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Bringing *Soul* into the classroom

by David Marshak



BOULDER, Colorado - Rachael Kessler wants to bring soul into the classrooms of our schools, not only private schools but public as well. And she knows many ways that we can do this.

Can we bring soul into public schools legally? Absolutely, Kessler explains, and we absolutely must do so if we want to engage our young people much more fully in their learning.

For Kessler, soul is not a religious term, nor does it refer to metaphysical attributes. "Soul is about nurturing the inner life," she says. "When soul enters the classroom, masks begin to drop away. Young people begin to share the things they are joyful about, what they feel successful about. And they share their vulnerability - the things they are afraid of, the things they think would make them look weak in front of their peers and teachers. As they look deeply into their own stories, as they listen deeply to others' stories, they feel compassion, even forgiveness." It is this

opening up to meaning that brings soul into education.

While evoking soul can be serious or weighty, it can also be playful or joyous. Soul is all about meaning, and young people learn best when they see and feel the connection between what they are learning and what matters most to them. "Bringing soul into the classroom is a way of engaging our young people and motivating them to learn," Kessler notes.

Kessler, the founder and executive director of the PassageWorks Institute in Boulder, Colorado, has devoted 20 years as a teacher and program developer to exploring and describing how soul can be invited and supported in our classrooms. Most importantly she offers a way to do it legally, with respect for the First Amendment's separation of church and state and with respect for the diverse religious and spiritual identities of our young people and their families. "The PassageWorks Institute...is dedicated to transforming the culture of classrooms, schools and districts so that the inner life of students and teachers is safe, nurtured, and welcome," she says. "By 'inner life' we refer to that essential aspect of human nature that yearns for deep connection, grapples with difficult questions about meaning, and seeks a sense of purpose and genuine self-expression."

Kessler began her work with teenagers at the Crossroads School in Santa Monica, California. She listened

to students' stories and questions with great care and attention and, over many years, developed a practical map that includes seven gateways to the soul of young people.



1. The yearning for deep connection describes a quality of relationship that is profoundly caring, is resonant with meaning, and involves feelings of belonging and of being truly seen and known. Students may experience deep connection to themselves, to others, to nature, or to a higher power. Examples of pertinent activities include silent reflection and journaling; morning meetings, weekly "councils," and other forms of regular, safe sharing circles in the classroom, as well as regular experiences in the natural world as school-based activities.
2. The longing for silence and solitude, often an ambivalent domain, is fraught with both fear and urgent need. As a respite from the tyranny of "busyness" and noise, silence may be a realm of reflection, of calm or fertile chaos, an avenue of stillness and rest for some, prayer or contemplation for others. Students of any age can be invited into a few moments - or a few minutes - of silence and stillness in the classroom as an encouragement to become more calm, centered, and present.
3. The search for meaning and purpose concerns the exploration of big questions, such as "Why am I here?" "Does my life have a purpose? How do I find out what it is?" "What is life for?" "What is my destiny?" "What does my future hold?" and "Is there a God?" Young people can be invited to reflect on their own knowledge and experience of purpose and meaning in their lives through sharing with peers in sharing circles and through writing, drawing, music, and other art forms. They can also explore purpose through service learning activities in which students provide service to others in some structured way as they learn both about the world and their own selves.
4. The hunger of joy and delight can be satisfied through experiences of great simplicity, such as play, celebration, or gratitude. It also describes the exaltation students feel when encountering beauty, power,

grace, brilliance, love or the sheer joy of being alive. For example, teachers can bring play into the classroom as well as humor and celebration. In sharing circles students can be invited to share their experiences of joy and gratitude.

5. The creative drive, perhaps the most familiar domain for nourishing the spirit in school, is part of all the gateways. Whether developing a new idea, a work of art, a scientific discovery, or an entirely new lens on life, students feel the awe and mystery of creating. Creativity is central to the arts - and we can envision schools for teens where every student participates in at least one art form - but creativity can be encouraged and nurtured in every subject. Teachers can support and honor creative insights and ideas and create a safe classroom in which young people will risk sharing their brightest ideas and aspirations, not fearing that they might be seen as foolish.

6. The urge for transcendence describes the desire for young people to go beyond their perceived limits. It includes not only the mystical realm, but experiences of the extraordinary in the arts, athletics, academics, or human relations. By naming and honoring this universal human need, educators can help students constructively channel this powerful urge. In the context of school, one acceptable way to define transcendence is the *flow state* - to be completely focused on one's activity. Flow is common in sports and the arts, but it can also be encouraged - and allowed - in academic work: in reading, in writing, in research, in problem solving, and in experimentation.

7. The need for initiation deals with rites of passage for the young - guiding adolescents to become more conscious about the irrevocable transition from childhood to adulthood. Adults can help young people to develop tools for dealing with life's transitions and farewells. Meeting this need for initiation often involves ceremonies with parents and faculty that welcome them into the community of adults. For example, high schools can offer "rite of passage" courses for seniors who are on their way from the world of K-12 schooling to their next step in life.

"Just as each student's spiritual path is unique," says Kessler, "so is the form these gateways take." She emphasizes that these guidelines are never to be forced into a step-by-step curriculum, but they can be used to develop a wide range of opportunities in school life for engaging the souls of students. "All of these gateways," she stresses, "abide by the core principle of honoring young voices; creating ground rules together, reaching out cautiously and indirectly through play and metaphor, gathering and listening to young people's most profound questions, and telling stories from significant moments in their lives."

Her book, *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School* [1] published in 2000 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, a large, mainstream professional educators group, has been distributed to more than 100,000 educators throughout the nation - mostly public school teachers and administrators. Since then Kessler and her colleagues at PassageWorks Institute have developed four different, carefully sequenced curricula that high school teachers can draw upon to nurture soul in their own classrooms, one developmentally-appropriate curriculum each for 10th graders, 11th graders, and 12th graders, and another curriculum for students who are recent immigrants or refugees - and for students who are at high risk of being alienated from school. Each curriculum is part of the overall PassageWorks Program, which is at the core of the Institute's current work.

The Institute also offers a "Soul of Education" Foundation Course, designed for teachers, administrators, counselors, youth workers and parents. The course introduces participants to Kessler's "Soul of Education" approach and prepares them to work with the seven gateways model in schools and other

contexts. Foundation Courses are offered in Boulder and in some other locations - for example, this summer at Hollyhock, a retreat center on Cortes Island north of Vancouver, British Columbia.

For the past two years Kessler and her colleagues have worked with the principal and faculty at Poudre High School in Fort Collins, Colorado. Much of the faculty in this public school has implemented PassageWorks curricula with their students. The outcomes of the first two years of this demonstration and research project have been positive and inspiring. Most teachers reported they had been able to create more positive relationships with many students. Across the board, students reported that they appreciated getting to know other students whom they otherwise would not know personally.

The faculty members who participated in the project came to know each other and their administrators in deeper, more personal, and more positive ways. And teachers noted that some students earned better grades, in part because they knew that someone in the school cared about them. This project at Poudre High School will continue and expand in 2007-08.

In a time when so many of our elected and corporate leaders still cling to the dead-end notion of schooling as a process of production based on the industrial paradigm of the early 20th century, as exemplified in the mis-named No Child Left Behind, Rachael Kessler reminds us that authentic education must always engage the whole person, which includes the body, heart, mind - and soul. Her work provides educators with nimble and powerful tools for helping teens connect learning with meaning and begin to discover their own paths from adolescence into adult life. In addition, Kessler offers us all the gift of hope when we look at schools with despair.

School can be different; it can be a place where whole young persons are nurtured as they learn and grow. We know a great deal about how to do this. And people like Kessler are showing us the way.

To learn more about Rachael Kessler and the PassageWorks Institute: www.passageways.org [2]

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