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## The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School, by Rachael Kessler

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guides for faculty, staff, and students. For one to be that guide, one must have made the journey. Bolman and Deal lead the way for that journey through the fictional account of one man and the insightful interpretation of his quest. These revelations are applicable models for all leaders on the quest for effective leadership.

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**THE SOUL OF EDUCATION:  
HELPING STUDENTS FIND CONNECTION,  
COMPASSION, AND CHARACTER AT SCHOOL**

RACHAEL KESSLER  
ASSOCIATION FOR SUPERVISION AND  
CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT, 2001  
\$23.95, 181 pages

*Reviewed by Yvonne Saunders*

There is no doubt that the youth of America face many challenges: violence, drugs, suicide, and teen pregnancy to name a few. Many would say that there is something missing in the lives of our youth. *The Soul of Education* attempts to fill this emptiness by adding a spiritual dimension to education in public schools. Kessler “uses the word soul in this book to call for attention in schools to the inner life; to the depth dimension of human experience; to students’ longings for something more than an ordinary, material, and fragmented existence” (p. x). Kessler makes it clear from the beginning that religion is not being advocated but “young people have experiences that nourish their spiritual development and yet are not directly related to worldview or religious dogma” (p. xiv). This reviewer considers this a flawed assumption by Kessler. While the attempt to bring meaning into the lives of the students through gateways is admirable, there is still something missing, and Kessler may be naïve in thinking that providing an atmosphere for asking ultimate questions without a teacher’s guidance is helpful in finding true

meaning in life.

Kessler maps seven gateways to help the souls of students emerge. First, Kessler creates a classroom atmosphere of trust by having the students create the ground rules for a confidential sharing. The students begin sharing through symbols in their lives, and then the students write anonymously their personal mystery questions. These questions are read aloud in council. "A council meeting gives each person a chance to speak without immediate reaction or dialogue" (p. 14). The lights are dimmed and a smooth stone is passed, designating the speaker. It is in this atmosphere that Kessler introduces various themes for the students to think about and share.

These themes fall under the seven gateways: deep connection, silence and solitude, meaning and purpose, joy, creativity, transcendence, and initiation. The yearning for deep connection provides students with a sense of belonging. This connectedness fills the need that some students fill with gangs, guns, or destructive behavior. The longing for silence and solitude is filled by helping students become comfortable with silence. Instead of filling their time with activity or music, Kessler wants the students to take time for reflection. Questions concerning the meaning of life are discussed in the next gateway of the search for meaning and purpose. Reflection and discussion about experiences in the students' lives, such as play or times of celebration, satisfy the hunger for joy and delight. Creativity nourishes the spirit of each of the students. In the gateway of transcendence students explore moments in "athletic, academic, and artistic performance, adventure learning, transcending prejudice and stereotypes, through suffering, sharing mysterious experiences and non-ordinary states of consciousness" (p. 118). Kessler recommends the use of relaxation exercises and meditation. As soon as Kessler mentions meditation, there is a "word of caution" (p. 133). Kessler refers to James Peterson, "The basic problem with teaching children spiritual practices...is that these meditations, breath exercises, yogas, and mantras actually work, releasing energies that children literally are not equipped to handle" (p. 134). This is exactly the danger that Kessler faces. If you can only bring the students so far, is it right not to bring them to the conclusion of God? Is it fair to just listen when they have been brought to a point of looking for the answer? Transcendence is followed by the last gateway, the need for initiation. In this gateway, students develop the tools necessary to help them through the many transitions they will face in life. Kessler dedicates a chapter to each of these themes. Many examples and stories are used when explaining the importance of each gateway. These stories are touching and inspirational to read for anyone who has taught or worked closely with young people. They are certainly a reminder that young people often have complicated lives which affect their learning.

Each gateway leads to deep sharing and eventually to sharing about God

in some of the students' lives. Kessler believes that the students can talk about God "while still honoring the First Amendment's provision for separation of Church and state. "To exclude such an important part of students' lives from discourse in a diverse, authentic classroom community is simply unnecessary" (p. 33). While students can talk about God, this reviewer's concern is that the teachers cannot. And since they cannot, they cannot sufficiently answer some of the questions students will have when discussing these areas. Even when teachers can address these questions, such as in a Catholic school, there does need to be training. Kessler admits that "questions about personal purpose or the meaning of life can lead to issues of ultimate causes and religious beliefs" (p. 64). Kessler addresses these questions by "returning the question." Kessler quotes Aline Wolf,

When a child asks if God made the world, a response might be, some people think that God made the world and other people do not think that God made the world. It's a question that people have been trying to answer for thousands of years. I am glad you are thinking about it too. (p. 65)

This can be a frustrating response for a child who is looking for answers. Is his or her spiritual yearning truly addressed with this response? Is it fair to raise questions in a classroom that the teacher cannot attempt to answer?

This book provides a map for helping students find meaning in their lives. For the Catholic educator, it is a reminder that it is important to create a classroom environment in which students can bring their spiritual questions and yearnings and talk about them in the context of a relationship with a loving God. The book is filled with reminders for teachers, such as "When the lesson plan is more important than the student's feelings or experience, when we are preoccupied with 'doing it right' and 'covering the material,' we often forget to open our hearts to our students" (p. 128). A Catholic educator does not have to fear the "dangerous impulse for a teacher to working with heart and soul in the classroom" of "becoming inflated with the fantasy of being a 'spiritual guide' or 'healer'" (p. 164) which Kessler warns against in the public school. While Kessler is walking a tightrope with the First Amendment and public education, *The Soul of Education* can provide some reflective strategies and inspirational stories for those in Catholic education. However, in the mission of Catholic education, where the teachers guide and give witness to God who alone gives meaning to life, Kessler's lack of depth is evident. We cannot be reminded enough that what we are about is helping students find God.

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