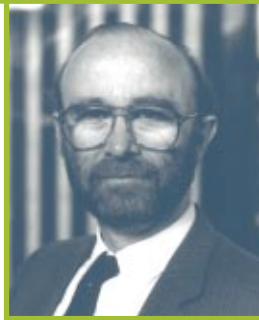


## Schools and faith: whose job is it to nurture spirituality?

Michael Irwin

**I wasn't sure what to expect from a health and physical education curriculum for schools. But I did anticipate guidance on such matters as when and how to introduce children to the vaulting horse and the digestive system.**



I was wrong. There isn't much about either in the Ministry of Education's recently released draft health and physical education curriculum. But there is a lot about "self-worth", "personal identity", "total well-being" and a "socio-ecological perspective".

Perhaps most surprising, in a document designed mainly for a secular state school system, are the references to the "spiritual". I applaud this acknowledgement of the importance of the spiritual dimension in people. The question is, however, to what extent will it be possible and appropriate for the health and physical education curriculum in state schools to contribute to the spiritual development of their pupils? The draft curriculum is woefully short on specifics.

"Total well-being" is said in the draft curriculum to have four dimensions: physical, mental and emotional, social, and spiritual. Spiritual well-being is described as involving "personal belief structures, personal identity, the values that determine the way we live, and the search for personal meaning". Health promotion is seen as a process whereby the wider school community can create, among other things, "spiritually healthy

individuals, school communities, and environments". Quite what spiritual health is at the personal and community levels and what the various components of "total well-being" actually mean and how they inter-relate are far from clear. Much is misty metaphysics.

A particular problem is that the draft curriculum makes no connection between spirituality and the various religious traditions represented within New Zealand. Yet it frequently claims that the curriculum will enable students to examine and analyse beliefs and their effects on well-being. And it makes the very bold assertion that it "identifies the knowledge, understanding and skills necessary to assist the development of *total* well-being [which includes the spiritual dimension] for students, their communities, and society" (emphasis added).

Given the extraordinarily wide scope claimed for health and physical education, we must ask what exactly is envisaged. Is it realistic to ask teachers to analyse *all* the values, beliefs and attitudes that might have a bearing upon well-being? How, for example, would they analyse religious practices such as family prayer? Will teachers be expected to give instruction in, for example, the Anglican Eucharist, the Jewish Passover, and devotional fasting during the Islamic month of Ramadan? All these practices are vital to the spiritual well-being of those who engage in them. Even if we were to accept that such instruction is appropriate for state school education, is it realistic to expect health and physical education teachers to have the requisite knowledge and skills? Insensitive or ill-informed handling of such matters is likely to harm the well-being of pupils who identify with the religions in question.

It would be far better for schools to accept that spiritual development takes place primarily within traditions of faith which also provide the basis for meaningful discussion about such development. This would set clear limits on what the school is expected to achieve in terms of the overall well-being of pupils and leave prime responsibility for spiritual formation to others, including parents and churches.

It is an entirely different matter to inform pupils about religious traditions without attempting to evaluate their truth claims or seeking commitment to them. Indeed there are good arguments for doing so. In an increasingly pluralist society young people need to understand the various faiths practised by New Zealanders. Moreover, it is impossible to engage in any depth with much of our Western cultural inheritance without understanding its foundations in Christian faith. Whether such exploration is a matter for the health and physical education curriculum rather than, say, the humanities is another matter entirely.

The lack of any theological reference in the draft curriculum also undermines its claims to “strengthen personal identity” and “enhance self-worth”. For example, a Jew’s identity is closely associated with God’s liberation of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt. A Christian’s identity and self worth relate to the understanding of God as creator and redeemer and to sharing a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. Other faiths and philosophies will have their own understandings of identity and self-worth and how they might be strengthened or enhanced.

A final point needs to be made. The emphasis on total well-being in the draft curriculum arises from a justifiable concern about problems such as New Zealand’s relatively high rates of youth suicide and teenage pregnancy. However, it is far from clear that including such concepts and subjects as personal identity, self worth, spirituality, and values clarification in the health and physical education curriculum will, *on its own*, assist

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significantly in overcoming such problems.

In addressing any matter of concern, the necessary first step is to identify the probable underlying cause or causes. To ignore this initial step is to risk adopting ‘solutions’ which may exacerbate the problem. In fact some aspects of *The New Zealand Curriculum Framework* and its constituent curriculum statements, including the health and physical education draft, may be reinforcing aspects of New Zealand society which could have contributed to disturbing behavioural trends among our young

people. It could, for example, be argued that teaching ‘values’ as ‘relative’ (ie: not absolute) undermines the traditional standards of thought and behaviour that provide a sense of ‘right and wrong’, including norms of sexual behaviour, and that promoting spirituality without theology is helping to remove traditional sources of meaning and purpose in life. Of course, simply being ‘traditional’ doesn’t necessarily mean being right. But if the promoters of the draft health and physical education curriculum reject traditional values and belief in a creator God as wrong (assuming some things can be ‘wrong’ in their relativist framework of thinking), they should at least consider the consequences which may include a normless, purposeless, meaningless and alienating universe.

**At the time of writing, Michael Irwin was a policy analyst for the New Zealand Business Roundtable specialising in education issues.**

### **Education Forum**

P.O. Box 10 539

Manners Street

Wellington, New Zealand

Telephone: +64 21 607 636

Fax: +64 4 471 1304

Email: [info@educationforum.org.nz](mailto:info@educationforum.org.nz)

Web: [www.educationforum.org.nz](http://www.educationforum.org.nz)