especially in Canada continue to be deliberately expunged from the curriculum. In so doing, we have avoided explicit references to the contours of a Biblical worldview. Nevertheless, our suggested approaches are, we believe, soundly rooted in such a worldview and in Biblically-mandated values. Rather than showing such connections explicitly, we have found it helpful to discuss this paper in its present form as well as the ones by Hilder (2005) and Van Brummelen, Koole and Franklin (2004) with Christian preservice teachers. Often such preservice teachers struggle with maintaining their identity as Christians

as they begin teaching in public schools (as is true for all teachers persuaded by the importance of teaching for personal meaning in the current school environment). At the same time, students who plan to teach in Christian schools have to realize that Christian schools are not immune to a narrow educational approach that constricts a quest for personal meaning. Thus the intent of this paper is to help especially pre-service teachers develop and defend curriculum strategies that break with the current dominant paradigm and enable them to teach with integrity and prudential courage.

Endnote

It is possible, of course, to teach literature with different emphases. In the Mandela example, critical teachers may emphasize the analysis of the systems of racism, apartheid, and structural exploitation. Postcolonial teachers may use a wide range of cultural discourses to teach about systems of power and privilege so that students understand resistance and agency. Life is more than a personal quest for meaning, but in this paper we take the position that such a personal search can (and should) be a platform that leads to broader social concerns.

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