Educating for Meaningful Lives
Through Existential Spirituality

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Why are students becoming disengaged from schooling? Many teachers, administrators and designers of policy and curriculum are expressing concern over this issue. Current approaches to schooling are dominated by a perceived need to enable learners to particulate in the knowledge economy. Both knowledge and learning how to learn knowledge have become the primary discourses in schooling - rather than education. School curricula rarely offer any sense of personal significance and for many learners such an approach to the curriculum is meaningless.

Educating for meaningful lives must be a central aim for educative curricula. This book offers curriculum designers and teachers a greater understanding of this relation that education has with living significantly meaningful lives and it does so through the notion of existential spirituality. Spirituality is not to be reduced to something religious but rather pertains to how a life is lived. An existential perspective enables the meaningfulness of life to provide the necessary significance which is required of a curriculum if it is to be understood as offering personal meaning for learners. Approaching the design and teaching of curricula through this perspective of existential spirituality enables learners to live a meaningful life in an uncertain world.
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Dedicated to my wife Sharon, and children Ross, Isaac, Brice and Clairissa.
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INTRODUCTION

“Whatever it was that prompted this questionable book, it must have been a most important and attractive question, and a deeply personal one.”
(Friedrich Nietzsche, *Birth of Tragedy*, 1993, p. 3)

The particular ‘important and attractive question’ which prompted me to write this book is the question ‘what is the meaning and purpose of life?’ Not only has this been a deeply personal question which has struck me in moments of solitude grappling with existential angst but it has also been a recurring problem for both the students and colleagues I have engaged with in my work in the schooling and university sectors. It is because this question goes beyond personal solitude to permeate the very foundations of all that we do together as human persons that has inclined me to consider its profound significance. It seems that if one plays the game of asking many ‘whys?’ that infants, philosophers, scientists and those of us who have experienced existential crises to ask, then inevitably one must confront the big picture issues of what does it all mean? This appears especially the case for those willing to endure the discomfort of asking questions to seek a justification for particular cultural and social norms – exactly why must we eat, exercise, read, write, show respect, know the quadratic formula, pass exams, remain faithful to marriage partners, honour promises and pay taxes? Inevitably responses to such questions require making an appeal to the meaning and significance of life. It is not enough to stop at ‘well you need to do such and such in order to continue to sustain your existence’ or ‘in order for us all to live at peace together’ because the question ‘why do we even exist?’ must inevitably emerge.

Being able to live peacefully together certainly was one of the concerns to influence education in the aftermath of the Second World War. Preceding this war Germany, under a fascist regime, attained mass participation in schooling, a nationally obedient populace and enjoyed the lowest rate of illiteracy in the world. Quite obviously the learning of ‘basics’ such as the three R’s and adherence to a nationally approved ethical code cannot be considered as being necessarily worthwhile and valuable as demonstrated by the crimes this population committed against other persons. In the 1960s and 70s there was great interest in the pursuit of articulating a certain sort of schooling that would promote educative learning that was distinctively different from indoctrination. There was much written about this by the analytical philosophers in the UK under the leadership of Richard Peters.
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However deliberating about the sorts of *educative* learning which ought to be occurring in schooling as distinct from other sorts such as indoctrination is not generally facilitated or even tolerated by the current adult population of whom most were born after World War Two. It might be true that we no longer live under the threat of totalitarian regimes which openly subscribe to fascist ideologies but we do continue to experience failures of various cultural groups to get along peacefully. Currently we are informed through the media about the terrorist threats that those of us in the West face from groups of fundamentalists. They are understood to be opposed to the continued colonizing forces of neo-liberal ideology present in powerful globalising organisations.

My interest in the issues that this book seeks to address has been largely initiated through my being fortunate enough to be taught by Richard Pring at Oxford University. He introduced me to the ‘big ideas’ surrounding education and schooling which have been largely absent from my undergraduate studies and my work as a high school teacher. There are various references made to Richard’s work throughout this book although I have pursued the questions he raised through different means that he himself often employed. It does not necessarily mean that I am at odds with his approach which is largely located in the analytical tradition. Indeed the richness of the analytical work of Pring’s earlier supervisor – R. S. Peters, has recently been recognised by Warnick (2007) as offering some very valuable material and processes for us to engage with. I therefore draw upon both Pring and Peters at times as I feel that their ‘moral seriousness’ which they give to their considerations about education continue to remain valuable for our world in the new millennium. Rather than remain in the analytical tradition myself I have chosen to draw upon some European existentialists and Dewey’s pragmatism in order to pursue the question of how we can educate for more significant meanings and purposes of life.

Like many other high school teachers I have endeavoured to offer something in addition to the official outcomes required to meet expected standards. These standards are often stated in terms of what students *know and can do.* I have sought to explore a specifically *educative* alternative which offers a way to *be.* Such an approach has recently been described by Hostetler *et al.* (2007) as an attempt to “retrieve meaning” which is centred upon “the question of being.” They suggest that this approach aims “to restore meaning as an aim that can guide educational practice” and argue that it might be necessary to seriously engage with existential questions and the meaning of life (Hostetler *et al*., 2007, p. 233). Through my adoption of such an approach some of my former students expressed that what I offered was “more than just a knowledge based subject” and that it was able to
contribute towards them being able to change their “outlook on life more than all [their] other schooling combined” (Webster, 1999, p. 29). Such a transformation in their lives has led me to pursue further research exploring more valuable ways-of-being. Some of this research is now being shared in this book. It is not a ‘how to’ book in an attempt to replicate some of the curriculum activities I have personally been involved with. Rather it critically explores the concepts and ideas behind such an intervention which can transform lives. It is hoped that such a study might stimulate the work of other educators who are also attempting to offer educative experiences for their own learners.

One of the challenging concepts I encountered early in this research was that of *spirituality*. It is a term that appears sporadically in educational policy documents but suffers from a lack of clarity. It also tends to invoke a religious connotation and therefore invites resistance from those of us who work in secular contexts. However, I now understand that this notion of spirituality is intrinsic for those of us who work in the humanities, especially education. Gadamer (1979; 1996) has explained that the German term for the humanities or ‘human sciences’ is *Geisteswissenschaften* meaning ‘sciences of the spirit’. Therefore those of us who operate within this area need to be mindful of the phenomena with which we deal most – that of human persons. This notion of spirituality is argued to be of central importance for understanding persons and in particular, educated persons.

As an educator much of my interest has been to bridge the gap between school curricula and the living experiences of learners as human persons as also identified by Faure in his UNESCO report. Faure (1972, p. 69) describes this gap as a dehumanizing disease that must be overcome by linking “education to life”. However, as identified by Dewey, before other alternatives and possibilities can be creatively developed first we need to critically understand the phenomenon at hand which Heidegger described as an understanding of its *essence*, in knowing our way around it because we know what questions require asking. The implication of this according to Faure (1972, p. 69) is that “the very substance of education, its essential relationship to man and his development, its interaction with the environment as both product and factor of society must all be deeply scrutinized and extensively reconsidered”. Through such a critical investigation into modern educational practices – or schooling – I conclude that it tends to abstract learners out of existence. Consequently we ought to consider how we might educate them back into existence itself such that their lives are able to have a greater sense of significance and purpose.

Our current age in the West has been described, probably most famously by Nietzsche, as an age of meaningless and nihilism and as an age where
we witness ‘a loss of myth’ (Lesser, 1999; May, 1991). It is myth (i.e. ‘grand narrative’) that has been assumed to have given lives a meaning and purpose but this is now becoming lost in a fragmented world where personal unifying narratives are said to have been replaced by multiple personal identities (Lytard, 1991). However, the quest to provide a response to the question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ is argued to be a matter of life and death (Yalom, 1980, pp. 419–420). This importance is reflected in the view of the existentialist Albert Camus, who stated, “I have seen many people die because life for them was not worth living. From this I conclude that the question of life’s meaning is the most urgent of all” (Quoted by Yalom, 1980, p. 420).

To address this question of the meaning of life from an existential perspective does not mean I have had to merge the works of various existentialists together. I have endeavoured to reference individual philosophers throughout this book in order to maintain some of their differences between each other and only describe a singular existential perspective as being the particular one that I myself am conceptualising here. In addition to drawing mostly upon the Europeans Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger, I also have incorporated some of John Dewey’s Pragmatism. It wasn’t until after I had studied the European philosophers that I developed a renewed interest in Dewey’s works. There are certainly some profound similarities in their concerns and the means by which they investigate them. There are others of course who have recognised similarities between these two philosophies. Paul Tillich (1980, pp. 119–120) has identified that American Pragmatism shares “many concepts with that perspective more widely known in Europe as the ‘philosophy of life.’” Its ethical principle is growth, its educational method is self-affirmation of the individual self, its preferred concept is creativity.”

While Dewey (1930a, p. 127) might not have described his own approach as Tillich has done here with the term ‘creation’ which he regarded to be a little “pretentious”, he did nevertheless promote the notion of growth as a way-of-being for enabling the social intelligence of human kind to reconstruct society. He certainly had an eye on a global perspective and clearly understood that the human world must always be inclusive of the natural environment. In pursuing a better world through reconstructing society he recognised the potential importance for education and schooling. Currently the global school population makes up one quarter of the world’s population and so if there are to be any serious and systematic approaches to making the world a better place and enabling lives to be more meaningful then an educative approach to schooling must surely have great potential. This is also recognised by the Delors (1998, p. 160) report to
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UNESCO where it concludes that as a result of this potential, education “cannot be left only to market forces.”

Unfortunately schooling in the western world has all too often been subservient to market and political demands. It is difficult to conceive of it otherwise. What I am concerned with in this book is the interaction between individual learners and the formal curricula which embody these external demands. What happens to the learner’s way-of-being as a result of this interaction, i.e. what sort of person does she become? Such market and political concerns which influence curricula development do not necessarily mean that the sort of learning which occurs in schooling cannot be educational in addition to meeting the required needs of society at large. I make the claim however, in Chapter One that this educative dimension has been marginalised out of schooling practices to such a degree that many curricula programs are actually meaningless for students because they reduce the thinking of learners to simply be able to only recognise and categorise. In order to support this claim I draw upon Heidegger’s notion of ‘total relevance’ and the pragmatic notion of ‘significance’ to make the case that the sort of meanings which are offered by school programs only offer relevance but do not offer significance.

In Chapter Two I explore a little further some of the influences that these market and political demands have on schooling, claiming that many curricula programs abstract learners out from existence. This is mainly achieved through humankind’s pursuit of certainty which can be located back to the times of ancient Greece and is evidenced today through the privileging of knowledge in the curriculum over and above what it might mean for human persons to be educated. My identification of this privileging of a certain epistemology over and above meaningful existence is not new. UNESCO (Faure, 1972, p. 69) too has identified a ‘gap’ between the typical content of schooling “and the living experiences of its pupils”. Faure consequently has argued that education ought to be linked to life. It is through a constant magnification of the importance of how learners learn knowledge which makes teaching take on a very technically proficient sort of identity which is unfortunately bereft of any articulated concerns regarding the big picture of life including such issues as why learners ought to be educated, what might be the meanings and purposes for their lives and what sorts of persons are they to become? The managerial obsession with the effectiveness of learning technologies has enabled the political and market interest on producing particular sorts of persons through schooling to be kept hidden from public scrutiny.

As my focus is upon what sorts of persons educated learners ought to become, I have tried to contextualise the importance of this in relation to
making global peace possible. This is the focus for Chapter Three where I identify that while the operators of the Nazi death camps like Auschwitz might have been literate and ethically obedient to authorities, they did not have the way-of-being which enabled them to live respectively with other persons in such a way that a negotiated world peace could be possible. The sorts of persons to be educated for such a pursuit must be imbued with a global focus rather than with narrowly individual and nationalistic concerns.

Often the notion of ‘truth’ can act as a barrier when considering what it might mean to be educated. Usually the correspondence theory of truth is adopted in curricula which have implied that meanings are to be found with entities themselves. Consequently the activities of interpreting and understandings are fragmented from one another. However I want to draw attention to how ‘truth’ can be understood in a much more participatory manner in such a way that interpreting and understanding can occur together as meanings are made. This is discussed in Chapter Four and leads to an existential understanding of hermeneutics which is described in more detail in the following chapter.

Chapter Five builds on this understanding of truth as something that is more participatory in nature by conducting a review of some important themes in existential philosophy. I consider that Existentialism offers a most valuable philosophical perspective as it specifically addresses the individuating feelings of alienation, angst and meaninglessness that many young learners and also many adults in our societies are experiencing. Readers might find this chapter denser to read as it endeavours to explore the major themes of this philosophy with the purpose of pursing the question of the meaning of life. This particular pursuit of life’s meaning has been described as spiritual and this forms the topic of the following chapter. In Chapter Six several understandings of spirituality are explored to make better sense of how spirituality has been engaged with in the field of education. In combining the understandings of existential philosophy with this exploration of spirituality, especially for education, Chapter Seven then presents a particular existential perspective of spirituality. This perspective focuses upon the question of the meaning of life in such a way that the main concern is upon what it might mean to be spiritual in an educated sense. However by adopting a perspective which is largely based upon existential philosophy the objection might be raised that it is only applicable to secular contexts of schooling and might be inappropriate for religious contexts. If this objection were to have merit then the perspective of existential spirituality as developed here would not have a place in the
thousands of schools around the world which are sponsored by various religious organisations. Therefore Chapter Eight addresses this potential objection by considering the compatibility of this existential perspective of spirituality with religion, particularly Christianity as this has been the most influential religion in the West.

In Chapter Nine the argument is made that we should be educating learners back into existence by transcending the correspondence theory of truth and the quest for certainty which privileges abstract knowledge in the curriculum. This argument shall be made by exploring the nature of education itself. Such an exercise will draw upon the analytical philosophers such as R. S. Peters again in addition to others, to make the case that if someone is to be considered as educated then there ought to be serious consideration given to the sort of person she is to become. That is, what should be her way-of-being? This shall be concluded in Chapter Ten with a proposed notion of what the way-of-being of a spiritually educated person ought to be in order for persons in an uncertain world to be able to pursue global peace and live their lives which has greater meaning and significance.
CHAPTER 1

SOCIETY AND SCHOOLING

AS MEANINGLESSNESS

“The founders of modern sociology had their
doubts as to the wisdom of the project they
examined and described as social reality

. . . something of ultimate value was left out”
(Zygmunt Bauman, 2002, Society Under Siege, p. 31)

The ultimate value to which Bauman refers to in the above quote is the
moral concern as to what makes life worthwhile in such a way that we are
able to live well in the world in which we find ourselves. This moral concern
regarding who we are and what might be the meaning and purposes of
our lives, has given way to the technocratic approaches adopted by many
in the field of sociology as Bauman has observed. The German expression
for the ‘human sciences’ is Geistwissenschaften which, literally means
‘philosophy or science of the spirit’. According to Gadamer (1979) this
term was based on interpreting J. S. Mill’s ‘moral sciences’ with the German
Geistwissenschaften. With reference to both Bauman’s observation and
these etymological origins of the field of the humanities, it is argued here
that those who study and conduct research into the human sciences and
those who are educating humanity have largely forgotten this moral and
spiritual aspect which is contended here to be necessary if lives are to be
meaningful.

In addition to these founders of sociology who have omitted this sense of
ultimate value, it is argued here that the dominant practices of western
schooling and universities also leave out ultimate values from their courses.
It has now become ‘normal’ to busy ourselves with “the miniatures of
our private lives” rather than “the big picture” (Mackay, 2004, p. 170) to
the point where, as Alasdair MacIntyre (2006, p. 125) has observed, if, in
the midst of one’s friends and associates one were to burst out with an
existential question concerning ultimate value such as ‘what is the meaning
and purpose of life?’, ‘what is it to live a human life well or badly?’ or
‘who am I?’ one would quickly be considered as approaching a break down.
Indeed MacIntyre notes that the asking of such metaphysical questions has
been listed as potentially symptomatic of psychiatric disorders. However
rather than the actual asking (or even silent contemplation) of questions concerning ultimate value serving as an indication of individual sickness might the absence of such concerns more publicly be symptomatic of a sick civilisation? This is certainly Gadamer’s (1996, p. 81) conclusion as he considered all of us to be “patients” in a highly technical civilization where “our personal existence is clearly something which is everywhere denied”.

As a result of this omission of ultimate value from public life many young people are becoming disengaged where life in general and themselves in particular appear to have an existence without meaning. These ultimate values concern our sense of personal identity, who we are, what the meaning and purposes of life might be and an enablement to live well. Ultimate values pertain to the quality of life rather than the quantity of material possessions, prestige, power or even longevity of physical existence. These latter aspects are quantifiable in nature and lend themselves to an outlook of consumption which according to Postman (1995, p. 33) can reduce one’s sense of personal identity down to what is accumulated rather than who one is as a unique person. Such a reduction of personal identity has prompted some social commentators like May (1991, p. 16) to claim that our contemporary western societies are facing a crisis characterized by an apparent sense of meaninglessness. In an interview he made the claim that:

The crisis in psychotherapy is that therapists, psychiatrists, and social workers, who should be dealing with the deeper aspects of the human being, with what I call “being,” instead deal only with the particular problems of the client. ...what we are concerned with is the meaning of life, not whether or not he has a job. ... Life is not superficial. The real problem is how you exist in a world that is antagonistic... Therapists and counselors don’t talk much about that. (May in Rabinowitz et al., 1989, p. 439)

Supporting this view Debats (1996, p. 503) adds that “the neglected meaning of life issue deserves greater therapeutic and scientific consideration”. The absence of meaning in relation to ultimate value within western culture is described by Purpel in rather Nietzschean terms as an:

“age of anxiety” and has produced a number of gloomy descriptors and concepts – “alienation,” “anomie,” “angst” – it is a time when we have been challenged seriously to confront suicide and the death of God. It has been called a time of spiritual and moral crisis – a time when words like “anxiety,” “despair,” and “absurdity” are part of everyday vocabulary, a time when self-help books and organizations proliferate. (Purpel, 1989, p. 23)
It is within such an environment that Victor Frankl (2000, p. 86) has reported that developing a meaningful philosophy of life which attempts to address ultimate value can nevertheless remain the highest goal for the majority of students in spite of – or because of – its neglect in institutional learning and in society more generally.

This postmodern and globalized era is considered to contribute to this apparent loss (or at the very least, a fragmentation) of personal identity and the consequent feelings of alienation (Brown et al., 1997, p. 3; Gergen, 1991, pp. 15, 73–74). In certain contexts, humanity is being valued only in economic terms, either as market labour or as ‘human capital’. This tendency can be seen to be occurring to such an extent that “large segments of the population everywhere are becoming irrelevant” (Chauvin, 1998, p. 9) producing groups of persons which can be considered to be waste (Bauman, 2004). According to Castells (1996) the key ingredients required for our western societies to survive globalization are economic competitiveness and profitability. Consequently education has been argued to be an important key to the competitive future of economic prosperity. Often governments argue that there ought to be a tighter relation between education and work to ensure economic prosperity. But such an agenda may result in the subordination of education to ‘performativity’. This criterion of performativity as argued by Lyotard (1984, p. 51) reduces the value of knowledge in education to its usefulness, efficiency and commercial value. While Lyotard refers specifically to ‘knowledge’ it is also argued here to be relevant for the notion of ‘ways of knowing’ and by implication, ways of existing. The impact upon our national schooling systems as a result of prioritising economic goals over those that develop persons to become more fully human is likely to be immense.

However Dewey (1916, p. 248) clearly argued that “education is not a means to living, but is identical with the operation of living a life which is fruitful and inherently significant”. The whole notion of education however is now under threat due to the ever-increasing demand for training in competencies. We have witnessed both education and training occurring concurrently within our schooling systems, although it would now appear that the educative aspects are becoming marginalised (Margetson, 1997) and are even considered as being irrelevant (Webster, 2004a).

Schooling generally provides curricula that can be demonstrated to be relevant for various subject disciplines and other requirements for the broader needs of society such as basic employability skills. As such the usefulness of curricula (being relevant) are considered sufficient to meet the requirements already identified by society. Consequently the various items of knowledge and skill acquisition tend to be functional in nature because they are designed to satisfy particular outcomes. Learning objectives
such as tying shoe laces, reading, writing, dancing, typing, adding and dividing are considered to be simply relevant for particular tasks that are required of citizens in society, most usually in places of employment. As such these learning objectives are often described as being justified because they directly contribute to the economy by preparing the next generation to participate in the work force.

However such curricula do not offer learners an engagement with anything of real significance. As Parker Palmer noted from his own experience of being a student, stating that:

My teachers… taught the statistics and the facts and the theories behind the facts. But … they never connected with the inwardness of my life, because the inwardness of those historical events was never revealed to me. Everything was objectified and externalized, and I ended up morally and spiritually deformed as a consequence. (Palmer, 1999, p. 25)

This chapter seeks to outline how our schooling systems contribute to this spiritual and moral ‘deformity’ as Palmer describes here which is symptomatic of society at large. School curricula can certainly be seen to be full and even over-crowded with facts and theories to be taught. It is contended here that this omission, whether intentional or unintentional, produce lessons and experiences for learners which might be relevant but they are not significant. Consequently I argue that without any sense of significance schooling is unfortunately reduced to a state of meaninglessness. In order to develop my argument I shall begin by examining the terms ‘meaning’, ‘significance’ and ‘relevance’ to better describe how meaningfulness is being reduced to relevance only without any significance. Reference shall be made to the philosophical perspective of essentialism and the influence this currently has on our curricula, especially as represented through Hirsch who argues for a separation between meaning and interpretation. This philosophical perspective shall be contrasted with the views of mainly Dewey, Heidegger and Gadamer who have argued that meaning-making cannot be separated from the activities of interpretation. Their concern for education is not focussed upon particular bodies of knowledge, behaviours or skills which are ‘essential’ to the content of any curriculum but rather their utmost concerns are what sort of persons are to be developed and what sort of world are they able to work towards establishing. The last section of this chapter shall employ the notion of ‘black and white thinking’ as a means of describing the manner or way-of-being which is developed in learners through current curricula which are essentialist in nature. This will serve as a means for analysing some of the barriers we as a species face
when considering bigger picture issues such as the pursuit of world peace on a planet which can be sustained.

MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE

In making the case that society is without meaning and that schools offer courses in meaningless, that is courses without meaning, it is necessary to clarify how ‘meaning’ is being understood here. While an examination of the meaning of meaning might appear to be a deeply philosophical task, John Dewey (1950, p. 332) warns us that even after attaining great familiarity with the literature on the subject we can only “even begin to be aware of how confusing, obfuscating, and boring in its multiplicity of elaborations the word ‘meaning’ has become.” Dictionaries usually employ the terms significance, importance, underlying truth, intention and purpose to offer a definition. David Cooper (2003, p. 21) explains that in the English language the word ‘meaning’ does not correspond exactly to any words in other languages. He recognises that in some languages such as French and Spanish that the terms ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ are quite interchangeable. This is not so readily accepted by some scholars such as E. D. Hirsch Jr. who contend that there is a difference between the two terms.

The distinction between meaning and significance made by Hirsch is based on his argument which references Goldmann, who explained that “the illumination of a meaningful structure constitutes a process of comprehending it [meaning]; while insertion of it into a vaster structure is to explain it [significance]” (quoted by Hirsch, 1976, p. 2). In addition to being an influential educator in the United States promoting an essentialist perspective, Hirsch is also a scholar in the field of hermeneutics which concerns the study of interpretations, particularly interpretations of texts. He uses the term ‘meaning’ to represent the notion of comprehending the verbal meaning of a text while ‘significance’ is used to refer “to textual meaning in relation to a larger context, i.e., another mind, another era, a wider subject matter” (Hirsch, 1976, p. 2–3). He has had to make his distinction between these two as clear as possible in order to strengthen his argument in light of the many criticisms he has received. He maintains however that the most important implication of his argument is to be able to identify stable meanings of texts separate from the context of individual interpretations in order to achieve that which is necessary for the possibility of knowledge to emerge.

Hirsch (1976, p. 3) claims that “if we could not distinguish a content of consciousness from its contexts, we could not know any object at all in the
world.” He considers that this ‘content of consciousness’, the object/idea to be known, must be consistent no matter who is interpreting or learning it. For a meaning to be gained via interpretation there must be “an experienced sameness” which allows for example, the object of an inkwell to be recognised as an inkwell no matter who is studying it. While he is not a realist in the sense that the actual stable meaning is actually a true representation of the object itself but is only ever a close approximation of it, he clearly divides experience into two realms – one of interpretation and another of understanding. He supports a divide between an object (the thing to be interpreted) and a subject (the individual interpreter), between knowledge and value, where he claims that “meaning is the stable object of knowledge” in contrast to significance which refers to “the unstable realm of value” (Hirsch, 1976, p. 146). However the appeals Hirsch makes to a consistent ‘content of consciousness’ and ‘an experienced sameness’ is not supported by the findings in neurology.

Neurobiologist and author Walter Freeman warns us against making appeals to the notion of consciousness as Hirsch has done because as a psychological construct it is without a biological basis which proves its existence. Instead Freeman argues that we can understand the notion of meaning better by studying how neuron populations (rather than linear arrangements of individual neurons) within the brain conduct themselves. He has observed that:

Brain activity patterns are constantly dissolving reforming and changing, particularly in relation to one another. When an animal learns to respond to a new odour, there is a shift in all other patterns, even if they are not directly involved with the learning. There are no fixed representations, as there are in computers; there are only meanings. (Freeman, 1999, p. 22)

Contrary to Hirsch, Freeman claims that biologically there is no basis for a belief in a consistent content of consciousness. Meanings, when biologically understood through the actions of neuron populations, are quite unlike stable bundles of information or objective collections of knowledge claims. This has great importance for our understandings of teaching and learning. Freeman (1999, p. 23) concludes that “meaning cannot be transferred directly into and between brains in the way that information and knowledge based in representations can be transferred into and between machines.”

Creating a divide between a realm of objective stable knowledge to be taught or transmitted and another realm of subjective value as Hirsch has attempted, is considered here to have had profound implications for
schooling and for education. The typical call for schools to get back to basics, to the three R’s, essential learning, cultural literacy, character education, standardized curricula, standardized testing and the No Child Left Behind policy in the United States, are typical responses made on the fundamental premise that these two realms can be held apart from one another. Such responses often promote essentialism, that is the notion that there is an assumed object of knowledge, something with an essence beyond the knowing person which is to be known. As a separate realm or indeed multiple realms as Philip Phenix contends, it could be asserted that these realms are able to provide stable meanings to apparently unstable existences. Phenix (1964, p. 33) argues that “Contrary to the Existentialists, it will be our theme that durable meanings can be found and that the obstacles to meaning can be overcome when the realms of possible meaning and the conditions for their realization are well enough understood.” He opposes the view of the existentialists such as Paul Tillich because they only appear to him to present “general disillusionment”. However Phenix has missed what Tillich argued was the positive message of Existentialism in that while it brought the individual to the edge of the precipice looking down to the potential abyss of meaninglessness it nevertheless offers the courage to be, the courage to take responsible actions and declare that something particular is significantly meaningful for oneself.

The main argument of Phenix is the claim that there are realms of meanings to be found in the various disciplines of knowledge. In the pursuit of meaning he privileges these realms of abstract knowledge above the existence of ‘subjective’ persons. This has direct implications for schooling as he argues that “The teacher’s task as a mediator of knowledge is to humanize the disciplines, by showing that knowledge in each of its various kinds has meaning for all rather than for an exclusive group of professionals” (Phenix, 1964, p. 54). He considers that these realms of knowledge form an articulated whole and therefore should be the basis upon which meaning is sought. This is in contrast to lived experiences which he regarded as fragmented. Presumably he would conclude that primitive societies are condemned to live meaningless lives until these knowledge disciplines were fully developed.

Through such essentialism schooling institutions portray that meanings lie beyond the knower in the realm of knowledge. In this two-realm view of reality individual persons do not have a presence in knowledge and meaning. Truth is something external to their immediate present existence. Knowledge and the learning of knowledge are privileged in schooling as a consequence and such a position is justified on the basis that the core knowledge to be learned ‘just is’ irrespective of whether parents, teachers
or parents value it or not. This has led Hirsch (1988, p. xvii; 1996) to argue that learning in schools should consist of “piling up specific… information” considered to be core knowledge for the express purposes of economic effectiveness and for what he regards to be social justice and the requirements for basic participation in a community. While his work implies that societies exist as monocultures his overarching argument is that it is the acquisition of knowledge that makes participation possible. However his focus is exclusively upon the school classrooms and dominant culture of the nation-state. He has not addressed how persons can participate together peacefully on a global scale nor indeed given serious consideration to what it is to be a person.

Essentialism is not new to education and practices based on this philosophy were referred to as the “old education” by John Dewey almost a century ago. Dewey’s main concern, and it is one that is shared in this book, is that the way-of-being, the way of living that is required by learners under essentialism is one of passivity, docility and unquestioning obedience. Dewey (1990, p. 32) claimed that “the attitude of listening means, comparatively speaking, passivity, absorption; that there are certain ready-made materials which are there, which have been prepared by the school superintendent, the board, the teacher, and of which the child is to take in as much as possible in the least possible time.” This assumption behind how learners are thought to learn ‘knowledge’ has been refuted by Freeman (1999, p. 26) as mentioned earlier who has already demonstrated through neurobiology that “information is divorced from meaning.” However the economy of absorbing information often termed as ‘knowledge’ is dominant in today’s schooling, so much so that the whole enterprise of education itself has become replaced by notions of efficient and effective learning. At the time of writing a Google search comparison between effective learning and educative learning produced 1,130,000 results for the former and only 792 results for the latter. This means that for each single result that the term ‘educative learning’ appears there are over 1,426 results which address ‘effective learning’. This comparison serves to indicate that the concern in much of the literature surrounding schooling tends to focus upon the effectiveness of delivering knowledge from the curriculum to have it processed and learned efficiently by students. Little attention is being given to the educational implications of this practice.

RELEVANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE

Hirsch has tried to make much of a distinction between ‘meaning’ and ‘significance’ but as reported by Cooper no such difference can be legitimated based upon the etymology of the term ‘meaning’ and biologically
there is not the evidence to support stable and consistent representations that are held in memory. It would appear that meaning does have much in common with significance, as demonstrated in some non-English languages where the two terms are interchangeable. Consequently we might understand Hirsch’s distinction to be an attempt to separate interpreting the known from understanding the value and implication that this knowledge has for one’s more immediate existence – including both the present moment and the predicted future. Rather than attempt to distinguish between meaning and significance it is argued here to be more valuable to understand meaning through the terms relevance and significance.

Relevance can be understood as the initial reference of relations that a particular entity might appear to have. Heidegger used the example of a hammer and described it as an object ready-to-hand, a tool (Dazu) which is something for activities (Wobei) – in this case hammering. The relation between the tool and the activity is one of relevance. Heidegger (1996, p. 78) explained that “to be relevant means to let something be together with something else”. So the object of the hammer is to be together with the activity of hammering. Meanings are found in the relationships between entities and activities. They do not reside in objects themselves abstracted out from all contexts. Hammering as an activity might have its own meaning – its relevance – located in relation to fastening for example as this second activity gives sense to the hammering. In this example relevance can be enlarged to incorporate the many other relationships that this fastening is related to such as the building of a shelter which is a barrier against bad weather.

Relevance for Heidegger is understood as the usability or the ‘what-for’ of the object and this offers its primordial meaning. With reference to Heidegger’s notion of circumspection Nielsen (2007, p. 459) claims that entities are first understood in their relations to each other prior to being understood as objects in themselves. Relevance is not a singular stand-alone relation between one object and a single activity but indeed is part of what Heidegger referred to as ‘total relevance’. A key to understanding this total relevance of Heidegger’s is through his term Bedeutsamkeit which is translated as significance and meaningfulness. In order to appreciate the relation between relevance and significance we must first understand Heidegger’s notion of Da-sein (translated as ‘there, to be’ and meaning to be there, present, available) as representing not just the entity of ourselves but also our way-of-being. According to Heidegger (1996, p. 10), Dasein is ontically distinguished amongst all other beings because, as a being, “it is concerned about its very being”. Dasein’s being cannot be understood piecemeal such as its mind, consciousness or cognition because its nature is
unified through a concern or care for one’s being. Due to Dasein’s concern for the meaning of its being it provides the site of struggle to make sense of this ultimate concern. Heidegger referred to this site as a clearing, a place where truth can be participated in thereby allowing entities, including one’s very own purposes which give the total relevance, that is, the significance and meaning to life, to be revealed. But Dasein is not just a place of clearing in time and space, it is also an activity, a way-of-being which Heidegger (2001, p. 144) described as “sojourning”. Regarding total relevance, Heidegger explained that:

These relations are interlocked among themselves as a primordial totality. They are what they are as this signifying in which Da-sein gives itself to understand its being-in-the-world beforehand. We shall call this relational totality of signification significance. It is what constitutes the structure of the world, of that in which Da-sein as such always already is. (Heidegger, 1996, p. 81)

The example used above regarding the hammer being relevant to building a shelter is given significance through understanding what it means for the person who is considering the hammer with regards to the world in which she is required to live in a shelter. This total relevance depends upon reference to Dasein’s needs and purposes as its relation to this entity provides the “primary ‘what-for’” which “always concerns the being of Dasein which is essentially concerned about this being itself in its being” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 78). Heidegger went on to explain that:

The understanding of a totality of relevance inherent in circumspect taking care is grounded in a previous understanding of the relations of in-order-to, what-for, for-that, and for-the-sake-of-which. We set forth the connection of these relations as significance. Their unity is what we call world. (Heidegger, 1996, p. 333)

It begins to emerge here that according to Heidegger human persons are beings in relation who relate to these relations which is quite different to conceptualising persons as transcendent egos who make sense of the world or of realms of knowledge only through rational consciousness. Persons are present with the meanings of these relations and this presence of theirs includes the very meanings for their lives which serve to give unity to their purposes. Through this sense of an all encompassing unity which is inclusive of our concerns Heidegger (1996, p. 333) concludes that “Da-sein is its world.”

This is supported by Freeman (1999) who contends that minds are purposeful actions in the world. They are not inert tablets of wax to be
written upon but are rather actively relating to and engaging with their environment in such a dynamic manner that the appearances of the same object never stimulates identical responses in the brain. As intelligent beings rather than as computers, persons’ meaning-making capability is inclusive of our personal sense of significance, our purposes, or what Freeman describes as our ‘expectations and designs’. He claims that:

When we encounter an object of a certain kind, we ask whether it is alive or dead, likely to attack or ready to escape if we try to capture it. If it is still, we ask if it is watching us. If it is moving, we ask if the motion is directed towards or away from us, or to other parts of its environment. (Freeman, 1999, p. 31)

Clearly our own personal presence has great importance for how we develop our meanings and understandings. There is inevitably some reference to our personal location, both physically and in relation to our plans, hopes and designs for the future.

Similarly to Heidegger’s hammer Dewey used the example of a hoe to demonstrate the ‘ready-made’ understanding of the entity in relation to the person who is present. He refers to the end-in-view or consequence of hoeing which gives the tool its meaning. The tool is used to systematically pursue an end-in-view or purpose by a person. Without this end-in-view of the person the entity of the hoe could not be understood much beyond immediate sense perception. Many meanings would be possible due to “a vast extension of what the hoe has to say for itself” (Dewey, 1950, p. 329). This notion of letting the hoe ‘speak’ to the person who is considering it is very similar to how Heidegger discussed truth as disclosing and un Concealing for which more will be examined in Chapter Four.

Meaning can be understood then as being necessarily relevant and necessarily significant. The relevance refers to the immediate togetherness entities have which are the relations which give immediate sense. However meaning also consists of significance that is the totality of relevance which is inclusive of the person and the person’s purpose or end-in-view for participating in a particular activity. One can appreciate then that ultimate value is not just the unity signified by total relevance and contained in the initial significance of the need to build a shelter or hoe a field as a source of food. Ultimate meaningfulness refers to the total significance of all the ‘whys’ that we participate with and which give our lives sense, significance, direction and purpose.
MEANING AND UNDERSTANDING

An important difference between the essentialist views of Hirsch and Phenix regarding meaning and that of the more pragmatic views of Heidegger and Dewey is that the latter two do not separate interpretation from understanding. For them all meaning-making (or meaning-recognising) occurs from what they both refer to as a ‘horizon’ of understanding. It is within this horizon that persons have purposes for the future for which present activities are aiming towards. These purposes or ends-in-view may be personal but they always occur in what Dewey explained is our ‘existential matrix’ which consists of just the one realm of existence where both culture and the biological environment are present. This one realm of existence with which one finds oneself is described by Heidegger as one’s facticity. It forms the world of Dasein and indeed is Dasein.

In order to interpret and make/recognise meaning there is a constant dialectic between the knower and the known in the one transaction, the one experience such that they should not be represented as independent entities. The reason for emphasising the word ‘one’ in this description is that both Heidegger and Dewey were opposed to assuming that there is a divide between a subjective realm of knowers and an objective realm of objects and ideas which can be mediated by a third realm – that of words with meanings. Heidegger (2001, p. 223) explained that Dasein should not be interpreted “as a subject in the subject-object relationship”. Words therefore do not consist of inherent meanings which represent the realm of things and which mediates to the realm of persons. As Heidegger (1988, pp. 208–9) has explained, “It is not the case that first there are the words, which are coined as signs for meanings, but just the reverse – it is from the Dasein which understands itself and the world, from a significance-contexture already unveiled, that a word accrues to each of these meanings.” It is important to acknowledge that such a Dasein is not an atomistic nor isolated person but is one who is embedded with and co-exists (mitda-sein) with others in a world, which is similar to Dewey’s notion of the individual who is not so individualistic at all but is rather a social being.

Meaning exists in relationships and is not a characteristic of atomistic individual objects. Postman and Weingartner (1969, p. 106) even argue that “meaning is not ‘in’ words. Meaning is in people” and therefore “a word and its referent that are beyond one’s experience are ‘meaninglessness.’” This same point is also argued by Ogden and Richards (1949, pp. 10–11) who explain, using the three elements of symbol, thought or reference and referent, are related to each other primarily through the middle one – that of the interpreter’s thought or reference. They conclude that there is no direct relation between a symbol and its referent, between a word and its
meaning, but only an indirect one which is inclusive of persons as interpreters. Such a view was also articulated by the physicist David Bohm who argued that it is part of our very nature to find coherent meaning because we are meaning” (as quoted by Pylkkänen, 1989, p. 13). Meanings are to be found with persons through the way they relate to the relationships between activities and the objects that are involved, or in Dewey’s terms, the way that they act upon these relations. An important contribution made by the Pragmatism of James and Dewey is to clearly identify the presence of persons in meaning relations. This is partly captured in the field of semiotics where Morris (1938) has outlined the importance of meaning in relation to the person who is the user of the sign and which he describes as pragmatics. While Morris (1938, p. 29–30; 1964, pp. 44–6) argues that pragmatics in semiotics does not necessarily correspond with all the various forms of Pragmatism, they do share a consideration being given to the relation of signs to their users.

A dichotomy between the learner and the world, between the knower and the known, is not being argued for here nor is the claim that learning primarily influenced by beliefs is therefore a subjective occurrence. It is most likely that meanings made by learners will be similar to each other because as social beings we share a common world with a common language. Not only do meanings emerge from direct first-hand experiences but they also develop through comparing ideas with ideas which are part of our social world with others. Meanings might be created from the centre of the stream of our own individual lives but they are not totally self-given. According to Michael Polanyi:

Many writers have observed, since John Dewey advanced the idea at the close of the last century, that, to some degree, we shape all knowledge by the way we know it. Stated in this bald way, knowledge would appear to be subject to the whims of the observer. But the pursuit of science has shown us how, even in the shaping of his own anticipations, the knower is controlled by impersonal requirements. His acts are personal judgments exercised responsibly with a view to a reality with which he is seeking to establish contact. This holds for all seeking and finding of ‘external’ truth, i.e., the attainment ‘self-centered,’ as against ‘self-giving,’ meaning. (Polanyi and Prosch, 1975, p. 194)

Both Dewey and Heidegger argued very strongly for appreciating that the transaction between person and entity occurs in just the one realm of existence where interpretations and meanings emerge from a horizon of understanding. The dialectic process of seeking meaning involves referencing
both the person with her world and ends-in-view and the entity (such as a hammer or a hoe) disclosing itself. This constant self-referencing produces a circular process which Heidegger referred to as the existential *fore-structure* of Da-sein itself and stated that, “The ‘circle’ in understanding belongs to the structure of meaning, and this phenomenon is rooted in the existential constitution of Da-sein, in interpretive understanding” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 143). The importance of the ‘fore’ in considering one’s horizon as the fore-structure is that it is the “nearest nearness which we constantly rush ahead of” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 12) and consequently give little attention to. It offers tools to allow us to think with but doesn’t readily lend itself as something to be thought about.

This has important implications for education. Gadamer, a former student of Heidegger, explained that this concept of horizon is used to appreciate that one’s stance from which one sees, thinks and learns is limited simply by being situated. He argued that if one did not have a horizon, that is one who claims not to be limited by a particular cultural or individual stance, “does not see far enough and hence over-values what is nearest to him” (Gadamer, 2000, p. 302). Such a person would be regarded to be more of a fundamentalist rather than an educated person because she resists entering into a dialectic to consider what legitimates the beliefs she holds to be most profound and is therefore prevented from learning and possibly changing to developing a more worthwhile and valuable fore-structure.

Understanding always operates from a horizon which consists in a system of interpreted relations. It is this which Gadamer, Heidegger and Dewey argue is present in any act of interpretation leading to meaning-making where there is a fusion of horizons. This is in contrast to Hirsch who maintains that horizons of understanding should not be involved in making meanings but rather meanings should be able to exist independently of the realm of persons, which he describes as consisting of subjective values.

For the purpose of the argument being made in this book, the importance of meaning as significance shall be pursued. Meaning cannot just be limited to relevance. Where significance is involved there is something of notable importance and value involved – especially ultimate value. While at this point the reader may doubt whether there is anything really worthwhile to be gained from examining what might appear as only slight nuances between the terms significance and relevance, I which to demonstrate that this subtle difference actually has profound implications for schooling, education and society and how we come to understand and participate in life in such a way as to make it worth living.
The greatest significance as understood and argued for here in this book is involved with the issues of ultimate importance and value. Having a clear sense of who we are and what are our purposes for life, are considered to be typical of significance because they address Heidegger’s total relevance and Dewey’s ultimate ends-in-view. While various frameworks and meta-narratives are occasionally offered by non-government schools to give life meaning, they are usually in the form of formalised religions or philosophies but little is found to offer significance on a personal level. Relevance to pre-determined frameworks and world-views tend to provide the answers and definitions. Therefore when it comes to life one tends to pursue the meaning of life rather than the meaning of one’s own life. The material that is offered by such institutions can be considered to be relevant to the particular world-view that is espoused by the organisation but for the learners as individual persons they may offer little or no significance.

MEANING-MAKING AS THINKING

Intrinsic to meaning-making is an experience of doubt (i.e. one is unsure what this thing is or what it means) and the activity of thinking (what sense and relevance can be given to this sensation?). Such experiences of uncertainty and doubt tend to individualise persons. Indeed any experience of uncertainty is recognised by Bauman (2001, p. 24) to be “a powerful individualizing force.” It is from the uncertainty and doubt which is experienced at the individual level that thinking responds. Thinking is therefore an individualized activity. This does not imply that all meanings are to be reduced to the subjective interpretations of individuals as I mentioned earlier. Meanings can, and most often usually are, made by a social group and the making of such meanings by an individual requires an engagement with what the social ‘experts’ have already determined the relevance or purpose of the ‘thing’ to be.

Thinking, according to Dewey (1933, p. 227), is an attempt “to grasp meaning” and for Heidegger (1971, p. 70) it is not just a means for gaining knowledge. Thinking can involve some difficult work. Fortunately for the most part we do not need to think about giving sense to every stimulus we receive during each moment of our waking lives. In order to cope in a potentially ‘blooming, buzzing confusion’ as William James described we recognise appearances as already having meaning. James refers to this as ‘sameness’ and Dewey similarly refers to it as ‘an attitude of anticipation’. We operate in a world of ready-made meanings which are given to stimuli as we encounter them. We have the disposition to recognise particular
objects that we have never seen before as belonging to the meanings we have already established in the fore-structure of our horizons. These meanings are in the form of general conceptual understandings. They allow us to categorize particular items which we may never have seen before but which we can confidently classify as types of cars, buses, trees, footballs, houses and so forth. Rarely are we confronted with something that we cannot reference to an already existing conceptual understanding. Even when we meet a particular person for the first time we are inclined to categorize him or her according to concepts we feel we already understand such as nice, friendly, racist, fundamentalist, relativist, conservative or Marxist.

The use of such conceptual categories serves to indicate that these usually tend not to be individually constructed but are established by the social group in which we find ourselves. We may initially be tentative with the meaning we assign a particular encounter but gain confidence as agreement is established with other persons in a more public setting, especially when they are authoritative experts such as religious and political leaders, teachers and textbooks. Upon such alignment of personal meanings with these authorities the individual is often satisfied that she is ‘right’ or ‘correct’ in her understanding. Often these established meanings are regarded to be a form of knowledge. Not only can the learner place confidence in what he knows but the teacher also can have clearly established bodies of knowledge from which she can judge the demonstrated understandings of learners to be correct or not.

The problem of this approach is that our societies begin to think only in this limited way. This was recognised by Heidegger who observed that:

> But today, when we know much too much and form opinions much too quickly, when we compute and pigeonhole everything in a flash – today there is no room at all left for the hope that the presentation of a matter might in itself be powerful enough to set in motion any fellow-thinker which, prompted by the showing of the matter, would join us on our way. (Heidegger, 1968, p. 171)

Here Heidegger laments that people have been conditioned to apply systems of classifications too readily in order to give (the standardised and therefore the ‘correct’) programmed responses to experiences without being involved as a person – to become a better thinker as a way of living or as a way-of-being. Edgar Stones (1983, p. 402) uses the phrase “label and liquidate” to represent this inclination we have to look to labelling as a way of providing meaning in order to resolve our problems. He argues that the practice of allocating labels to the individuals we encounter basically
liquidates the uniqueness of these persons. While the adoption of such an approach of ready-made categories and labels certainly relieves humankind from difficult thinking and are able to replace our uncertainty and tentativeness experienced regarding initial understandings of phenomena with the valid answers established by the society at large, there is however a price to pay.

Too often thinking is reduced to an activity of seeking only a relevant meaning in things and to overlook the significance aspect. Because relevance appeals to definitions there is a level of satisfaction experienced when phenomena are defined and labelled ‘correctly’. Thinking however is not encouraged to engage with the total relevance or significance which is necessarily inclusive of a concern for the meaning and importance of our own lives in relation to the lives of others and the planet as a whole. Learners are often denied help in developing an understanding of how school work could be seen as being personally significant and so their questions go unanswered such as ‘why do I need to know the quadratic formula?’, ‘why do I need to learn about the French revolution?’ and ‘why do I need to learn how to throw a shot-put’?

The reduction of meaning to recognition only without being inclusive of significance limits thinking to the task of classifying correct answers to the problems of closed systems which are presented. This sort of thinking which is most appropriate for assigning phenomena to predetermined categories gives a certain feeling of confidence that the meanings are actually right. Problems and uncertainty are seen as conditions to be overcome and replaced with a form of certainty which is usually in the form of knowledge. Such an approach was criticised by Bruner (1990, p. 105) because the whole notion of learning as active meaning-making has come to be replaced by the more passive and docile role of absorption in which learning is reduced to the simple “acquisition of knowledge”. This approach is also described by Dewey (1930a, p. 132) as “putting the least possible tax on individual powers of digestion” and he reported that while the physical truancy of his time might have been occurring less frequently there was nevertheless “mental truancy known as not paying attention [which] is still carried on with great success”. This is because school work did not require the sort of thinking that involves the full and interested attention of learners. Therefore the way of life or way-of-being which is developed in schooling as a result of this reduction of learning in this way is restricted to the seeking of knowledge rather than being engaged with a more valuable way-of-being able to pursue the potential significance that is intrinsic to meaning and ultimate value.
BLACK AND WHITE THINKING

Persons who are successful within institutionalised systems of schooling tend to demonstrate a propensity for a limited approach to thinking which is used to superficially recognise right from wrong answers. Such a skill is required to compete successfully in batteries of standardised tests. This is described here as black and white thinking. It is a dichotomous way of operating which is employed to operate in school classrooms. Such environments are somewhat Platonic as they assume that absolute being and the good life exist in a separate realm and can to be accessed by a particular way of thinking. The sort of thinking that Plato asserted to be of most value was one which could be used to draw out or remember one’s origins in a spiritual realm quite distinct from the realm of physical existence in which one currently found oneself. Similarly school curricula promote a realm of truth, absolutes and answers which can be accessed via a similar sort of thinking which can identify the right from the wrong, even although in their curricula the spiritual dimension is totally absent.

While such polarised thinking is used to identify right from wrong and good from bad in a rather superficial process of recognition, classification and pigeon-holing, it does not lend itself to any serious conceptual consideration as to what makes the right actually more valuable than the alternative ‘wrongs’ or lesser goods or even how the ‘good’ is actually understood to be the best. This has been an inadvertent development promoted through the ever increasing demand for regular objective testing throughout the school years by governments seeking greater accountability by individual teachers, schools and local school authorities. Even within such assessment driven environments many individual teachers claim they are primarily working to promote deeper levels of understanding amongst students. The argument is not to disparage the great work that these teachers sometimes are able to achieve – often donning their ‘social-worker hat’ as many describe it, to achieve positive changes in learners in spite of the system rather than as a consequence of the system.

The successful learners who are celebrated within schooling and are sometimes labelled as ‘intelligent’ or ‘gifted’ usually display a skilful employment of this sort of black and white thinking with its characteristic categorisation and calculative attributes. While such ability may not seem problematic of and by itself as long as other ways of thinking are also assumed to be developed in conjunction with it, it is contended here that such thinking actually restrains the development of thinking in other more complex ways. Mary Belenky et al. (1997) also use this phrase ‘black and white thinking’ to describe persons who they consider are least developed in understanding their relation to knowing how they know. The women
they studied with this particular framework of knowing were characterised as being silent in the sense of having an inability to dialogue or to speak out and challenge authorities – especially in schools – because they are apparently blindly obedient to them and what they say. They see life in terms of polarities where “trying to know ‘why’ is not thought to be either particularly possible or important.” (Belenky et al., 1997, p. 28). Such a disposition actually resists understanding knowledge of the world differently in a way that might undermine the assumed certainty that absolute knowledge portrays.

A mindset which adopts such a black and white polarised understanding of the world cannot co-exist with ways of understanding that appreciates the legitimacy of other perspectives of knowing. In this sense persons who operate with this framework of black and white thinking are intolerant of attempts which appear to problematise the way they currently understand both how the world/nature works and how we should live in it. The forestructure of their horizons of understanding is taken for granted. They are, as Heidegger warned, only too eager to rush on ahead of and use their forestructure to interpret the world, being disinclined to critically re-evaluate the meanings they take for granted. This is because from their perspective what is at stake is not just a personal preference or bias but rather it is their fundamental beliefs regarding the world and what they believe is right, true and good.

This description of black and white thinking that is being fostered in our schooling systems to the detriment of other potential ways of understanding shares some important characteristics with Asperger’s Syndrome. This syndrome is a neurological disorder which is also associated with the term autistic spectrum disorder. It basically refers to “a triad of impairments affecting: social interaction, communication, and imagination, accompanied by a narrow, rigid, repetitive pattern of activities” (Wing as quoted by Bashe & Kirby, 2005, p. 9). While there is great variety to the individuals who are diagnosed with Asperger’s Syndrome many of them are at the extreme ends of reading, spelling and numbers (Attwood, 1998). Many are identified as operating at the higher functioning end of the autistic spectrum having above normal IQ (Bashe & Kirby, 2005). Such persons often demonstrate a great capacity for recalling systematised information and being literal-minded, (Willey, 1999) that is they make judgments regarding meaning based solely upon superficial appearances or enthusiastic willingness to follow rules and duties.

The comparison of black and white thinking with this syndrome is not presented here as if there might be a link of some sort. Rather the use of the recognition of the attributes which tend to enable particular learners to
excel in schools and often attract the label ‘gifted’, has a great deal in common with this disorder that is worth considering. Potential relations between giftedness and abnormality has been suggested by others like Vygotsky (1997, p. 324) who has explained that the term gifted might better be understood as a person’s readiness to be “in compliance with all those practical goals which the school places before him”. Rather than the general and abstract inference which is often imputed to the notion of giftedness, Vygotsky here recommends it be more appropriately related to very specific activities which the individual is able to comply with most effectively. Those with Asperger’s Syndrome who operate at the higher functioning end of the spectrum tend to excel in schooling environments which reward accurate recall of vast quantities of facts and information and so often can attract the labelling of academically giftedness. While such persons are able to display prodigious memories they struggle to cope with uncertainty a lack of routine and a lack of absolutes. According to Attwood (1998, p. 117) “their thinking tends to be rigid” and unable to deal with changes and uncertainty. They can effectively engage with problems which offer themselves as closed systems and therefore to being solved by calculative operations which only require relevance to be recognised. These are often the only sorts of problems which are presented in schools.

Being closed systems they are able to avoid engagements with meaning as understood by total relevance and significance. What rarely are offered in curricula are problems which require on-going uncertainty with entities which are constantly undergoing flux and reconfiguration due to their complexity and obscurity. This is the nature of the many ‘big issues’ facing mankind such as climate change, pollution, disease epidemics, alternative energy sources and displacement of entire populations from traditional lands. Such difficult issues do not come with an answer or conclusion that enables deliverers of a set curriculum to announce that they have been ‘done’ and which releases them to introduce the next item in the program. In an environment that simply understands learning to be only remembering and calculating, engagement with issues dealing with ultimate values must be left out because the sort of thinking required is so foreign to that required in schooling.

This similarity between intelligent or gifted thinking with the characteristics of Asperger’s Syndrome is important because as the learners graduate from our schooling institutions who have been successfully inculcated with this predominant orientation towards black and white thinking, then, in their capacities as adults, employ this polarized thinking to contribute to the formation of society. While they have been recognised and rewarded for their ability to memorize and process large quantities of
information accurately they lack the wherewithal to critique and evaluate such information in terms of more global and complex considerations. They have little capacity and therefore little tolerance for listening to the perspectives of others who might have quite different world-views. Life tends to be understood in terms of closed systems which lend themselves to calculations involving a very limited number of variables as is evidenced by the continued privileging of Newtonian science in schools where the reality of the physical universe is presented in terms of abstract mathematical relations. This approach continues to promote a sense of universal black and white absolutes where things are either right or wrong and very little toleration is given to ambiguity, complexity, flux and uncertainty. Thinking in dualistic terms of black/white, good/bad, practical/theory, thought/action, fact/value, mind/body, us/other is often the sort of pigeon-hole classificatory approach required of learners to excel in current systems of schooling.

If this black and white thinking becomes the dominant mind-set encouraged to prevail in our societies then there will obviously emerge profound difficulties when we as adults encounter others in our ever increasing globalized environment. Understandings which make our lives significant tend to be formed within cultural frameworks rather than by universal and outward looking orientations. Persons who have a disposition primarily towards black and white thinking can find themselves to be at a disadvantage as the ability to listen, appreciate and understand perspectives which are foreign to their own is most difficult because these differing views tend to implicate that one’s own views about how life should be understood and lived might be relative rather than absolute. This can appear particularly threatening when issues of values and morality are considered. The modernist notions of history, national and ethnic identities and universal ‘correct’ understandings are also threatened by the potential legitimacy of ‘others’. No longer can one participate in life with a sense of certainty as to what is right and good because one view of ultimate values can no longer be assumed to be universally correct but rather each is culturally specific and genealogical. This can have a profoundly unsettling effect for which it appears ‘natural’ for persons to resist, avoid or overcome.

It is argued here that schooling does not just provide curricula which are neutral towards any potential meaningfulness for our existence but it actually works against the notion that lives can be purposeful and meaningful. Living a meaningful and worthwhile life does not just involve an inward focus but must look outward to be inclusive of the life of this planet as a whole. Traditional schooling has focussed on closed systems such as subject specialisations thereby reducing the capacity of persons to lift their understanding and appreciation of life to a more outward, open and holistic
view which appreciates how humankind might come to know and participate in a global understanding. As a collection of closed systems, Postman and Weingartner (1969, p. 116) have observed that knowledge in schools is ‘fixed’ and “answers are either yes or no, right or wrong”. Whilst in the fields of science and philosophy closed and linear approaches to thinking have been replaced by systems, networks and complexity theories, schooling tends to continue to transmit what Polanyi (1964, p. 43) once described as the “dead letter” of research activities in a form of established doctrine. Consequently it is contended here that schooling promotes a form of nihilism because its curricula do not go beyond closed systems and are not able to provide a more open forum to seriously engage students with the issues concerning their lives as they see them, providing direction and purpose to make sense of their challenges. This does not only affect the outlook of the young people currently enrolled in schooling institutions but of course has a residual affect in their lives as adults, where not only do we witness the adult population struggle to articulate visions for a meaningful life but individuals are increasingly encountering feelings of existential angst in which we don’t quite feel at home in our part of the planet. This sense of alienation includes both the physical and cultural aspects of our environments where we are becoming ever more uncertain as to how ‘mother nature’ is responding and adjusting to humankind’s various activities and how our own ethnic cultures should adjust in a globalised era where we are increasingly being confronted with other cultures which challenge all that we have assumed to be proper, sensible, right and meaningful.
CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE AND KEEPING SECRETS

“Education has other purposes than to provide a skilled workforce for the economy: it should serve to make human beings not the means but the justification of development.”
(Jacques Delors, 1998, Learning: The Treasure Within, p. 80)

According to this quote above from the Delors report to UNESCO, educators’ ought to include goals such as what sorts of human persons should graduate from educational institutions and what makes human life worth living. However rather than adopt this position schooling typically emphasizes the learning of knowledge (Delors, 1998, p. 86) often justified with an appeal to common sense that students need to come to know the world in which they live. Consequently teaching itself has become described as “a knowledge-based profession” (Teaching Australia, 2007). However identifying knowledge as some thing, reifying it to the content which constitutes curricula to be transferred to learners is fraught with many difficulties. Not least, as Dewey has identified, is a dichotomy which is promoted between knowledge and the knower with the consequent difficulties emerging such as how does a knower interact and come to know the objects of knowledge? This has led to the creation of vague concepts such as mind and consciousness. To assert that knowledge is some thing is to ignore the findings in the last chapter which identified that meanings are not to be found in entities or even words themselves. Morris acknowledges that it is difficult to be clear regarding meaningfulness in relation to words and language and argues that:

Hence the naturalness of what Whitehead has called the fallacy of simple location. In the present case this takes the form of looking for meanings as one would look for marbles: a meaning is considered as one thing among other things, a definite something definitely located somewhere. This may be sought for in the designatum, which thus becomes transformed in certain varieties of “realism” into a special kind of object – a “Platonic idea” inhabiting the “realm of substances,”
perhaps grasped by a special faculty for intuiting “essences”. (Morris, 1938, p. 44)

Objecting to such reification of meaning which is identified here with the assumption that knowledge can be considered to be something to be grasped by the faculty of a ‘mind’, Morris here argues that meanings cannot be regarded to have an existence of their own nor can they be located in time and place as simple correspondences.

It will be argued in this chapter that the reification and the privileging of knowledge over the actual and particular living experiences of the learners contributes towards the meaninglessness of schooling because the meanings of curricula are reduced to the simple correspondence of relevance but are not inclusive of significance. This argument will first reference what Dewey has described as humankind’s ‘quest for certainty’. It will be discussed how through this quest knowledge has been privileged. Such a privileging has required attention to be turned away from the sort of personhood or way-of-being which is required by learners in such environments. This diversion of attention is also considered convenient for keeping hidden any political ideology which might intentionally prefer such a way-of-being amongst the masses. Identification and critique of such ideologies can be avoided through an aggressive promotion of the notion of effectiveness as a means only. This chapter will then conclude by considering whether the inevitable effect on schools for such a focus on effectiveness might mean they will become places without education.

THE QUEST FOR CERTAINTY

In his book The Quest for Certainty (1929), John Dewey argues his thesis that throughout much of the history of western cultures, humankind has been on a quest for certainty and that it has been knowledge which is assumed to answer this quest. This has led to the privileging of knowledge over and above practical activities, experiences and even existence itself. This is because it is commonly assumed that knowledge has access to reality compared with other modes of experience. He sums up this quest in the following:

Perfect certainty is what man wants. It cannot be found by practical doing or making; these take effect in an uncertain future, and involve peril, the risk of misadventure, frustration and failure. Knowledge, on the other hand, is thought to be concerned with a region of being which is fixed in itself. Being eternal and unalterable, human knowing is not to make any difference in it. It can be approached through the
medium of the apprehensions and demonstrations of thought, or by some other organ of mind, which does nothing to the real, except just to know it. (Dewey, 1929, p. 21)

Consequently the immediate direct experiences that individuals have are not assumed to be reliable compared with mediated meanings which are considered to be more robust and objective.

This quest is particularly evidenced through Descartes certainty of his first principle of philosophy gained through his methodological doubt. His method which was inspired by mathematical certainties and proofs, involved holding everything in suspension in order to reach final certainty in the fundamental consciousness of the ego cogito. Beyond doubt was his transcendental ego which through its objectifying attitude related to phenomena through the certainty of mathematically mediated knowledge. Heidegger (2001, p. 110) claimed that “Descartes gains his position from his will to provide something absolutely certain and secure, therefore something not from an immediate, fundamental relationship to what is or from the question of being.” The immediate, definite experiences of persons were doubted and something more secure was sought beyond individual existence. While Charles Taylor (1995, p. 5) states that “Descartes is thus the originator of the modern notion that certainty is the child of reflexive clarity” Dewey argued that this notion of certainty goes back even further than Descartes to Ancient Greece.

It was through Plato that the idea was particularly emphasised that if knowledge of the good could be attained by persons then it would surely follow that they would also do good. As both education and philosophy emerged together in the West the notion of a successful education of the young was understood to involve their acquisition of this knowledge which would enable them to behave as good citizens. This knowledge was also inclusive of authoritative values to guide judgement and conduct. Dewey explained that this quest for gaining knowledge and values by which certainty of the good could be attained was premised on the assumption that universal Being, as fixed and immutable, could only be grasped as intellectual knowledge. Indeed through Platonic philosophy there was unity between thought and being although such thought tended to be abstracted out of immediate existence. Certainty could not be gained with immediate experiences because practical activities and life itself were considered fraught with uncertainties. For classical philosophy, Dewey (1929, pp. 28–9) concluded that it “became a species of apologetic justification for belief in an ultimate reality in which the values which should regulate life and control conduct are securely enstated.”
When the empire of Rome was being subjected upon various inhabitants of the ancient world this quest for certainty was pursued particularly through Roman law. The administrative authorities eclectically chose what suited their purposes from Greek culture and through their legal system they aimed to introduce "order into chaos and of transforming the confused and conflicting medley of practice and opinion into a harmonious social structure" (Dewey, 1910, p. 10). Citizens where conditioned to being subjected to both the knowledge of the ultimate and of established law which existed beyond their immediate beliefs and experiences. Consequently there was the promotion of two separate realms. The first of these was immediate existence consisting of practical experiences which were considered subjective, uncertain and even perilous. The second and higher realm was that of ultimate value and knowledge where cognitive certainty could be attained. This two-realm understanding is also to be found in the mind/body dualism where the mind is often separated from its bodily immediate existence in order to pursue, at least in schooling, reliable knowledge which can bring certainty and order to experiences.

Dewey concluded that this divide which was created between practical activities (including our immediate existence) and abstract knowledge (regarded as rational, orderly and certain) continues into our current civilisations and ways of operating in the world. This is often manifested in education as a practice/theory dichotomy. Dewey argued that the disparagement of practical experiences and the elevation of intellectual knowledge are based upon two premises:

first, namely, that the object of knowledge is some form of ultimate Being which is antecedent to reflective inquiry and independent of it; secondly, that this antecedent Being has among its defining characteristics those properties which alone have authority over the formation of our judgments of value, that is, of the ends and purposes which should control conduct in all fields – intellectual, social, moral, religious, aesthetic. Given these premises – and only if they are accepted – it follows that philosophy has for its sole office the cognition of this Being and its essential properties. (Dewey, 1929, p. 69)

What emerged from this of course was the notion that there are two quite separate entities – the known (phenomenon) and the knower. The individual subjective knower was expected to obediently submit to the higher realm of authoritative objective knowledge which can give sense and certainty to life. To accentuate the importance of this perceived divide Heidegger (1988, p. 124) claimed that “this distinction between subject and object pervades all the problems of modern philosophy”.

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Heidegger overcame this perceived divide between the knower and the known with his existential notions of being-in-the-world and of Da-sein in contrast to subjectivity and transcendental consciousness. Dewey also offered a challenge to it through his pragmatism which unites the knower and the phenomenon to be known in the one world of experience. However the implications of these views appear to have had little impact on education which has too often fallen victim to this assumed divide between a conscious mind or intellect and an outer reality of which representations are constructed (Gadamer, 1996; Rorty, 1979; Taylor, 1995). Hence the emergence of various constructivisms in educational theory which attempt to explain how knowledge – often understood as a social construct – is constructed as representations within individual minds. Consequently educational practices tend to prioritize the processes which involve learners obediently complying to the theoretical knowledge of abstract certainties by constructing their own representations first and then secondly applying these to practical activities.

THE PROBLEMS WITH PRIVILEGING KNOWLEDGE

The common conception of knowledge within schooling literature is often reduced to “mentally stored information” (Yates and Chandler, 1991, p. 131) which is to be transferred from teacher and text to the mind of the learner. Richard Pring (1976, p. 8) laments that there is too much emphasis upon fixed curricula with their “certain highly worked out, publicly legitimized forms of knowledge” because it detracts from the living existences of the lives of learners, who in the end are really the ones who “alone give point and sense to educational programmes.” As William James (1899, p. 124) commented, “the meanings are there for the others, but they are not there for us.” Knowledge which is meaningful only in a relevant manner not only contributes to a sense of meaninglessness of one’s own life but it also conditions one’s way-of-being to becoming willingly obedient to authorities and to adopt black and white thinking. Such a way-of-being works against having the will and the ability to make life more significant and purposeful and it is argued in this book that the primary reason for this is because the current privileging of knowledge in schooling institutions abstracts learners out of their existence.

Knowledge is often assumed in an unproblematic manner to be essential or basic (as per the often expressed opinion of some that schooling should return ‘back to basics’) to function within society according to expected norms. Such is the influence of this priority of knowledge that school curricula are all expected to be based upon subjects, that is, upon the
differentiation of knowledge disciplines such as art, maths, science, geography, and morality. Knowledge has been considered more able to transcend individual subjectivities than other ways in which meanings might be gained and so it tends to be assumed to reside in a higher realm than direct experiences. Consequently curricula with clearly defined outcomes and standards can be confidently implemented as their content represents what is certain.

The content which is purported as being essential in school curricula is founded upon a spectator theory of knowledge where learners are reduced to observers who see from a distance rather than being participants in its creation. According to Heidegger’s (2002, p. 115) interpretation of the Greek concept for knowledge, we have inherited the notion of seeing (often expressed when we claim “I see”) but without the “more extensive and simultaneously more penetrating” notion of knowing-one’s-way-around because of one’s active inquiring presence. Through this spectator theory, knowledge in schooling is assumed to reside outside of and independent of individuals. One can therefore appreciate why the content of school curricula is often meaningless for learners in terms of personal significance. As Postman and Weingartner (1969, p. 86) observe, “reality, as the young perceive it, is missing.” To demonstrate this disparity between the world of the school curricula and that of the existing learner, they quote a joke that involves a fifth grade teacher working in a ghetto school who asks a question regarding the number of legs that a grasshopper has. To which a student replies, “Oh, man… I sure wish I had your problems” (Postman and Weingartner, 1969, p. 93). They conclude that it should not be surprising then that so many drop out of school before graduation because for them the curriculum does not offer any significant meaning.

In spite of a premium being placed on educational qualifications in today’s societies there nevertheless remains a high drop-out rate amongst youths at schools. The decisions for quitting school appear to be based largely upon negative choice, that is, “anything is better than school” (Dwyer & Wyn, 2001, p. 47). Consequently, even while the majority of these early school leavers remain unemployed, one study reports that 91% describe themselves as being much happier since leaving the school environment (Ainley & Sheret, 1992). In another study of school ‘drop-outs’ by Ianni and Orr (1996) they conclude that there is an overlap and combination of four major factors which contribute to the decision to leave school early. These factors include:

an adolescent’s own development of self, particularly as a learner; occurrence of role conflict within the school and between the school and other environments; the existence of cultural dissonance for
students and staff; and structural deficits and limitations within the school (in particular), families, and communities. (Ianni and Orr, 1996, p. 305)

These factors would appear to indicate that there is a divide between the immediate experiential world of persons with their beliefs and purposes which seek significance and the world of formal schools with their own frameworks and curricula of certain knowledge.

In such assessment driven environments students soon realise that what they really understand and believe to be significant about the world in which they live is not important. What counts is how well they perform to the official standards of knowledge and skills. It doesn’t take long for students to appreciate that the process of their participation in learning activities, their direct experiences, are only a means to securing the answers – the knowledge. Dewey (1916, p. 349) regards that such environments are better suited “to make disciples rather than inquirers.” Consequently students develop little interest in engaging with activities and various experiences, and either focus exclusively with obtaining the right answers or drop out altogether if they see little value in seriously participating in their acquisition.

Dewey (1938, pp. 15–16) identified knowledge itself to be an abstract phenomenon which has been used “to designate the objective and close of inquiry” or as its “settlement”. As such knowledge is not ‘alive’ or dynamic but rather it announces that an individual’s experiences of inquiring, thinking and being puzzled and enamoured with various phenomena either are over or are unnecessary in the first place as the answers have already been attained. The learner’s role then is simply to memorize the volumes of conclusions that others have made through their own forms of inquiry. Dewey (1916, p. 165) described this environment as one in which “the goal becomes to heap it [knowledge] up and display it when called for. This static, cold-storage ideal of knowledge is inimical to educative development. It not only lets occasions for thinking go unused, but it swamps thinking” (Dewey, 1916, p. 165). This contrast between static knowledge and active inquiring and thinking is recognised by Heidegger (2002, p. 111) who argued that “whether you ‘know’ this or that… does not count for much. What is essential is that you are ready and willing to pose questions.”

While individual teachers do strive to involve some thinking and problem solving within their classes, such efforts are rarely recognised because the actual thinking and puzzling a learner might participate with while directly experiencing challenges do not lend themselves to standardized assessments. Indeed teachers themselves are being held accountable by their employers to exclusively focus upon student outcomes in terms of standardized responses.
to the detriment of helping students develop more holistically as educated persons.

What has been given scant attention in schooling is how such knowledge-driven curricula affect the way of life or the way-of-being of the learners who are being limited to only becoming spectators. What happens to young persons when day after day they are wrenched out of their existence, when their personal significance for their very lives is replaced in an institutionalized environment by celebratory accolades when one gets the answers to the teacher’s questions right? Similarly this question is posed by Blake et al. (2000, p. 222) who ask “What is knowledge to the pupil or student if it is not knowledge for some purpose? And more to the point, what is a purpose to them if it cannot ultimately be seen as their own, and not just willed upon them?” Do students become purposeless, that is, do they lack a meaningful sense of their own identity and for their lives? This is certainly being experienced by many and we need to ask whether such a way-of-being has emerged by default or deliberate design before addressing how it might be challenged and replaced by alternatives which have far greater educative value.

KEEPING SECRETS: THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF SCHOOLING

What is to be taught in schools, who should determine this, for what purposes and for whose gain, are necessarily political considerations as they directly relate to the sort of society that is to be developed and maintained. Unlike the answers to the first question – what ought to be taught, which can be observed by the objectives prescribed in school curricula, what is not so visible are the overall grand visions which governments have for schooling systems and what sort of world they consider these should be contributing towards. Such visions are expected to be outlined in statements regarding the aims and purposes of schooling/education. As aims these visions provide the philosophical élan (Faure, 1972) which is in contrast to detailed outcomes to be attained which should be termed as objectives rather than as aims. Unfortunately such aims which address the big picture regarding global issues and the meaning of life generally are absent in government policies. Such aims and purposes could provide the why for curricula and allow these to be legitimated with references to bigger issues. However in the West there is a distinct absence of purposes of education being articulated. For example the Australian Federal Minister for Education, Science and Training, Julie Bishop, has stated that “the purpose of education is, as it has always been, to inspire and educate” (Department of Education, Science & Training, 2006, p. 2).
Leaving aside for a moment the description “to inspire” we have a self-referential truism that ‘the purpose of education is to educate’. This is as profound an insight as stating that ‘the purpose of knitting is to knit’. In addition to this self-referential description little understanding of education is expressed here other than it should also ‘inspire’. But this aspect of inspiration is not necessarily a characteristic that is specifically educative as we have witnessed many charismatic leaders of fundamentalist and indoctrinatory organisations also inspire their followers. We are left to wonder whether school authorities and governments in general do not have any such aims or that alternatively they do have aims but these are deliberately being kept secret from the population at large.

Traditionally the aims of national systems of schooling since their development in Prussia about 200 years ago have been nation building and the preparation of the population to able to be readily drafted into serving in the armed forces. To enhance this nation building purpose, school curricula were presented as embellishing the already existing culture of the nation. Matthew Arnold, an English cultural critic and influential school inspector, argued that culture was the way forward to make progress amidst the challenges that lay before the nation of his day. He described culture to be “all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world” (Arnold, 1869, p. viii). Arnold described himself as a liberal and with other like-minded individuals such as Irving Babbitt, E. D. Hirsch and Allan Bloom, promoted a humanistic approach to education. They appear to have posited the ‘best of what had been thought and said’ into a canon for liberal arts curricula largely composed of traditional subjects. This collection of classical essentialized knowledge which persists in much of the schooling today as cultural literacy (Hirsch, 1988) or less subtly as ‘Essential Learnings’ is to be learned without being accompanied by any warrant or purpose other than it is the ‘best’, it is our heritage and culture and it is ‘good’ for the younger generations to be inculcated into if they are to develop good character.

However, according to Carr and Hartnett (1996, p. 71), what Arnold actually offered was the “notion of cultivating the nation by nationalizing culture”. The sort of liberal education to which Arnold and other liberals have promoted has been generally claimed to have its origins in classical Greece. However William Spanos criticizes this claim as being simply an attempt to keep secret the ideological agenda for maintaining the dominant sociopolitical order of which the supporters themselves were very much a part. Rather than having origins which can be clearly located to classical Greece, Spanos argues that the origins of liberal arts schooling actually go back to Rome and the Roman interpretation of Greek culture. He explains
as with Dewey before him, that the Roman interpretation of the Greeks was specifically embedded in their particular purpose to establish and maintain their empire. He argues further that:

The Roman reduction of the originative thinking of the Greeks to “scholarship and training in good conduct” did more than enable the theory and practice of the Roman Empire. In appropriating and harnessing Greek thought and pedagogy to the production of loyal and dependable citizens devoted to the preservation and extension of the metropolis’s cultural and sociopolitical heritage, it also provided the structural model for the various manifestations of the Holy Roman Empire, the imperial project of Great Britain, and, more discreetly and indirectly, as Sacvan Bercovitch has suggested, the theory and practice of American Manifest Destiny from the Puritans’ “errand in the wilderness” – building their City on the Hill – through the founding of the Republic to the establishment of the New World order in the post-Cold War period. (Spanos 1993, pp. 110–111)

In an effort to promote conformity amongst the masses to the requirements of the state, Rome placed great emphasis upon developing an obedient and compliant citizenry. The world-view taught was one in which the physical world was understood to be governed by natural laws and similarly the social realm also required legal and moral laws to govern it. The role of the citizen was to learn about these laws and just as one was to live under the physical laws of nature so too one was to be subject to social laws. Learners could take confidence, even certainty, in knowing that life was governed by authoritative rules and regulations to which they must be wilfully obedient. A good citizen was one who not only passively accepted the existence of such law-like characteristics of life but also was one who accepted it as one’s duty to readily obey them. However accompanying such a call to good citizenship was an appeal to a nationalistic spirit rather than one which had a more outward looking orientation with more of a global concern to live at peace with peoples who were not governed by Rome and understood life in quite fundamentally different ways. This, according to Spanos, is the culture that western civilisation has been founded upon, not the original Greek culture that is often assumed.

This transformation of Europe from the more original Greek ideals to Roman governance is also described by Ong (1982) to be the replacement of oral culture to one of literacy, characterised by texts rather than speech acts. The communication between various peoples in Europe was most difficult from about 700AD when various dialects moved far beyond the original Latin. Ong (1982, p. 112) refers to “Learned Latin” as the officially
recognised language that made communication between these peoples possible and this was achieved mainly through the institutions and official discourses of governments, the Church and of schooling. However unlike the spoken languages of the time Latin was specifically controlled by writing. Ong (1982, pp. 113–4) argues that “writing, as has earlier been seen, serves to separate and distance the knower and the known and thus to establish objectivity.” The emotional inflections of one’s naturally spoken mother language were replaced in written text by the more objective language of Latin upon which modern science has developed. Through the multiplication of the written language through texts that could be printed rather than written, the encouragement of “the quantification of knowledge” then took place. So in addition to the fact that Rome exerts more influence on today’s school curricula than classical Greek culture according to Spanos’s argument, we also understand through Ong that our societies in the West are the inheritors of the Roman language with its objectifying nature which separates the person from the knowledge as typically located in the written form.

In one of his early essays titled ‘The significance of the problem of knowledge’ Dewey argued that people have been subjected to the corporate life as assigned by the ruling elites for the express purpose of their being controlled. He argued that this has been partly achieved by drawing upon the incorporated truths of Athens and Rome which promoted the view that both truth and meaning exist beyond the individual beliefs and understandings of existing persons. Spanos too argues that truth in Roman culture was understood as the correspondence of knowledge with the reality of both natural and social absolutes. The Latin term for truth, veritas, which is also the root for other terms such as verification, means that our knowledge has been verified to be true. Knowledge in this sense is objective because it is assumed to represent the reality behind the various phenomena which we encounter. It is similar to a realist perspective where objective truth is understood to exist ‘out there’ beyond persons and which can be attained via rigorous rational and calculative thinking. This approach while more akin to Aristotelian realism tends to be reserved for the prerogative of authorities. According to Aristotelism learners are to be taught what is already known rather than how to know. Learners are provided with the results and conclusions of what others have discovered.

The privileging of an assumed certain but abstract knowledge and the devaluing of the search and inquiry for making meanings significant for the lives of individual learners has been partly predicted by Lyotard’s performativity. But is this just a ‘natural’ and inevitable feature of ruling elites and neoliberal influences which have put pressure upon schooling systems
to comply with market demands in order to enable communities to survive in the competitive demands of global markets? The dominance of economic interests over general or ‘liberal’ education programmes has been evident for some time (Ferrier & Anderson, 1998). This domination is now so persuasive in the neoliberal rational economic wake of Reagan and Thatcher that we have become accustomed (Lawton & Cowan, 2001, p. 17) to the idea that a relationship actually exists between education systems and economics. Gadamer (1996, p. 59) adds that even the understandings of human intelligence which are promoted in our societies represent “a secret and unacknowledged theriomorphism.” That is, persons have their humanity removed and are reduced to having only a form of animal intelligence. He argues that such a conceptualisation “unintentionally allows the human person to be used as a tool, to be treated as a manipulable collection of capacities” (Gadamer, 1996, p. 59).

Rather than the grand purposes for privileging abstract knowledge in curricula being kept deliberately secret, alternatively has this devaluing of the way-of-being of persons been the logical consequence of education theories which have inherited the quest for certainty from antiquity? While rapacious market ideologies require persons globally to be conditioned into becoming compliant producers, consumers and law abiding citizens, educational theories which privilege the centring of abstract knowledge provide a more palatable discourse to achieving these ends than political ideologies. It is argued here that both of these influences complement each other however, in the sense that they require a similar conception of a way-of-being for learners who are to be initiated into such projects. However, by promoting only certain educational theories in terms of their applications rather than their legitimacy, the political ideologies which lie behind them can remain hidden and secret.

EFFECTIVE RATHER THAN EDUCATIVE

In order to foster a way-of-being amongst learners which is characterized as being obedient and conforming to authoritative knowledge and values, school curricula actively discourage both students and teachers from opportunities to consider big picture issues such as the aims of education, by encouraging a focus usually through accountability upon the means of teaching and learning. Such a focus actively avoids giving opportunity to identifying and critiquing political ideologies. In his book *The End of Education*, Neil Postman identifies that attention to the aims and purposes of schooling which attempt to make sense of education and the sort of societies we ought to be building in terms of helping lives to be more
significant and purposeful, has been replaced by an obsession with only a technical focus upon the means of effective curriculum delivery. He identifies two challenges that schools face – an engineering one which specifically addresses the means how learners learn, and a metaphysical one which refers to the reasons for its being. He argues that:

It is important to keep in mind that the engineering of learning is very often puffed up, assigned an importance it does not deserve… there is no one who can say that this or that is the best way to know things, to feel things, to see things, to remember things, to apply things, to connect things and that no other will do as well. In fact, to make such a claim is to trivialize learning, to reduce it to a mechanical skill. (Postman, 1995, p. 3)

Through a focus on pedagogy, learning can certainly be trivialised and yet pedagogy as a means only, is dominant in much of the current literature dealing with teaching and schooling. Postman (1995, p. 26) comments that “There was a time when educators became famous for providing reasons for learning; now they become famous for inventing a method”. He laments that the second challenge he identified for schooling – the metaphysical challenge – is either neglected or avoided altogether. Yet this particular challenge offers educators opportunity to articulate and justify a why for their pedagogy and for schooling, and therefore their concerns can extend beyond the functionality of only how. Postman (1995, p. 4) warns that if this challenge continues to be overlooked and neglected, then “there is no surer way to bring an end to schooling than for it to have no end”.

Identifying this dichotomy between means and end purposes, between pedagogy and education, Hinchliffe (2001, p. 33) suggests that we might have to “accept that we have been misusing the term [education] and start to get into the habit of calling the bulk of what goes on in our schools and colleges pedagogy rather than education”. While the difference between means and end purposes is not always clear, especially regarding teaching and education, Hinchliffe (2001, p. 37–8) reminds us that what is distinctive about education is its willingness to always be questioned and critiqued, whereas contrastively, “what pedagogy can never do is develop a radical critique of itself and its aims.” As a means only, pedagogy is not able to provide criteria of end purposes by which its activities can be considered to be good and worthwhile. This echoes a central concern for Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) where they argue that the formation of conceptual thinking and critical perspectives are being restricted by the domination of the anti-intellectual technicization of education. This tendency to instrumentalise fosters what they term as ‘literalness’ which is the
inability to critique and understand the depth and significance of various important issues.

In spite of Dewey’s (1916, p. 177) warning that “nothing has brought pedagogical theory into greater dispute than it is identified with handing out to teachers recipes and models to be followed in teaching” schooling authorities and educational researchers continue to seek methods of teaching and curriculum delivery which can best guarantee pre-determined outcomes. This is because the approach to schooling which is often favoured is essentialist in nature. Essentialism basically involves a collection of information and skills regarded to be essential and which are to be transmitted “efficiently and effectively through methods that have stood the test of time” (Gutek, 2004, p. 264) without any concern for the way-of-being of the learners. Such models of efficiency for curriculum delivery reduce human persons to styles or as having ‘needs’ using pseudo-scientific language which classifies and identifies them as objects. Teachers are simply required to label and process students rather than consider and engage with their humanity and uniqueness.

Materials for schools often quite unproblematically adopt rational-economic terminologies such as efficiency and effectiveness. For example the governments in the USA, UK and Australia have developed models of ‘Effective Schools’. While the many recent government publications dealing with schooling give attention to techniques of effective learning, teaching, management, leadership, delivery of the curriculum and of course assessment, the practices which are promoted as best practice lack any consideration for the end purposes or justifications as to why they might be valuable. It appears that there is an obsession with effectiveness amongst government bureaucracies as evidenced in the following welcoming statement by the Victorian government in Australia to their blueprint website for state schooling which states, “WELCOME to the Blueprint Website. The Blueprint provides the framework for an effective Victorian government school system – a system with effective teachers, effective leaders and effective schools” [my emphasis] (Department of Education and Training, 2007). Nowhere on this website is there an articulation of any aims or purposes for education or of a vision which engages with global issues and concerns.

Another example from the UK involves the National Standards for Headteachers in which Blake et al. (2000) estimate that the word effective and its cognates appear 45 times in the total 3,319 words. If we include school administrators with their ideals of teachers amongst the votaries of this form of effectivenes, the following remark by these same authors has profound implications for the profession. They contend that:
the votaries [include school administrators and their conception of the ideal teacher] of the cult of effectiveness... are experts only in means (if, of course, they are even that at all). Their ends and values are laid down for them. They need no convincing of the need for change... They would no sooner take part in a dispute on the objectives of education than they would seriously question the latest taxonomy of management styles, or express reservations about Kolb’s Learning Cycle. (Blake et al., 2000, pp. 14–15)

School bureaucracies are obsessed with teaching as a means only of transferring information, skills and principles of behaviour to learners. What we witness is a great plethora of methods and recipes being dealt out for teachers who are treated as technicians required to uncritically implement approaches which draw upon categories such as learning styles, multiple intelligences, thinking hats and notions of scaffolding. These are considered here to be no more than pedagogical gimmicks or what Dewey (1907, p. 158) might term “trivial devices and patent panaceas” which in addition to making teachers all the more busy in trying to apply the latest fad in order to make their performance as effective as possible, results in marginalising their opportunity to engage with the big picture of schooling – what its aims or end purposes should be. Consequently discussions around pedagogy suffer from this constraint and only address effective means of teaching and learning, never about the ends of pedagogies such as what we are educating for?

Considering, questioning and challenging overall aims and purposes of schooling is not encouraged nor often tolerated. In response to this growing trend to reduce schooling and universities to effective transfer and processing of information, Pring (2004a, p. 15) has argued that “it is one of the absurdities of much research into the ‘effective school’” that the big picture issues which are part of an educational justification are ignored. Effectiveness can only appeal to its own rationalistic framework and is not capable for deliberation about ends. Through a focus on pedagogy as a means only, learning can certainly be trivialised, and yet this is what is predominant in much of the current literature dealing with schooling and education. Accountability within schooling institutions is only given to the means of delivery and to the satisfying of objectives, never to aims and purposes regarding why persons ought to be educated. Consequently our language has become dominated with managerial terms such as best practices, effective and efficient methods (to be simply applied, not critiqued) and performance, without any justification as to what significant educative ends these means should be used for actually attaining.
CHAPTER 2

SCHOOLS WITHOUT EDUCATION

Schooling and university institutions often lack a sense of ultimate meaning and educative value in their programs as demonstrated by their lack of clearly articulated aims and purposes. Contributing towards this absence especially since the Thatcher and Reagan years has been the marginalisation of the language of education dealing with the philosophical thinking and debate around aims of education. Standish (2006, p. 276) argues that the philosophy of education, as a serious thinking activity regarding aims and purposes, has been intentionally removed from university faculties in the UK as it offers a potential source of criticism and possible resistance to government policies.

Just as Alasdair MacIntyre argues in his book After Virtue that the language of morality is disappearing altogether so too it is argued here that schooling has lost the language of education. MacIntyre states that:

I have suggested so far that unless there is a telos which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately. These two considerations are reinforced by a third: that there is at least one virtue recognised by the tradition which cannot be specified at all except with reference to the wholeness of a human life – the virtue of integrity or constancy. ‘Purity of heart,’ said Kierkegaard, ‘is to will one thing.’ This notion of singleness of purposes in a whole life can have no application unless that of a whole life does. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 203)

Such absence of purposeful lives as articulated in educative purposes demonstrates the concern expressed by Neil Postman in which he argues that schooling itself comes to an end and terminates when it has no end purpose. Without a telos, an orientation which gives sense and purpose to programs and experiences for learners, it is not possible for educative programs to be offered. Instead schooling institutions often become ‘centres of detention rather than attention’, where learning is reduced to mechanical processes of already established procedures and where the business of school work “diverts attention from important matters” (Postman, 1995, p. 26).

By developing populist strategies which are “designed to ‘appeal directly to the common-sense of the masses’” government policy writers avoid actually having to articulate their philosophical aims of education and hence evade the possibility of being critiqued by educators and intellectuals.
CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE AND KEEPING SECRETS

(Carr and Hartnett, 1996, p. 136). Such a strategy which makes an appeal to what is self-evident through a vague claim to common sense, makes their overall purposes hidden and secret or as Spanos (1993, p. 61) describes – “an absent presence.” This allows governments to keep their ideologies from debate and criticism – which is the antithesis of the hallmarks of a democracy.

Harvey (2005, p. 69) argues that the neo-liberal ideology behind current forms of capitalism driving global economic markets depend upon forms of authoritarianism and nationalism, and which, like fascism, has “to put strong limits on democratic governance, relying instead upon undemocratic and unaccountable institutions”. This comparison has also been made by Giroux (2004, p. xxiv) who argues that neoliberal ideology “enables fascism to grow”. It is difficult for neo-liberal governments to be so publicly open with such an ideology which is clearly suspicious of active democratic participation, and so it is more convenient to keep such overarching views secret from the public and to operate behind some vague references to democracy and freedom as if these were self evident attributes of their own values. This is not just a development peculiar to governments in the West since the Reagan and Thatcher era. Dewey (1927, pp. 363) had observed even during his time that the ruling class must basically operate from a concern of wanting to keep their intent a secret by disguising their designed purposes of schooling from the masses. He contended back in 1922 that “Thus far schooling has been largely utilized as a convenient tool of the existing nationalistic and economic regimes.” (Dewey, 1922, p. 89).

It might be objected that the position being developed here is reading too much into the ‘absent presence’ of educational aims. What is visibly present in so much government literature, while nevertheless lacking philosophical élan, is a focus upon effective and efficient means of delivering common sense curricula to societies in which ruling governments must give an account to the electorate for the responsible allocation of resources. Surely such approaches, while emphasising technical means over end purposes, can be regarded as being ‘value neutral’ and so should not be accused of the antidemocratic intent as described above. However, Alasdair MacIntyre has identified that the managerial approaches of effectiveness are clearly not valueless or value neutral, but in fact they are embedded in a much more sinister motive. He argues:

There are strong grounds for rejecting the claim that effectiveness is a morally neutral value. For the whole concept of effectiveness is, as I noticed earlier, inseparable from a mode of human existence in which the contrivance of means is in central part the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behaviour; and it is by appeal to his...
Bauman’s (2002) notion of ‘managerial imagination’ likewise presents this manipulation of managing bureaucrats as an effort to maintain a stable system especially through assessment driven systems of schooling where it is recognised that “measurable people are manageable people” (Roberts, 1995, p. 416). By prescribing statuses and roles through fostering a culture of conformity to standards the status quo can be preserved. So paramount is this to the managerial imagination, individual critique of the ends or purposes of these systems is not tolerated because it represents a threatening deviance away from being “objects of normative regulation and administration” (Bauman, 2002, p. 31). This sort of manipulative managerialism is not an intrinsic characteristic of government of course but is rather, according to Saul (1997), more akin to corporatism – which all too often infects our governments. Saul claims that corporatism is much like an ideology “which claims rationality as its central quality” and has the effects of “passivity and conformity” upon individuals (Saul, 1997, p. 2). He argues that there is a crisis of conformity in our societies that is partially maintained by universities which “continue to pump fresh prisoners of the management approach” (Saul, 1997, pp. 73, 136).

This description of manipulative managerialism which seduces students and indeed the public at large into being conformist and obedient is famously represented through Paulo Freire’s argument in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Here Freire made the case that compliance amongst learners is the result of the active manipulation of certain pedagogies which are specifically designed to make them into passive receptacles for information to be banked or deposited. This results not just in passive compliance for the truths and the values of the particular curriculum, but also conditions learners to passively accept the world which oppresses their very personhood. Freire argued that the applications of these oppressive pedagogies are often done by individual teachers in their ignorance as they fail to critically recognise that the end purposes of such practices foster passive, lethargic and compliant mind-sets which completely disempowers learners.

The argument made in Chapter One that schooling is meaningless is also to be recognised as being partly demonstrated through the lack of proper aims and purposes of education in the literature published by schooling authorities. Those responsible for schooling instead tend to involve themselves exclusively with instrumental rationality suited to performance driven environments. Their lack of articulated aims can be understood as a form of nihilism which is also claimed by Blake *et al.* (2000) as they...
recognise that the rationales dominant in schooling contexts only address the means by which curricula are effectively delivered and therefore they can only refer to functionality. An effective method of operation can only be considered to be successful when it is being – effective. Such a self-referencing system is unable to offer criteria by which it might be critiqued as to its value in more significant terms. Therefore such a managerial and technical perspective can be considered to be nihilistic because it is devoid of any sense of significant value that can be seen to make education meaningful or worthwhile.

Nihilism is basically understood to represent meaninglessness. Nietzsche (1967, p. 9) has famously described nihilism to occur when an “aim is lacking” and when the question “‘why?’ finds no answer.” Lacking a sense of significant meaning – or purpose why – is considered here to be the sort of nihilism that is affecting our schooling and which lies latent in the lives of graduates who may have this sense of meaninglessness manifest itself later in their adult lives. If something lacks a why, a purpose, it can be considered to be nihilistic.

To ignore or keep secret aims and significant meanings for education is argued here to demonstrate a failure to understand personhood. Victor Frankl, drawing upon his experiences in Nazi concentration camps has claimed that people need to have a sense of significant meaning for their lives in order to fill the existential vacuum we find within ourselves and to survive even the worst conditions of existence. This primary sense of being a person identified by Frankl is similar to the ‘will to meaning’ as described by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Nietzsche even claimed that the impulse to will is so strong that people would rather will to meaninglessness rather than not will at all.

The sort of meaning that is argued to be absent from schooling is the significant sort which gives learners a sense of personal identity and purpose to their lives offering a why for their engagement with the curriculum and life with others more generally. However this claim might be challenged with reference to some non-government schools who present particular meanings for life which are often religious in nature. Such schools often do have articulated aims and purposes for schooling. However these purposes are considered here not to be necessarily significant for learners who attend such institutions because the meanings offered, while relevant to the particular world-views being promoted by the funding authorities, do not primarily seek to also be personally significant for individual students. This is demonstrated by the absence of the way-of-being for learners as persons and a focus upon a reification of values which are often quite traditional in nature. Such values might be claimed as able to
contribute to sorts of character development. However, they are often portrayed as existing in a stable realm of meanings beyond immediate existence and consequently rarely reference the particular lives of the students or a global perspective with which they can navigate their way with in addressing the ‘big picture’ issues which currently challenge our planet. These sorts of character development programs fail to transcend nationalistic or religious frameworks to enable learners to negotiate with different worldviews in a worthwhile manner as a way-of-being. What is needed is an education by which lives can be made significantly meaningful giving sense and purpose for individuals in order to pursue peace and worthwhileness in a global context.