

Outdoor Outlook

The Quarterly Journal of The Outdoor Education Group

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God and the bush

Spirituality and its place in outdoor education

New law in Victoria

The Victorian Education and Training Reform Bill discussed



GOD AND THE BUSH

We are educators. The task of educators is to encourage and assist the latent potential of young people to become patent. Thus as educators our concern must be with the intellectual potential of the young people in our care, but equally with their physical, aesthetic, social and spiritual development. Frequently the intellectual becomes lost in the academic with the purpose of schooling seen only in terms of reaching set academic standards. But even where schools consciously strive to deepen intellectual awareness, as opposed simply to academic achievement, to take students to new and challenging levels of intellectual understanding, they only too frequently place intellectual growth above physical and aesthetic growth. Where schools provide highly developed sporting, visual arts, music, drama and dance, along with intellectual, programmes, too frequently they ignore the need to provide programmes of social development. Where students have their spiritual needs recognized as well, they are fortunate indeed, because even in schools with religious foundations the spiritual development of students is often sorely neglected. Fully developed adults, capable of a rich personal awareness and fulfilling social relationships with others and with the world around them, need to have been educated not just to obtain high ENTER scores, but to know the joy of fulfilling their intellectual, physical, aesthetic, social and spiritual potential.

Religion without spirituality is likely to be empty and fruitless, but spirituality can, and does for most people, exist without religious practice. In a spiritual experience, a person feels him or herself emptied and become like a void vessel, making way for something else to flow in. That “something else” may be a deep sense of peace, of purpose or of love. In a religious person it may be a sense of oneness with the Divine; in the case of Christians the Divine is personalized in Christ. A Christian may understand the empty vessel as being filled by the Holy Spirit. Spiritual experience, however, most definitely is not confined to those with religious beliefs – far from it. A person, regardless of his or her religious beliefs or absence of belief, who is spiritually aware, develops inner strengths, relates differently to others, has a sense of proportion and looks at others and the surrounding world not just through his or her eyes. Spirituality is very difficult, if not impossible to define, but it is a reality, and our students will remain underdeveloped, if it is ignored in their education.

It is not “cool” for young people, especially those without religious connections, to describe to others their spiritual experiences: to be willing to do so is not iconically Australian. Indeed adolescents of western European descent generally see this as encroaching on the private domain. When they do describe their spiritual experiences, they are worth listening to. Some will respond to poetry or to music. Some will talk about taking part in religious services at school, usually young people who have no out of school church experience. Many find their spiritual awakening while surfing, or in individual sports such as cycling and long distance running.

In my experience very many will refer to experiences in the Australian bush. They talk of watching from the top of a mountain the sun go down, of gazing out over a vast, still valley, of listening to the deep silence of the night broken only by the sounds of the bush, of dawn in the Australian red centre. They recall a twenty-four hour solo, of watching a lizard for an hour at a time, of sitting under the tall gums beside a fast flowing river, the blue silence broken by the answering cries of the birds. They are not alone in their experience. The Old Testament prophet Elijah in the wilderness, along with countless others, heard “a still small voice”. The modern translation of the Hebrew is “a sound of sheer silence”. (i)

The fulfillment of our spiritual potential, as with all our potentials, is not achieved at a first experience or in a sudden blinding flash. It has to be nurtured. Spiritual experiences in the bush at Year 7 are rare, but where there is a well designed and conducted sequential outdoor education programme, for many young people at Years 11 and 12 contact with the spirituality of the bush and the conversion of this into their own experience is a major factor in drawing them back into the outdoors in their senior school years and afterwards.

Why does the bush have this effect on so many people?

(There are some readers, who will want at this point to jump the next section, and if religious ideas bore you, I encourage you to go straight to the fifth last paragraph!)

The idea of God’s being found in the wilderness goes right back to earliest recorded times. God spoke to Moses when he was alone in the wilderness. The Hebrew prophets constantly went into the wilderness when they wanted to commune with God and to solve difficult problems. The Hebrew psalmist saw nature as proclaiming God:

“Let the heavens rejoice and let the earth be glad:
Let the sea roar and all that fills it
Let the fields rejoice and everything in them:
Then shall all the trees of the wood shout with joy
before the Lord”. (ii)

St John the Baptist was at home in the desert. Christ himself withdrew to the wilderness for forty days of contemplation before beginning his ministry. St Anthony, in Christian tradition the founder of monasticism, withdrew as an hermit to the Egyptian desert. When St Columba and his Celtic monks left Ireland to convert Britain, they made their home, not in the rich pasturelands of the Lowlands of Scotland, but on a tiny, windswept, barren island facing the wild Atlantic, Iona, where they and the rocks were almost one. Islam arose out of the spirits of the Arabian desert, and much of the spirit of the Koran is a wilderness spirit. Our own indigenous people, with their animist beliefs, saw spirits in a visceral relationship with the rocks, streams, mountains and plains of an ancient land.

In our own time non-Christian eco-spiritualism has for some people in a secular, materialistic, largely religionless society filled a void and provided an explanation for the feelings they have in the bush. Often without seeking to do more than react to their own feelings, they define the bush as essentially spiritual, as conveying some kind of spiritual force. By immersing themselves in the bush they believe they absorb the bush's living spiritual qualities. They see the bush as in some way sacred and themselves as humbled in its presence.

Ecology and spirituality unite in a common cause and there is a spiritual connection between humans and the environment. These people describe a sense of connectedness with the whole of nature and the environment, even the cosmos, and describe the means by which this connectedness manifests itself as an energy or spirituality emanating from the bush. In a more sophisticated sense eco-spiritualists begin to see the natural world as a source of the divine. They begin to discover at the heart of the universe a source of love, goodness and affection for the entire earth community, both the ecological community and the community of people, who are themselves part of nature.

Inevitably eco-spirituality arises out of our own experience of immersion in the natural world. The place where people spend most of their lives moulds their priorities and the way they perceive and engage in their surroundings. A world of concrete, asphalt and glass, of mobile telephones, computer games and video shops reinforces people's belief that they are separate from nature, immune from the uncertainty and unexpectedness that nature is. When nature intrudes on their lives through bushfires, hurricanes or earthquakes, they see it as the enemy. Except in human relationships, there is very little in urban living, which inspires more than solipsism, consumerism, materialism and egoism and the lowest common denominator of taste. In contrast immersion in the wilderness can bring an awareness of some much greater, positive force, which we may choose to characterize as divine.

Not surprisingly eco-spiritualism has become closely associated with the environmental movement. On the one hand it has become for many the source of their environmental activism. On the other hand it may be the consequence of it. Certainly what might be described as the eco-spirituality movement and the environmental movement reinforce each other. A growing consciousness that the activities of the human race have destroyed and are destroying the finally balanced ecology of the planet has brought an awareness that what is being destroyed has a legitimacy of its own. Traditionally man saw the

natural world as totally subject to his needs and whims. Now we are more aware of ourselves as very small in a very large, but fragile, world and a vastly larger cosmos. While not all environmentalists are eco-spiritualists, it is difficult to be an eco-spiritualist without being an environmentalist.

The eco-spirituality movement appears to be modern. The word is no more than thirty years old. In fact it is a very old philosophy – pantheism – dressed in new clothes. In pantheism the divine and nature are essentially identical. The pantheist believes God has no existence apart from the natural world. In fact just how pantheism is to be understood and who is and is not a pantheist is not entirely clear. In terms of world religions, possibly the beliefs which come closest to pantheism are to be found in certain parts of Hinduism, where Brahman, the one supreme, all pervading spirit, the supreme reality has no separate existence of his own. Some forms of Buddhism verge on being pantheistic. Philosophical Taoism is the most pantheistic of the world's belief systems. Many of the early Christian mystics, in their passionate search for God in nature and a desire for union with the Divine, came very close to pantheism. Falling short of pantheism they are frequently described as nature mystics. Certainly the Judeo-Christian, and indeed Islamic, traditions, with their emphasis on a creator God outside the natural world and the partial revelation of that God through written scriptures, history and in the case of Christianity the incarnate person of Jesus Christ are in direct opposition to pantheism.

Modern pantheism has its origin largely in Baruch Spinoza, the maverick, but challenging, Jewish philosopher, who was expelled from the Amsterdam synagogue in 1656 and who used as a catchphrase “Deus sive Natura”, that is, “God or Nature”, implying that one name was as good as the other. The most complete attempt at explaining and defending pantheism from a philosophical perspective is undoubtedly

Spinoza's *Ethics*, finished in 1675, two years before his death. Pantheism had a definite impact on the so called “romantic” poets and artists of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, such as William Wordsworth, Wolfgang Goethe and William Turner, who looked largely to the natural world for their inspiration. In the mid 19th century it had a significant influence on the formative German philosophers, F.W.J. Schelling and G.W.F. Hegel, although the latter denied that he was a pantheist. Also in the 19th century probably the most typically American poet, the great Walt Whitman, clearly demonstrated his pantheism in his poem *Song of Myself*. Ludwig van Beethoven seems to have demonstrated pantheism in some of his work. In the 20th century novelist and poet, D.H. Lawrence, reflected pantheistic ideas in much of his writing, and certainly during his long stay in Australia was influenced by what he understood to be the ideosyncratic spirit of the Australian bush, as he demonstrated in his novel *Kangaroo*.

Pantheism rejects entirely any form of anthropocentrism, that is of placing humankind at the centre of the natural world. Rather anthropocentrism is seen as undermining the cosmocentric perspective at the core of pantheism. It is antithetical to the pantheist world view and ethos. The spiritual force of the outdoors plays down the role of self and plays up the divine nature of the whole universe. Thus pantheists “commune” with nature. Pantheistic ethics focus on how to live and on the individual's relation to the natural order, to which, of course, other individuals belong. Pantheists see their well-being as intrinsically connected to the wider environment rather than to more immediate, and one might think more pragmatic, things, such as employment and family life. (iii)



Many young people (and older people too) find these ideas attractive, even if they are not familiar with the term “pantheism”. There are no ecclesiastical structures, institutions or hierarchies. There are virtually no doctrines, no scriptures and no worship or prayer. The approach is not devotional, but rather contemplative and meditative. There is no “religion”. Rather life in the bush can bring personal fulfillment and peace and a close sense of fellowship with others.

But its attraction for young people also points to its serious limitations. It seeks no answers to the problems of real living. It does not tackle the questions of evil or personal and corporate responsibility for sin. It has nothing to say about the major ethical issues, which we all have to face. It says nothing about life and death. It provides none of the rituals by which communities and individuals mark life’s transitions. From the perspective of the three monotheistic religions, pantheism is clearly heresy. Christianity, Judaism and Islam have at the very centre of their beliefs a personal God, who is outside the cosmos he created. What the notions of a personal God and creator mean in the context of the twenty-first century is a legitimate question for debate, and much contemporary theological thinking is taken up with precisely this issue, but the essence of these beliefs is fundamental to all three religions.

The issue is an important one for those who lead schools with some kind of religious foundation or church affiliation. In fact in the contemporary Christian church the answer is found in the adoption of the essence of eco-spiritualism into conventional church teaching. Christians cannot accept pantheism, but they can accept panentheism. Panentheism predicates God as present in all aspects of creation, but not confined by it. God is outside and above creation, but he fills all creation with his presence and with his spirit. The spiritual experience, which so many young people, have in the bush, is a real contact with the divine, with God. Traditionally Christian, and also Jewish and Islamic, theology taught that the whole natural world existed for humankind to make use of as humankind willed. The first chapter of the Book of Genesis gives humankind authority to exercise dominion over all creation as God’s administrators (iv). The last quarter of the 20th century, however, saw a tradition in Christian thinking, which had always been there – witness the Franciscans – develop into a new theology of the environment. Pope John Paul II was a major influence in this. He and others led all the churches in condemning environmental abuse and calling on all people to restore the natural world wherever they could. The dominion over all creation given to humankind in the

Book of Genesis, John Paul II pointed out, is not an absolute power to use and misuse or to dispose of as we please, but to administer wisely so as to foster life and development. Christian eco-spirituality is seen as the humble way of caring for the earth and as the area where ecology and the resources of the spirit overlap and cry out for all of us to abandon behaviour destructive of the natural world and to transform our attitudes towards the earth. Christian eco-spirituality, however, is also a way of meeting with the divine through the agency of the wilderness, rather as the nature mystics did in early Christian times. (v)

Surely there are two lessons we can take as educators from all this. First, if ours is a school, which takes Christian faith and worship seriously, outdoor education is a unique opportunity to connect young people with the community of faith through the medium of the natural world. This is a lesson, important though it is, for some only. How it is done is up to each school. Roman Catholic and Anglican schools may celebrate the eucharist in the bush – a powerful message indeed. Others may look to appropriate intercessions, thanksgivings and readings.

All schools have an obligation to foster the spiritual talents of young people, just as much as their intellectual, physical, aesthetic and social potentialities.

But second there is a lesson for leaders in all schools and the leaders of outdoor education. Regardless of the presence or absence of religious commitment on the part of the School, all schools have an obligation to foster the spiritual talents of young people, just as much as their intellectual, physical, aesthetic and social potentialities. There is no better way of doing this than through experience in the outdoors.

How can we through the outdoor experience assist young people to develop spiritually? In a badly run outdoor education exercise, students are permitted to make a thunderstorm of noise, not just some of the time, which is normal, but all the time, which is destructive. Every programme should have quiet times during the day for reflection. Some groups find it constructive to use such reflective times to write down their thoughts and impressions or to express them in artwork. Leaders should call spontaneous reflection times of quiet when the group comes face to face with something in nature, which is genuinely awe inspiring. Students, hiking through the bush should be encouraged not all of the time, but some of the time, to listen to the sounds around them. During the debrief at the end of the day students, if prompted, will discuss their feelings, their reactions to special experiences and to scenes of exceptional beauty during the day. The solo experience is especially suitable for spiritual

development, especially if staff take the time to prepare students beforehand. The outdoors is a splendid opportunity to help students to gain awareness of their inner selves.

Some teachers take with them into the bush a book of short appropriate poems, which can relate to the students' experience during the day. What better poem to read on a beach at the end of a day surfing than Judith Wright's poem, *The Surfer*, which paints a dramatic and graphic word picture of the smallness and vulnerability of man engulfed by nature:

Turn home, the sun goes down: swimmer, turn home...

For on the sand the grey-wolf sea lies snarling;
cold twilight wind splits the waves' hair and shows
the bones they worry in their wolf-teeth. O, wind blows,
and sea crouches on sand, fawning and mouthing;
drops there and snatches again, drops and again snatches
its broken toys, its whitened pebbles and shells. (vi)

Again, it must be stressed that the enrichment of spiritual awareness in young people in the outdoors cannot be achieved without a properly constructed sequential programme. A six or four year programme, where each year's experience is planned to build on the one before, provides for the continuing development of a young person's spiritual potential. A one off experience may be of some value, but in a sequential programme the boy's or girl's spiritual awareness can become deeper and more entrenched year by year.

In all spiritual education, there is one factor of immense importance, which only too easily can be forgotten in a society which encourages egoism in its young people. Enriching though spiritual experiences may be for the individual, their worth is tested by the way they effect relationships with others. Part of the spiritual experience of the bush comes from the fellowship, the concern for one another which develops in a group in isolation from the rest of the human world. A spiritual person is not one, who just gazes endlessly at his or her own navel. Spiritual experience leads us to reach out, not just dig deeper in. A spiritual person is tolerant, loving, concerned and above all strong. We are meant to live in communities, and spiritually strong people are well equipped to do so.

In religious terms communion with the Divine through the outdoors leads to communion with the whole people of God. ■

- i. I Kings 19.xii. The traditional translation is from the *Revised Version*. The modern translation is from the *New Revised Standard Version*.
- ii. Psalm 96, xi-xii.
- iii. There is an informed and sympathetic account of pantheism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which can be found on the web: [www//plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/](http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pantheism/)
- iv. Genesis 1.xxvi.
- v. There is a simple explanation of Christian eco-spiritualism arising out of the Anglican Franciscan community at St Philip's, Annerley, in Queensland – www.stphilips-annerley.org.au – and a more challenging analysis in Charles Cummings, *Exploring Eco-Spirituality*, Spirituality Today, Spring 1989, Vol.41 No.1, pp.30-41.
- vi. These are extracts from Judith Wright, *The Surfer*, Selected Poems – Five Senses. Angus & Robertson 1978.

This article was written by the Editor. The Outdoor Education Group is a secular organization, which respects the particular religious or philosophical tradition, or absence of such a tradition, of each of its partner schools. The views expressed above are personal to the writer.

In Brief...

■ Our Patron Salutes Teachers

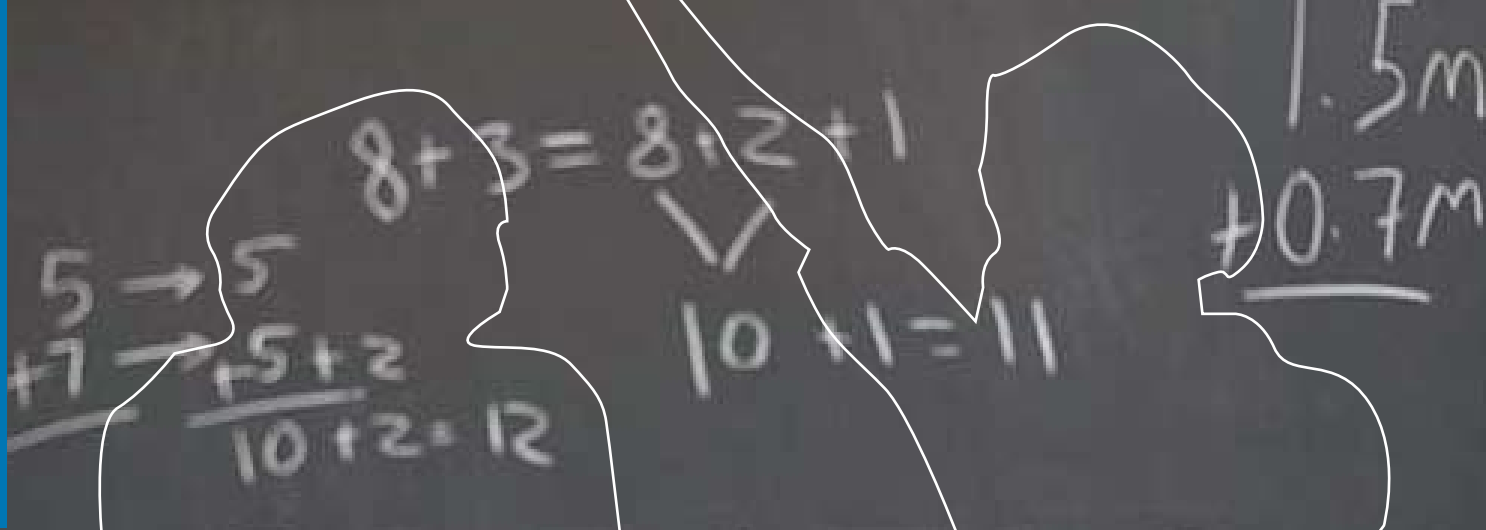
His Excellency the Governor-General has marked World Teachers Day on 28 October by issuing a Message, which says in part: "I reaffirm teaching as the great, noble profession. And what honourable, diverse and imposing responsibilities teachers have in Australia....In our world of growing distractions and uncertainties, teaching reminds us of values that enrich and offer balance to our students – lifelong education, the sharing of knowledge and experience that may not always be found in books, valuing history and treasures of our world, service to others, and respect for the dignity and worth of each individual. Teachers, I salute your contributions and wish you every success for the future".

■ Thanks ACU – a Partnership Bears Fruit

A partnership between OEG and the Australian Catholic University is bearing fruit and making a significant contribution to OEG's current research project. ACU has been crucial in the design of two key research projects, which have examined outdoor education learning outcomes. The outcomes of Haileybury College's Pre-senior Life Effectiveness Programme were measured over a year, and the results were able to inform best practice. The second study will determine also the most effective mode of delivery in terms of teaching skills and programme design. This will lead to the best experiences and learning outcomes for students. OEG applauds ACU's professional skills and their work on our behalf.

■ Individual Reporting Set to Begin

At the end of First Term 2006, OEG will commence piloting the web based learning outcomes tool, which will provide individual student reports, specific to the School's outdoor education programme. These will be able to be accessed by the School, the students' parents and by the students themselves. OEG client schools will be invited to participate in this innovative new research project. This is a major step in bringing outdoor education in line with the kind of transparent reporting, designed to assist the learning process, which is part of the core of contemporary educational thinking, and which is being implemented by Education Departments around the country. In Victoria it is a significant provision in the *Education and Training Reform Bill* (See *New Law in Victoria*). ■



NEW LAW IN VICTORIA

Victoria's new legislation confirms and expands in statute law many accepted principles and practices. It requires commitment on the part of schools to the principles of Australian democracy. It introduces a new, single registration authority. But the Bill is a large one and "the devil may well be in the detail".

By the time this issue of *Outdoor Outlook* reaches its readers, the new *Victorian Education and Training Bill* almost certainly will have been read a first time in both houses of Parliament and the interested public will have begun to examine it, so that they can spend the summer proposing amendments before the Bill finally becomes law sometime in the early part of next year. There is a long tradition of government's introducing major change just at the end of the school year – even the most dedicated members of school communities and officers of educational organizations find studying proposed law on the beach a challenge!

There is widespread agreement on most of the proposals in the Government's White Paper, which was issued in September and which was the Government's response to the public consultation on a series of questions, which were discussed in the July issue of *Outdoor Outlook*. No-one disputes that the *Education Act 1872*, brought partially up to date in 1958, is in serious need of extensive revision. The White Paper declared the government's obligation to ensure that all schools – government and non-government – deliver a quality standard education, which provides students with the opportunity to excel in the 21st century. Further it affirmed that the ability to choose schools is a parental right in a democratic society. The right of choice is welcomed by parents and governing bodies in non-government schools, but is in fact much more significant for government schools, which must still provide room for the children of parents in their local area, if they choose to take up that option.

The bill affirms the principle of free instruction in government schools, and declares that this free instruction covers the eight Key Learning Areas agreed to by all states and territories and the Commonwealth in the 1999 Adelaide Declaration of National Goals for Schooling. Free instruction is to be available to the end of Year 12 or its equivalent, as long as the student is under 20 on 1 January of the relevant academic year. The right of government schools to

charge fees in specified areas and to seek voluntary contributions is written into the bill. The compulsory school leaving age is raised to 16, bringing the law more into line with the real world. The secular nature of government schools is reaffirmed, but more clearly defined, so that the ambiguity surrounding comparative religion studies and the explanation of specific religious beliefs and practices in the course of teaching other material, such as in English or History, is removed.

The programmes and teaching in all providers of education and training, including government and non-government schools, must be delivered in a way, which supports and promotes the principles and practices of Australian democracy, with commitment to elected government, the rule of law, equal rights for all before the law, freedom of religion, freedom of speech and association and the values of openness and tolerance. Ongoing registration presumably will depend on this commitment. Very few Australian educators would withhold support for these principles and practices, but the required commitment poses interesting difficulties when government does not itself demonstrate the same commitment. **It is interesting also that there is no requirement for commitment to the principles of multiculturalism.** Nor are non-government schools to be obliged to apply open entry policies. It seems that schools can continue to give preference to adherents of a particular faith, and that they can exclude in fact members of different beliefs from enrolling, even where there are vacancies. Apparently the "value of tolerance" does not extend so far as to require rejection of any kind of discrimination on racial, religious, cultural, gender or age grounds.

There are two major directions proposed by the legislation, neither of which is a surprise. **First, schools are to be required to be transparent in their dealings with government, the public especially parents and, in terms of each student's progress, with the student and his or her parents.** If the right of choice is to have

any substance, parents need access to meaningful information about schools, and parents have a right to the best possible information about their children's progress and expert advice from teachers as to how that progress can be improved. (An important side benefit of OEG's current research project is that there will be transparent and objective reporting of student performance to parents and schools and to students themselves.) The government's own accountability means that there has to be full and open reporting of the performance of all education providers in receipt of government funds. While none of this is surprising, it is significant and appropriate that these principles should be enshrined in statute law. Reliable information, which can be understood easily, will have to be made available, so that parents can compare schools, including the programmes offered by them, the students' learning achievements and how effectively graduates access tertiary education, training and employment. This implies considerable expansion of the present practice.

Second, the bill provides a common regulatory system for all schools in Victoria. At present government schools are in fact owned and regulated by the same people, the government acting through the Department of Education and Training. Non-government schools have been regulated until now primarily through the Registered Schools Board, a statutory body with final control in the hands of the Minister. A new statutory body, the Qualifications and Registration Authority will develop a common regulatory regime for all schools, government and non-government, and training providers. It will also take over the role of the Victorian Qualifications Authority. It will recommend to the Minister minimum standards for the registration of all schools, minimum standards for home schooling and information about Victorian schools that should be disseminated to the community. It will make determinations on the registration and deregistration of a school, and policies and procedures for school registration and deregistration, policies and procedures in the event that a school does not meet the standards for initial or ongoing registration and policies and procedures with respect to providers of accredited courses to overseas students. It is expected that the Authority will approach its regulatory function with a "light touch", although how a "light touch" can be imposed by legislation, or what a "light touch" actually means is a little mysterious! Minimum standards will be set for student learning outcomes, enrolment policies and minimum enrolment numbers, student welfare policies, the breadth and depth of curriculum programmes, governance and probity and review and evaluation processes. The Authority will advise on minimum standards for all schools, monitor the implementation of these standards and provide information for the public about the performance of schools, especially in relation to whether the standards are being met. The intention within this regulatory framework is to leave individual schools to take initiatives, develop programmes and create their own individual cultures.

Almost certainly the most difficult adjustments will need to be made by government, not independent, schools, because government schools are being brought under a regimen more like the existing position of non-government schools. Independent schools, however, should be aware of the potential for interference in their affairs that exists in the new Bill. Much of the government's intention will not become clear until the new Authority begins to formulate its regulations. Nor is it known as yet whether there will be independent school sector representation on the governing body

of the Authority. Clearly there is the potential for the imposition on schools of common disciplinary, pastoral care, co-curricular and academic policies, practices and structures. Obviously there is a real risk that the uniform benchmark for all schools will be those in the government schools. The very reasons that many parents choose independent schools for their children could be negated. Yet there is no suggestion from the Government that this is its intention. If anything the intention seems to be primarily to push more responsibility on to government schools. The independent sector has to realize also that within its ranks there are schools, almost all of fairly recent foundation and highly subsidized by the Commonwealth government, whose standards and levels of accountability leave a great deal to be desired. If the new legislation brings about an improvement in standards in these schools and some government schools alike, while leaving most non-government and government schools to get on with their work with minimal interference, the community can only be grateful.

Is this all then that the new *Education and Training Bill* is about? Far from it.

As so often the devil may well be in the detail. This Bill is about 500 pages long. The White Paper was 19 pages long! The new Bill is a complete revision – and that means modernization – of the old Act. It is meant to last at least a further fifty years. There is a myriad of detail, which has been changed, e.g. "government school" replaces "state school". When you change the way things are expressed, you often change what they mean, even if that is not your primary intention. If you bring something up to date, inevitably you change it. None of this was in the White Paper, because it does not come under the heading of policy. Yet 500 pages of quite small changes could have massive consequences. Independent schools and government schools alike should beware and examine the detail of the provisions of the Bill very carefully. They may well be surprised.

The lawyers will certainly be busy over the summer holidays.

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It is not also immediately clear that government has opted out of many areas of control, simply because their exercise is no longer of any benefit to government. A good example is the length of the school year. What

advantage is there to government in suffering criticism in fulfilling its existing obligation to set the minimum time that schools must be open? Better to leave this and other matters to the systems and individual schools.

But what is the major disappointment in the new Bill? Here was a great opportunity for us as a community to go back to the beginning and to redefine education, to develop a new concept of schooling suited to providing young people with the skills, character and moral qualities to face a world, which is increasingly challenging. Here was an opportunity to look at education with fresh eyes and see it, not as we at present practice it, but as a process, which develops the intellectual, physical, aesthetic, social and spiritual potential of every young person. The job of our schools, after all, is to help young people to develop into confident, capable, at ease, purposeful, community minded, enriched, fully rounded, mature Australian adults. In this process the co-curriculum, including outdoor education, should be playing a major, not just add on, role, at least equal to academic study and preparation for the world of work. It is not too late for the debate to begin. ■

Profile

James T. Neill

– Researcher



James Neill has been contracted from the University of Canberra by OEG to work with Dr Lorraine Smith and to play a major role in the ground breaking research project at present being conducted by OEG, which was outlined in the last issue of *Outdoor Outlook*. This research will assess the educational value of outdoor education, assess the effectiveness of individual outdoor courses, and allow schools to measure their desired outcomes from their outdoor education programme and from individual parts of it and to assess whether these outcomes are being met. It will also assess the relative effectiveness of different kinds of outdoor education programmes. The research will provide data to inform the decision making of government and school authorities. Importantly parents, students and schools will be able to receive reports on individual student development as a result of experience in the outdoors (see *In Brief*). James Neill is developing the reporting mechanism for this, which is web-based and immediate. It is an important service to students, their parents and schools.

James Neill co-developed the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire, which uses 8 of the 13 OEG competencies under the heading "Self". OEG has expanded these competencies to 23, which are at present being validated and revised with the help of the Australian Council of Educational Research.

Born in 1970, James Neill grew up in Perth. At present he is a full-time lecturer in the Centre for Applied Psychology at the University of Canberra, where he teaches social psychology and research methods. From 1988 to 1997 he worked for Outward Bound Australia, mainly as an instructor, research co-ordinator and staff trainer. From the University of Western Australia James gained a science

degree majoring in Psychology and minoring in Human Movement Studies. He worked for a period for the New York Outward Bound Center and sailed across the Pacific with a youth crew aboard the 72 foot ketch, Sir Thomas Sopwith. Becoming increasingly fascinated with the psychological aspects of how people behave and change during adventure experiences, he began collating and archiving adventure education research in 1992. This led to an honours degree in psychology, with a thesis focussing on the effects of Outward Bound programmes, at the Australian National University in 1994. From 1999 to 2001 he lectured at the University of Canberra and the Australian National University, specializing in research methods and personality and developmental psychology. In 2001 he moved to the United States to work in the Department of Kinesiology at the University of New Hampshire, where he taught research and professional literature topics in the graduate programme and outdoor education philosophy and methods in the undergraduate programme. Having returned to Australia in 2003 to concentrate on his thesis for a Ph.D. in Education, James took up full-time work at the University of Canberra this year. There are some 40 published papers to his name since the mid-1990's, and he is the webmaster for *Wilderness*, and has edited the *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, *Scisco Concientia*, the *Adventure Therapy Newsletter* and *OzBound*. James provides research consultancy in design and conduct of programme evaluations and programme evaluation tools, research statistics and report writing, and outdoor education staff training.

James Neill and his wife and family are themselves outdoor enthusiasts.

He is Australia's leading researcher into Outdoor Education. ■

Our third issue

This issue marks the conclusion of Outdoor Outlook's first year and of the twenty-first year of the Outdoor Education Group. OEG is proud to be the largest provider of Outdoor Education to schools in Australia. With more than 78 partner schools, OEG's more than 200 staff have served over 20,000 young people during 2005. Through its link with Swinburne University it also has played an important role in the training of outdoor educators and will continue to do so. We are privileged to operate under the gracious patronage of His Excellency the Governor-General of Australia, Major-General Michael Jeffery AC, CVO, MC. Our readers are the educational leaders of schools and school systems around Australia.

The rule is that one should not discuss religion or politics at a dinner party! Fortunately we are free to ignore that rule, and the leading article in this issue examines the question of spirituality and its place in education, especially in the outdoors. The article on the Victorian Education and Training Reform Bill may be seen as trespassing on the domain of politics, but it raises important issues not only for Victorian schools, but for schools throughout Australia, as well as for providers of co-curricular activities, not least outdoor educators. Our aim is to stimulate discussion on educational matters, and we trust that you will find that Outdoor Outlook does exactly that.

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