

## BOOK REVIEWS

### Sex, gardening and God: Setting the values for Christian schools

Leo, Graham (2007). Macquarie Park, NSW: Christian Schools Australia.

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This intriguing text is a 'must read' for educators especially for Christian educators who are intent on developing authentic, responsive, transforming approaches to values education in their schools.

As one engages the text, it becomes a very enjoyable, though sometimes challenging, read. Leo has a compelling style that entices readers not only to think widely and deeply about the values issues he raises, but also to do something about them in their educational settings.

Some of these issues are:

**Context of the text:** In the current educational debates, especially about *character education* and *values education*, it is imperative for Christian educators to engage with the significant questions and investigate their underpinning theologies and philosophies. Also, it is important for staff and students in learning organisations and communities to examine policies, programs and practices that lead to dynamic and life-long values education outcomes. Design, development and ownership of a values education framework are matters taken very seriously by the author.

**Foundations:** The biblical analysis in which Leo has engaged while preparing this text is significant, detailed and compelling. Widespread use of the Scriptures, with extensive use of quotations, is a valuable base for the conceptual structure underpinning his proposals.

**Stakeholders in the text:** While there are many sub-themes and dimensions to the text's thesis, it is significant that parents, families, and communities of learners play a central role. Schools alone cannot plan for and engage in quality values education programs unless families are networked into, and connected with the learning community in which they and their children are participants.

**Significance:** This volume will inform, enlighten and provoke the reader to take

concerted action in the values education domain. While too often values have been left to the hidden or implicit curriculum, Leo challenges educators to raise the level of their engagement. It is a challenge that should not go unheeded in educational learning communities.

**Warnings:** Values education is a very problematic enterprise—What values? Whose values? How designed? When and where embedded? For what purposes? With whom? With what implications and outcomes? Optional or compulsory? Explicit/overt or implicit/hidden? The conceptual and strategic approaches to personal and community capacity building in learning organisations are 'not an easy row to hoe'. Leo alerts readers to potential pitfalls and issues that might bring about one's demise, or minimise the effectiveness of one's programs and practices. His experience and advice is extensive, helpful and encouraging.

**Engaging the text:** A key feature of Leo's text is the inclusion of three strategies to focus the reader's attention. These are his:

- regular use of significant quotes in text-boxes;
- inclusion of 'self-analysis' activities; and
- 'questions for schools', which are helpful devices to assist readers to engage with and go beyond the mere reading of the text.

**Concerns:** Leo, as an *agent provocateur*, purposely 'stirs the pot'. He wants readers actively to pursue issues that arise from his interpretations and proposals. He doesn't expect readers merely to accept his views or interpretations. He therefore acts as a critical friend and mentor to encourage, guide and provoke *action* in values education matters rather than get mere passive *agreement* with his constructs.

**Textual controversies:** Not everyone will agree with Leo's approaches to values education. He does not have a 'one size fits all' approach to this curricular issue. Indeed, his purposes are to entice readers to design, develop and implement their own approaches and strategies for promoting values education.

**Provocations via the text:** The author's experience encourages a 'hands-on' approach to values education. He encourages educators to build learning communities that are well-informed, well-framed, uniquely designed, diversely programmed and critically reviewed on a regular basis. For example, he supports handling *paradox* through engaging in diverse, personal and professional development programs.

**Proposed use:** The volume provides exceptionally valuable foundations. Leo proposes eight values for learning organisations and educational communities to engage with, and dynamically design and promote comprehensive

programs that will enhance values education in Christian schools and assist with the transformation of students' lives.

I commend this engaging text, but warn that it will provoke readers seriously to reflect on, and then initiate actions that will renew programs and improve practices in values education in schools.

TEACH

## Religious education in early childhood

Grajczonek, J. & Ryan, M. (Eds.), (2007). Brisbane, Australia: Lumino Press.

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This is a thought-provoking book by scholars and practitioners. They present research, current issues, and opinions from new perspectives, to encourage and provoke discussion and reflection among early childhood educators in religious education settings.

The spiritual and moral aspects of a child's development is an area that is often neglected by early childhood professionals, either through ignorance or for fear of inadvertently interfering in matters best left to the family and 'experts'. However, the recent growth of preschools attached to faith-based schools has challenged educators in this sector, to cater for the *holistic* development of the very young children in their care.

Children's development of spirituality is dealt with in the book's first section. I was fascinated with Robert Coles' work who investigated the perceptions of children in three world religions: Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and those from a secular background. Theorists David Hay and Rebecca Nye opened my eyes to entirely new ideas, while James Fowler's theories on the stages of faith development and Brendan Hyde's chapter on the pedagogy of the spirit were insightful and challenging. Vivienne Mountain's contribution on "Prayer and young children", Ann Troutdale's discussion of the "Interplay of stories, imagination and children's spirituality", and "Children in the book of Mark" by Joyce Mercer, provided much interest and information.

The second part of this book is devoted to practitioners' views and work-practices. Ideas presented clarify and extend children's religious experience through process drama, story telling and children's literature. I enjoyed the discussion

encouraging and reinforcing the "I wonder..." factor in children's thinking, as they experience Bible stories and relate faith to themselves.

There is also a thorough discussion of teachers' roles in fostering and modelling a spiritual life; teaching and learning theories as applied to religion; the value of classroom support systems and positive interaction; and gender issues. Chapter 14 gives a variety of descriptions of classroom interactions between teachers, students and peers that make intriguing reading, as a range of religious topics are covered.

Importantly, the role of family and community in a child's religious life is not neglected. A very realistic portrayal of contemporary family life and the dynamics affecting the child and school are ably presented by Elizabeth Anderson. Some of these dynamics are the pace and stress of modern family life, a sense of alienation from the churches, and the complexity of a secular and pluralistic society. On the other hand, she underlines the sense of community, identity, and security that a religious faith can bring to a family; especially the children. These qualities are further affirmed in Maurice Ryan's essay, "Contexts and partnerships", where the writer invokes the familiar image of 'It takes a village to raise a child' and considers the spiritual implications.

Demonstrating that there are contrary positions on the value of religious education, the editors have included a critique by Roger Marples. In his chapter, "Against faith in schools: A philosophical argument for children's rights", he argues forcefully in favour of letting children grow naturally in a spiritual sense, without too much adult intervention (reminiscent of the old values-free education argument?) and discusses equity issues, public funding and the right of the child to choose and be autonomous in their own faith. He makes some interesting points in areas that are often open for debate. The reasons given why parents, in the first place, often choose faith-based schools surprised me.

The reader can't help getting involved with this book. Although some parts may not appeal to, or be relevant to particular faith traditions, there is still plenty to challenge and stimulate one's thinking because it raises a range of current topics and educational issues that apply to *all* Christian schools.

The book is well planned and constructed, but documents in the last section lack sufficient general interest and could be scaled back.

With faith-based schools in Australia steadily growing, this is a timely and relevant book and I believe that the editors have achieved their stated aim of provoking discussion and reflection. TEACH