

## Where is the soul in education?

*“The spirit of learning is about developing practical approaches towards the integration of life enhancing attitudes, universal values, and creative, holistic techniques across the curriculum and into all learning domains.”*

Dawn Griggs Founder/Director Soul of Education (Dec March 2004)

Without “soul” education is bland, disconnected and can create students that appear “dead” in our classrooms. Essentially holistic education recognises that the whole child needs to be encouraged to grow through learning in caring and supportive environments. The global movement towards outcomes based, student centred learning is recognising this need –philosophically we are heading in the right direction. Educators the world over recognise we all learn differently and have different ways of processing information and transferring it into knowledge or wisdom. Integrated learning allows the curriculum to flow just as life and living does. All learning is now known to be influenced by emotions and happy kids learn best. With all this relatively new educational knowledge why are things in the classrooms so different?

The over emphasis on assessment and reaching benchmarks is a drive that often shuts down authentic learning for life. It sucks the creativity, student directedness and enthusiasm for the cooperative collaborative unfolding of curiosity and intuitive learning. Accountability and results are seldom able to measure the social, emotional or moral growth of students and yet surely these are equally as important. The giving of awards for academic and sporting success does likewise – it creates a sense of failure for the 99% of the school community who never receive that public accolade. The year after year progress of students who are graded according to these two main yardsticks does much to crush the spirit of our emerging generation. Is it any wonder we have such huge issues in the Western world around illicit alcohol and drug abuse, violence, obesity, teenage depression and youth suicide figures that are simply outrageous. Essentially classroom teachers know what can improve schooling and yet politicians make the decisions based on intellectual and fiscal directives!!

*“The body of a child will not grow if it is not fed; the mind will not flourish unless it is stimulated and guided. And the spirit will suffer if it is not nurtured.”*

Rachael Kessler “The Soul of Education.”

So what does “soul of education” mean? How does it work? Where is it happening? Essentially soul attends to those areas just mentioned – the recognising, valuing, encouraging and nurturing of the non-academic or the non competitive qualities in education. This means the commitment to being respectful of diversity in our schools –colour, age, gender or culture. This means building connectedness between and within all those who attend a school through the building of genuine relationships between and among all who share in this amazing journey called education. This means celebrating the ancient ways of actualizaion or personal growth through songs, dance, art, story telling, poetry and ritual. This means the equal valuing of the vocational programs and academic programs where “craftsmen and women” are seen to be a valuable and incredibly worthwhile in the fabric of our communities. It also means having balance between the individual and group activities showing that self and unity and cooperation both have value. It means making learning fun and

valuing the role of laughter and lightness in building emotional competency and safety and interpersonal bondedness in groups. It means helping children learn how to think and how to use their own minds to interpret the world and to find that elusive thing we all search MEANING. It means teaching children life skills and values that will help them form effective loving relationships and to be able to contribute positively to our world. It means we care deeply about our role in the development of every child who comes to us. Finally it means that parents and teachers work together with the same agendas, the same intentions and the same positive commitment to “bring forth the greatness within each child.”

It also means that we acknowledge and really listen to our young – to the students in our schools. At the third international conference on The Soul of Education last year in Lennox Head, northern NSW students voiced the concerns of youth around the world that they believe we, as educators, can do it better. The Indigenous young adults among the group shared stories of years of racist insults and challenges that brought the audience to tears. Mostly they asked to be really heard especially in schools and to have input into their own learning. They emphasized the need for compassion and kindness especially in those chaotic teenage years where everything changes so fast. The chaotic world they have grown up in has created more challenges than ever before and we all need to support our fledgling adolescents cross the bridge to adulthood as much as we can.

Thomas Moore in “The Care of the Soul” wrote *“Politicians and educators consider more school days in a year, more science, more maths, the use of computers and other technology in the classroom, more exams, more tests, more certifications for teachers and less money for art.” On all these counts soul is neglected.*”

Maybe the education of our children will continue to rely on those amazing teachers who turn up everyday with passion for their career, their students and the schooling system. They have a genuine affection and commitment to children and teenagers and they love their job. There are thousands out there who are doing all of the things that build “soul” in their schools maybe without even knowing it. Daily they give hope to kids and their parents that what matters most is the gift of life. They make a positive difference everyday and thankfully, they make our world a better place to be.

**Maggie Dent**

Author, educational consultant,  
resilience specialist.

[www.esteemplus.com](http://www.esteemplus.com)

Dunsborough Western Australia.

0897553488

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