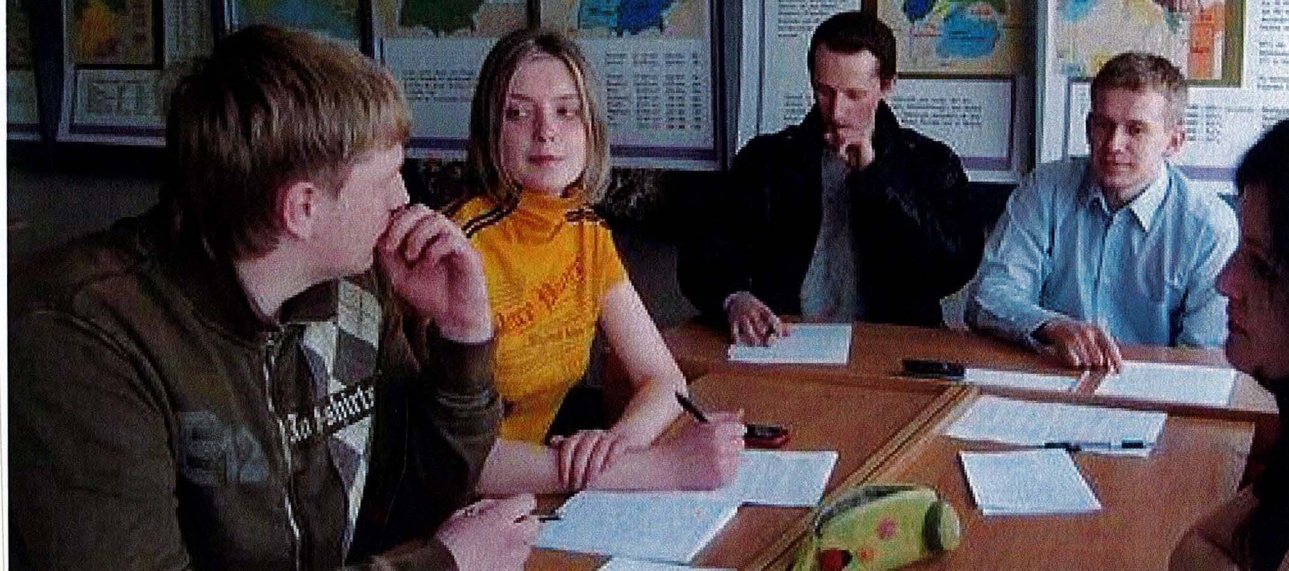




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# Taking Holistic Education Seriously

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*This paper shows how schools influence the ways young people develop relationships with themselves and their friends, on how they develop a commitment to the wider society, the natural environment and religious faith. Based on surveys in 29 Catholic schools in four dioceses in two States, it suggests ways in which schools can measure and assess their influence.*

*This paper will help schools which participated in the Putting Life Together 2011 surveys to reflect on the impact they have on the lives of their students. It invites other schools which have not done such surveys to consider the influence they have on the development of their students' relationships with themselves, close others, the wider society, the natural environment and with God.*

Cover photo by Nagora.



## Assessment and Holistic Education

There is an important period of reflection for both students and schools at the end of the school year. Students look at their examination results and wonder if they have done well enough to go on to the next stage in their lives: perhaps another year level, perhaps into university, perhaps into a job. Schools consider how well they have done in preparing them. The focus for much of the thinking of both students and schools are the academic results. Have the students mastered the content, the concepts, and the skills which enable them to perform well in English, mathematics, science and social studies examinations?

These subjects are certainly important. Having a high level of skill in literacy and numeracy, for example, is fundamental to getting a good job and functioning well in our increasingly complex society. Having the cognitive skills to understand the world in which we live is an important indicator of the ability to learn the skills for a specific occupation.

Certainly the data suggests that those who are able to go far in their formal education are able to get more interesting and well-paying positions in society. Higher educational qualifications open up further possibilities. Those who succeed in their education thrive in many ways.

Nevertheless, knowledge and cognitive skills are not the only factors in functioning well in society and finding fulfilment in life. Many able students do not find a place in society or fulfilment in life. At the same time, many students who do not function so well academically find they can make a contribution and experience high levels of fulfilment.

### The Surveys

In 2011, 29 Catholic schools participated in the survey program 'Putting Life Together 2011'. These surveys explored some of the other aspects of the lives of students and the ways in which schools had contributed to those aspects. More than 4000 students completed surveys, providing some overall perspectives on young people today and specific feedback for the participating schools.

The students ranged from Year 6 to Year 12. Schools were encouraged to organise for a range of year levels to do the survey and in most schools, students from three different year levels participated. Schools were encouraged

to arrange for whole classes to do the survey so that there would not be any particular bias in the range of students who participated. While parents were informed of the research and had the opportunity to withdraw their children from it, no parents took that step. Surveys were completed anonymously on the Internet.

### Factors Contributing to Life Satisfaction

An examination of the Putting Life Together 2011 surveys shows that there are three groups of factors which contribute strongly to life satisfaction as shown in Figure 1:

- strong relationships in which the person feels they belong;
- a sense of what the questionnaire called a 'great scheme of things' in relation to which one can make a contribution; and
- confidence in one's capacity to make a contribution to those relationships and in the 'great scheme of things'.

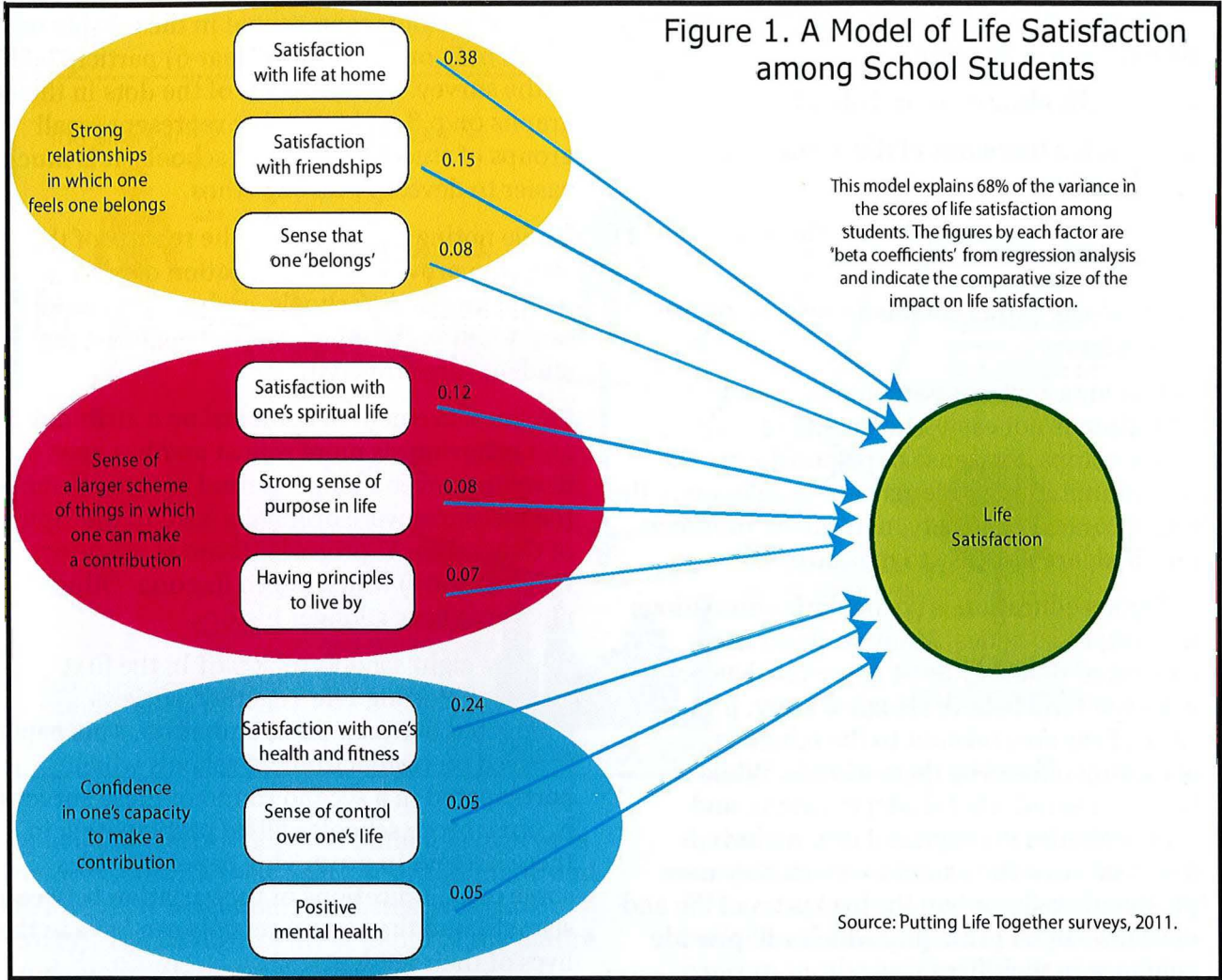
The most important contributor to personal fulfilment is personal relationships. People who have good relationships at home, who feel they are accepted and have a place where they can contribute, experience much higher levels of satisfaction with life. Relationships with friends and the general sense that one 'belongs' are also important.

In relationships with family and friends, people not only enjoy the support of others but find a sense of their own worth. They find satisfaction in the way others recognise their worth as individuals and find they have the capacity to contribute to the lives of others.

Having a sense that there is a 'great scheme of things' in which one has a place and a purpose also contributes strongly to life satisfaction. This occurs in the understanding of and contribution to the wider society and the natural world. Religion and spirituality play a role here, because they provide a narrative about a larger context. Religions offer people a 'world view' and the chance to see themselves as making a contribution which has significance in that larger context. But religion is just one way in which this occurs. Other people have a philosophy of life which enables them to see themselves as making a contribution. Some feel they are able to make such a contribution through commitment to the environment or social justice.

As shown in Figure 1, a third set of factors in life





satisfaction has to do with one's confidence in one's ability to make a contribution. Satisfaction with one's health and fitness is one part of this, along with one's sense of control over life. Positive mental health and a sense of optimism in life also contribute.

Analysis of the Putting Life Together Surveys found that when all three sets of factors were taken into account, how well students were doing at school made comparatively little difference to their levels of satisfaction in life. The quality of one's relationships, one's sense of a great scheme of things and one's confidence in making a contribution are much more important factors.

While satisfaction with life at home is the most influential factor in life satisfaction, as shown in Figure 1, schools make a big contribution to the overall level of satisfaction with life. Schools certainly help students to develop an understanding of society and the wider world. In conscious or unconscious ways, schools contribute to the capacity of young people to develop fulfilling relationships with peers and with adults beyond the family. Within the school, students begin to sense and experience

what contribution they can make to others and in what ways they can contribute to the bigger scheme of things. Schools can help young people to develop interests and find passions to which they can commit themselves. We shall explore some of these ways later in the paper.

Schools systematically prepare students for examinations. They take seriously the results that their students achieve in public examinations such as the VCE and HSC. While the results reflect students' innate abilities, they also reflect the influence of the school. Hence, teachers examine the results and look at areas in which they need to achieve better. However, not all schools take as seriously how they are performing in relationship to holistic education: the education of the heart and the spirit, in relation to the sense of purpose, to the ability to build and maintain fulfilling relationships, to the sense of making a contribution to the wider world.

Evaluation in Holistic Education

If schools are serious about the holistic nature of education that is necessary to prepare students for life beyond school, then they need to be serious about the evaluation of success in



such preparations. There is a well acknowledged path to such evaluation:

1. Identify clear aims and objectives;
2. Develop measures of those aims and objectives;
3. Conduct assessment using those measures; and
4. Evaluate achievements in relation to the evidence.

Conducting such assessments in holistic education is not easy. The quality of relationships, the sense of responsibility and the commitment students have in relation to the larger context of society, natural environment and God, are not easy to measure.

Religious education is particularly contentious in Western societies. Many students are convinced that they must choose for themselves what they will believe (Hughes 2007, p. 127). Many are resistant to the religious education offered by their schools. While we have measured what students believe and their attitudes to religious faith, we have also measured the extent to which they have personally reflected on the big issues of life and have developed principles which will provide guidance in their lives.

The measures of the extent to which schools are encouraging students to believe in themselves, to develop friendships, to be good citizens, and to develop religious faith are particularly weak. In the limited context of this study, we have had to rely on the reports of the students. The extent to which students report the school's encouragement reflects, to some extent, the students' own openness to that encouragement. We have also used some other measures, such as the extent to which students are involved in school social justice groups, which are a little more robust.

Schools are partially a product of the students who attend them. Hence, the background of the students in terms of the quality of lives of their families, the education and socio-economic status of their parents, the ethnic background of the students are all major factors which affect the nature of quality of the relationships that are discussed in this paper. Hence, the measurements reported here are not simply products of what the school is doing, but the attitudes students bring to the school from home and community.

It should also be noted that there are a few

primary schools represented in the sample in which only one year level (year 6) participated in the survey. Hence, some of the dots in the graphs on p.8 and following represent small groups of students. In small schools, it is much easier to develop a strong ethos.

While noting these factors, the reports of the students provide some indication of what is happening in the schools, and perhaps more importantly, the ethos of the school that the students are attuned to.

The measurement of students' own attitudes and behaviour is more robust and has been developed over a longer period of time. Some of the measures were originally used in the 'Spirit of Generation Y' project (Mason et al., 2007; Hughes 2007) which began in 2002. Other measures have a longer history.

Twenty-eight schools took part in the first round of 'Putting Life Together' surveys conducted between 2004 and 2008. This paper is based on results from 29 schools which participated in a second round of these surveys in 2011. More schools will be participating in these surveys in 2012. This paper provides some brief indications of the variation between schools, and the impact schools can have in the lives of their students.

## The Dimensions of Holistic Education

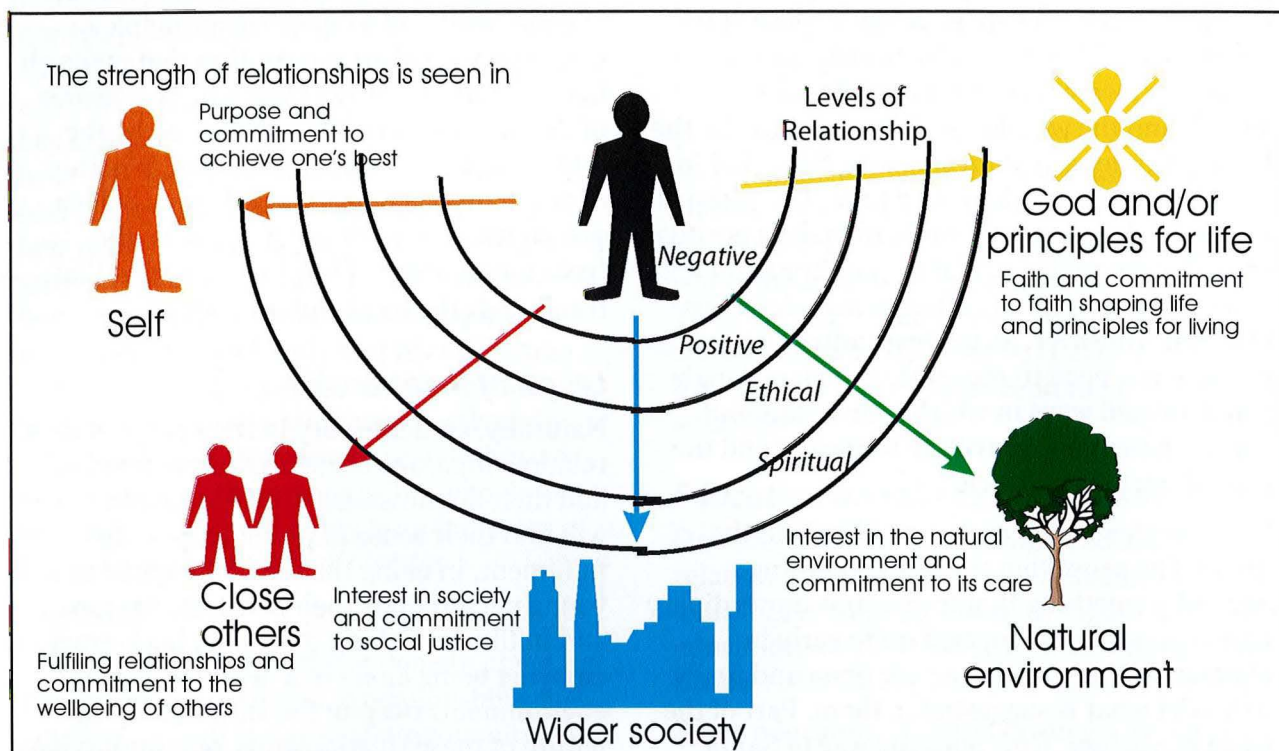
### *Five Relationships*

At the heart of life are five fundamental relationships, with self, close others, wider society, natural environment and with God or principles of life as illustrated in Figure 2. While there are various conceptions of holistic education, many people see it in terms of developing the capacity for and the quality of these relationships (see Hughes 2011; De Souza 2009). The 1999 Adelaide Statement of the goals of education adopted by Australian Federal and State ministers of education (Hughes 2007, p.32) endorsed education as the development of the sense of self as a basis for relationships with close others and the wider society. It also spoke of education as developing concern for the natural environment and as developing the capacity 'to make sense of the world'.

The aspiration of life in terms of these relationships is found in the major world religions. For example, four of them are referred



Figure 2. The Five Basic Relationships in Life



to in Jesus' instruction that human beings were to love God with their heart, soul and mind, and to love their neighbours as themselves (Luke 10:27). The essence of life is found in the nature and quality of these relationships.

These relationships are:

1. **With the self** — how people feel about themselves, the responsibility they take for their lives, their desire to find fulfilment within themselves and, when beset by challenges that threaten their inner equilibrium, their ability to return to that state of equilibrium. This relationship is displayed in people's confidence in themselves, their sense of purpose, and their commitment to personal excellence.
2. **With close others** — firstly the family, and then increasingly through the years of schooling, their friends; their ability to relate in a positive way, both giving and receiving in these relationships, taking some responsibility for the wellbeing of others and mindful of the impact that their actions have on others.
3. **With the wider society** — the willingness to make a contribution to the wider society, not just in return for the financial rewards one may receive from so doing, but for the benefit of the wider society. The relationship with the wider society expresses itself in the

desire for and in actions which contribute to a fair and just society, a society in which all have a place and the contribution of each individual is recognised. It is shown in the concern for the welfare of others in society.

4. **With the natural environment** — shown in the respect for and care of the natural environment. As we have become aware of the fragility of the natural environment and the impact human beings are having on it, so we have become increasingly aware of the need to respect and care for it. The natural environment is also a place in which human beings can find a sense of refreshment and renewal, a place where their spirits can be reinvigorated.
5. **With that which transcends the social and natural world** — which, for some people is expressed in religious faith. A relationship with God gives to the individual a place in an ultimate order of things, and provides an ultimate sense of purpose and identity. Religious and non-religious people may identify basic principles which provide guidance for life in a way which links them with a greater purpose which transcends their own lives and their immediate situations.

The young child entering school has some initial sense of themselves and of their family.



Through the school, their sense of others and their ability to interact positively with others develop. In those primary years, a sense of the natural world and the wider society grows. While the awareness of the complexity of society and the wonder of the natural world, the basic attitudes are often set early, the detail in understanding develops over time. The sense of curiosity, the sense that one can make a positive contribution to the care of the environment and to a caring society, can often be seen in young children. However, as understanding deepens, so there is a need to recognise the increasingly sophisticated ways in which individuals and communities can contribute to society and the care of the natural world.

'God' language may or may not begin in the home. The sense that there is something beyond, something that transcends our ordinary experience, may be formed quite early in childhood. Young children are open and ready to accept what is suggested to them. Part of the issue is whether 'God' goes the way of Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, or whether there is a maturing of the understanding of 'God' that leads to an awareness of the mystery in the universe and in existence itself. Another part of the issue is whether this sense of the beyond leads to responsibility in playing a part in the ultimate mystery and order of the universe.

Other children have little sense of 'God' if the family does not use or endorse such language. This can certainly become a problem when the language of God is used in school. Some children simply accept the differences. Usually, the influence of the home predominates. Some children turn off or actively rebel against the use of 'God' language in the school. Passively or actively, they resist religious education and/or liturgies and prayers.

On the other hand, something of this transcendent order of things may be grasped through basic principles which provide guidance for life. With or without the teaching of religion, children come to see that compassion is a major key to a peaceful world in which all human beings may find fulfilment. Other major principles include the importance of the freedom of communication and, on the other hand, the responsibility for each individual to contribute according to their capacity to the wellbeing of all.

At the heart of contemporary Australian society is the principle that all people should be treated equally and given an equal chance of contributing to society as a whole irrespective

of race and colour, religion or gender. People of high ability and people with disability are of equal worth as people. The principle of democracy involves recognition that while all have a right to express their will, the desires of the individual must be tempered by the interests of the whole community. Whether or not young people adopt religious beliefs, principles such as these can provide the basis for an order of life and wellbeing that transcends the local and immediate.

### *Levels of Relationship*

Naturally, students vary in the nature of these relationships, according to their personalities and their circumstances. One young extrovert will find their sense of pleasure, perhaps even fulfilment, in being the life of the party. Another young person finds their sense of pleasure and fulfilment fishing on a quiet back-creek, enjoying being alone in a beautiful natural environment. Despite the variation in the nature of these relationships, our studies have indicated that some general 'levels' can be identified (Hughes 2007, p.28ff).

#### **Negative Level**

In each of the five major relationships, some young people have negative attitudes. Some young people do not feel good about themselves, and some say they are hurting deep inside. There are some who find it hard to relate to others, either their family members or their friends. For one reason or another, the relationships are strained and unfulfilling. Some young people have little or no interest in the wider society. Indeed, some have told us that they avoid watching the news because it is just too unsettling for them. The wider society, they tell us, is a scary place. For others, that is true of the natural environment.

#### **Positive Level**

On the other hand, the majority of young people feel positively about all these relationships. They are positive about their own lives, even if there may be niggling negative feelings about their self image, their ability to do one thing or another, or occasional doubts about their capacity to make something of life. The majority of young people get on moderately well with their families and are able to make good friends. Most young people feel that society is a place of opportunity and an arena in which they can make some positive contribution and most enjoy the natural environment.



**Ethical Level**

In some young people, there is something more than just a positive feeling in these five relationships. The relationship is marked by a sense of responsibility and a recognition that they can be proactive in their contributions to these relationships. Many young people feel that, with some effort, they can work towards their personal best. Many recognise that by putting other people before their own interests, they can make a positive contribution to relationships with family and friends. Some young people have a sense of responsibility in relation to society and the natural world, recognising that they can make a difference, and seeing it as their responsibility to do so. This sense of responsibility is an indicator of an ethical level in these relationships.

**Spiritual Level**

While there is a transcendent domain, there is a spiritual level in all forms of relationship which is evident in deep and passionate commitment. Some young people develop a deep sense of commitment in their lives. Some are deeply focussed and committed to achieving their personal best, to being all they can be. The level of commitment many young people have to their friends goes beyond all sense of duty. While sometimes that level of commitment is motivated by the deep desire to be part of a community of people who accept them, and sometimes out of a deep desire to be recognised, at other times the commitment is deeply rooted in a desire for the wellbeing of others. Some young people are deeply committed to wanting a just and fair society or to the protection of the natural environment. They have a deep passion that demonstrates itself in participating in social action or environmental groups.

*Levels of Relationship with the Transcendent*

Those same stages are evident in relation to God or principles of life. Some young people have little sense of God or principles of life. Indeed, they may be quite antagonistic to either. They have no recognition of an order which transcends their interests and needs, and which may even transcend the interests and needs of the society in which they live. On the other hand, other young people are

positive about God, or about principles of life, but take neither seriously. They assume that God is there, but they fail to apply that understanding to how they live or fail to live by the principles of life which provide daily guidance.

Other young people display signs of responsibility in their relationship with God and/or with principles of life. They take their relationships seriously. They recognise some obligations in these relationships. Then there are other young people who are deeply committed, either to God or to living by principles which transcend the immediate situation.

*Education and the Levels of Relationship*

One can visualise something of a ladder in relation to each of these relationships with four identifiable steps as shown in Figure 3. Holistic education may be conceived as assisting young people to climb the ladder in each relationship.

Some education involves dealing with negative relationships. Sometimes that happens in the classroom, through the influence of the teacher and through the assistance of peers. At other times it happens in the counsellor's office.

For those at a positive level in their relationships, the task of education is to encourage young people to understand and adopt ethical responsibilities. It is a matter of assisting them to become pro-active in those relationships, in seeing what they can do through their personal efforts to contributing to those relationships.

The spiritual level in the relationships cannot be taught. One cannot teach another person to be committed, because commitment is a matter of the heart. While a person's actions may suggest commitment, only when the commitment is deeply rooted within the self is it authentic.

Schools, parents, churches and communities may point to examples of such commitment. They may encourage people to consider commitment and invite people into activities which display commitment. When that commitment is adopted by the young person as their own, when it is demonstrated irrespective of other forces that may encourage its outward display, then the young person has reached a spiritual level in that relationship.





## Initial Results

### *How Young People Think of Themselves*

The surveys completed by 4000 students in the Putting Life Together Project 2011 show that around one in three students is not sure what life is about or what he or she has to contribute. Half of these students (16% of the total sample) say they are hurting deep inside and nothing seems to help. In the 29 schools surveyed, the proportion of students hurting deeply ranged from 7 per cent to 22 per cent as can be seen Figure 4 below.

Often the root of the hurt is in the home, in poor relationships with parents or poor relationships between the parents. In some cases, the problems lie in the fact that their families have immigrated to Australia recently and these young people do not know how to resolve the differences in values and behaviour between the Australian culture and that of their families.

While the cause of the problems often lies outside the school, some schools are better than others in providing an environment which helps students to overcome the hurt and to believe in themselves. Figure 4 shows that in schools which

helped students to believe in themselves, fewer students indicated that they were hurting.

Some schools do this better than others, as shown in Figure 4. In one or two schools nearly 90 per cent of students said that the school had helped them to believe in themselves, compared with another school in which only 50 per cent of students responded this way. In most schools, between 55 and 75 per cent of students affirmed their school helped them to believe in themselves.

The proportion of students in a school 'hurting inside' is usually partly a result of the background of the students and the homes from which they come. It is unlikely that students who are hurting will say that their school helps them to believe in themselves. Hence, the relationship pictured in Figure 4 (and in all the graphs) represents a complex set of interactions and does not demonstrate a simple causal relationship.

Nevertheless, it suggests that schools can help students to believe in themselves and that students value this in their schools.

The surveys suggest several ways in which schools help students to believe in themselves.

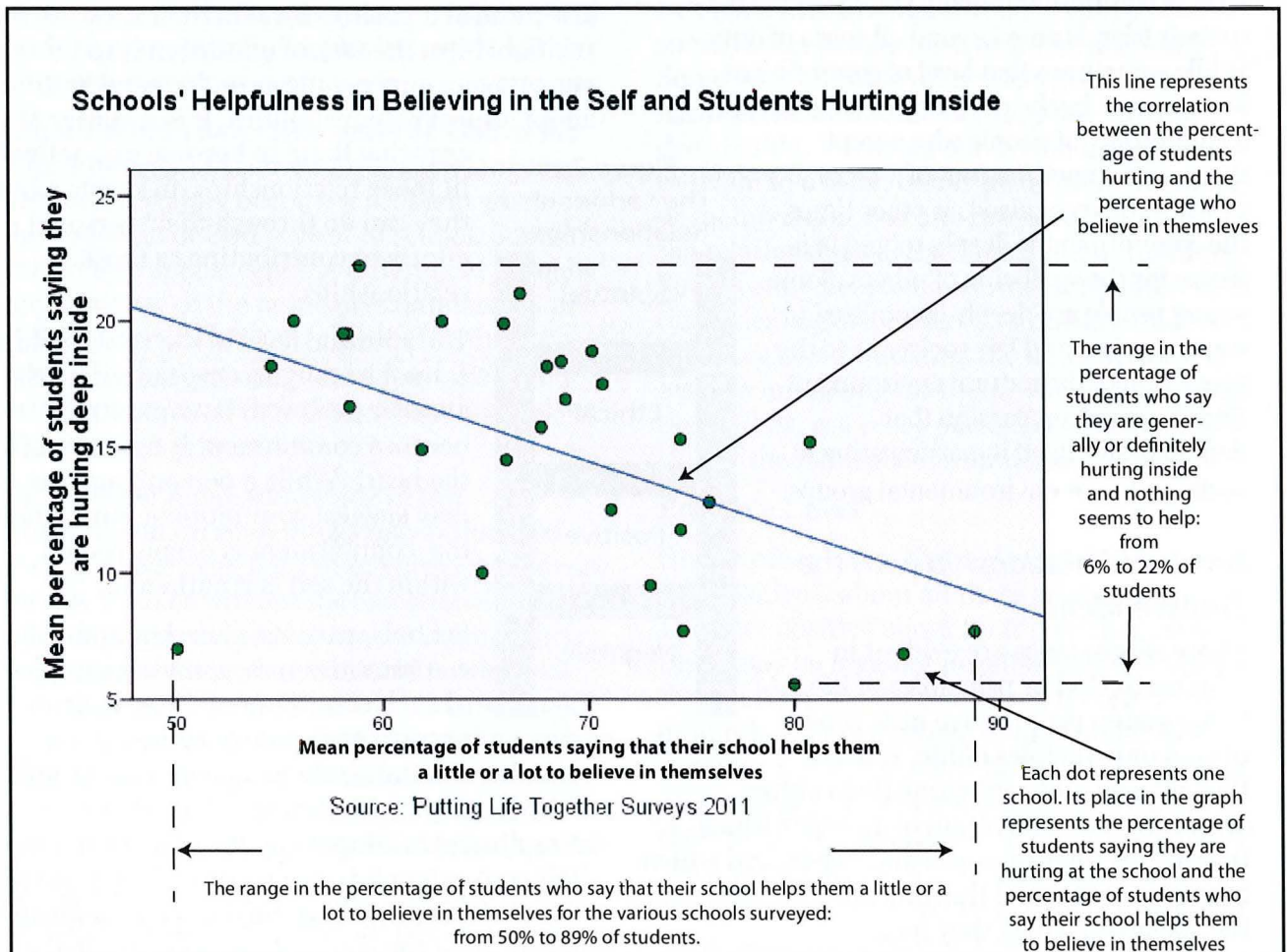


Figure 4.



Of fundamental importance is the way that schools value the worth of each individual student, irrespective of their academic or sporting performance.

Another factor revealed by these studies was the importance of students being respected by their peers. The development of an ethos in the school in which students feel their peers both listen to and respect their feelings contributes significantly to students believing in themselves.

The surveys suggest that schools vary significantly in the extent to which they had developed this ethos of respect. In one school, just 18 per cent of students said their opinions were respected by other students. At the other end of the spectrum, in another school, 76 per cent of students affirmed that they were respected.

Between 2005 and 2011 there was little change in the proportion of students hurting inside. However, in another measure of students' feelings about their own lives, the confidence that they had about their lives having a purpose, there was a significant change. In 2005, 82 per cent of students said their lives had a strong sense of purpose compared with just 69 per cent in 2011. The factors contributing to this decline in sense of confidence warrant further investigation.

*How Young People Think of Close Others*

Most young Australians place great importance on finding a group of friends on whom they can rely and to whom they can turn for support, and are positive about the friendships they make. Across the sample of 4000 students, 5 per cent said their friendships were not satisfactory, and another 22 per cent that their friendships were moderately satisfactory. The remaining 73 per cent reported that they were highly satisfied with their friends.

Many students (46%) reported that their schools had helped them a lot in developing deep

friendships. Another 29 per cent of students said their schools had helped them a little. However, as shown in Figure 5, schools varied considerably in the extent to which students felt their schools had an impact: from 28 per cent to 82 per cent of students affirming the school's role in helping them a lot to develop strong friendships.

Figure 5 also shows that in schools where more students affirmed the school's role in developing friendships, more students reported that they were highly satisfied with their friends. Figure 5 shows that in a couple of schools, just 55 per cent of students affirmed that they were highly satisfied with their friends, while in other schools, up to 88 per cent indicated they were highly satisfied.

Some schools do better than others in creating a friendly atmosphere. Overall, 20 per cent of students said their schools were definitely friendly and another 44 per cent of students said they were generally friendly places. Again, the differences between schools were quite striking from just 6 per cent of students describing their schools as definitely friendly to 46 per cent describing their schools that way.

The proportion of students describing their schools as friendly fell between 2005 and 2011 from 76 per cent to 64 per cent.

The friendly atmosphere is directly related to the level of trust that students have in their classmates. In schools with high levels of

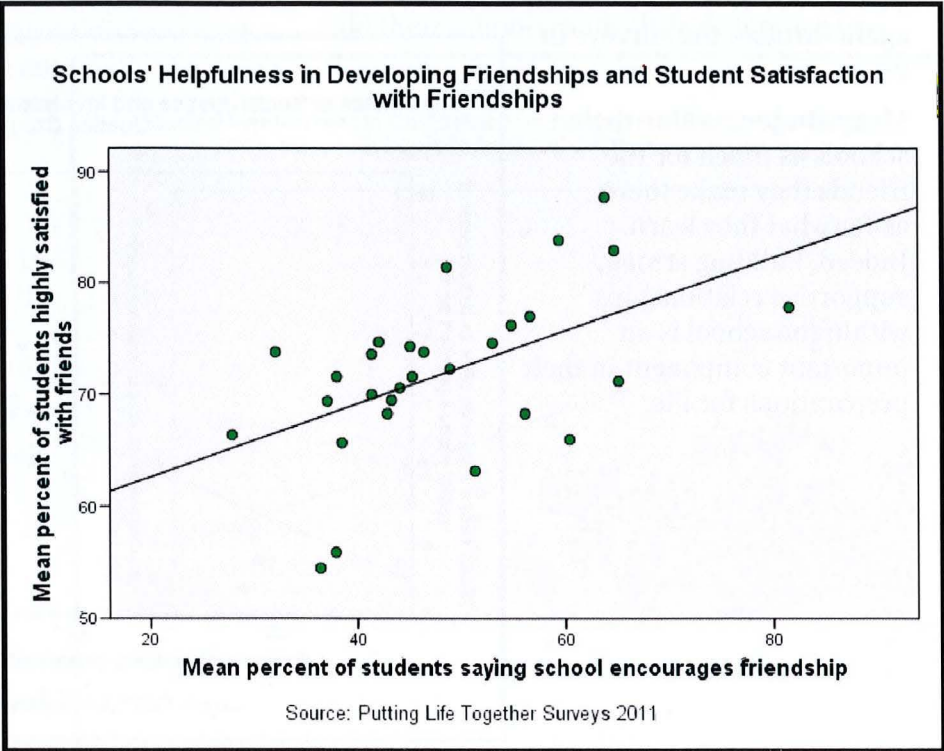


Figure 5.



trust among students in the classroom, high proportions of students said they were satisfied with their friendships.

The surveys suggested that another way in which schools contribute to building trust and a friendly atmosphere is through their emphasis on students helping others.

The surveys asked students to rate the importance of the value of helpfulness on a scale from 1 to 10, in the context of rating a range of values. Across the 4000 students, the average score was 8.1. In the set of 10 values, 'helpfulness' received the 4th highest rating, following family, friends and excitement.

However, the rating of helpfulness as a value varied significantly in the participating schools, from 7.1 to 9.0. In schools with a higher average score for the importance of helpfulness, higher proportions of students affirmed the school's role in developing friendships.

Frequently, students have spoken of the role of camps and retreats in providing the opportunity and the encouragement to build strong relationships with each other. This was affirmed again through the surveys in 2011.

Many students value their schools as much for the friends they make there as for what they learn. Indeed, building strong, supportive relationships within the school is an important component in their preparations for life.

### *How Young People Think of the Wider Society*

Of the students we surveyed in 2011,

- 45% said social justice was very important,
- 41% that it was moderately important, and
- 14% that it had little importance.

Developing a sense of social justice is often thought of as developing a society that gives people a fair go. In particular, it is a society which gives those who start with a disadvantage an opportunity to make something of life.

Many students indicated that they were not very

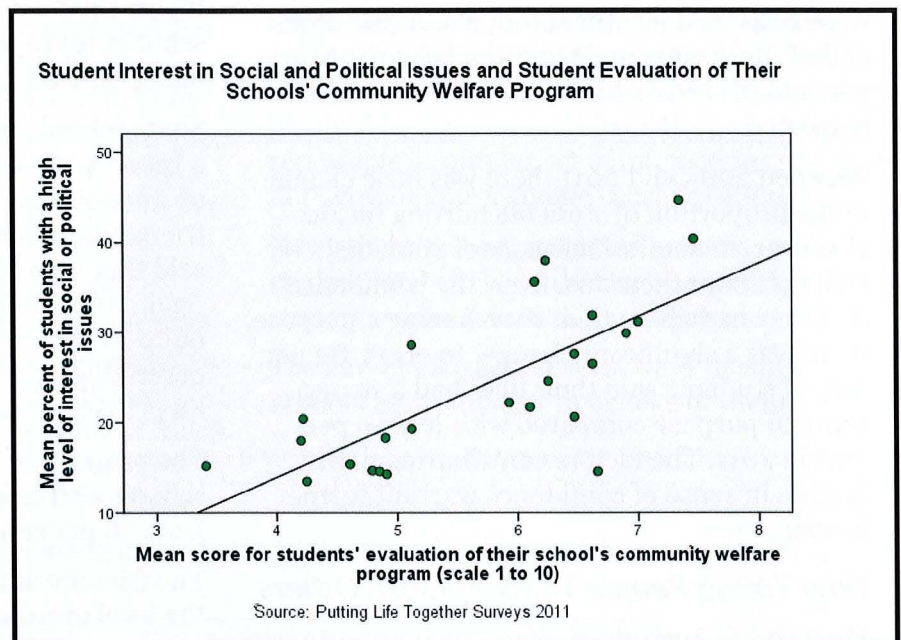


Figure 6.

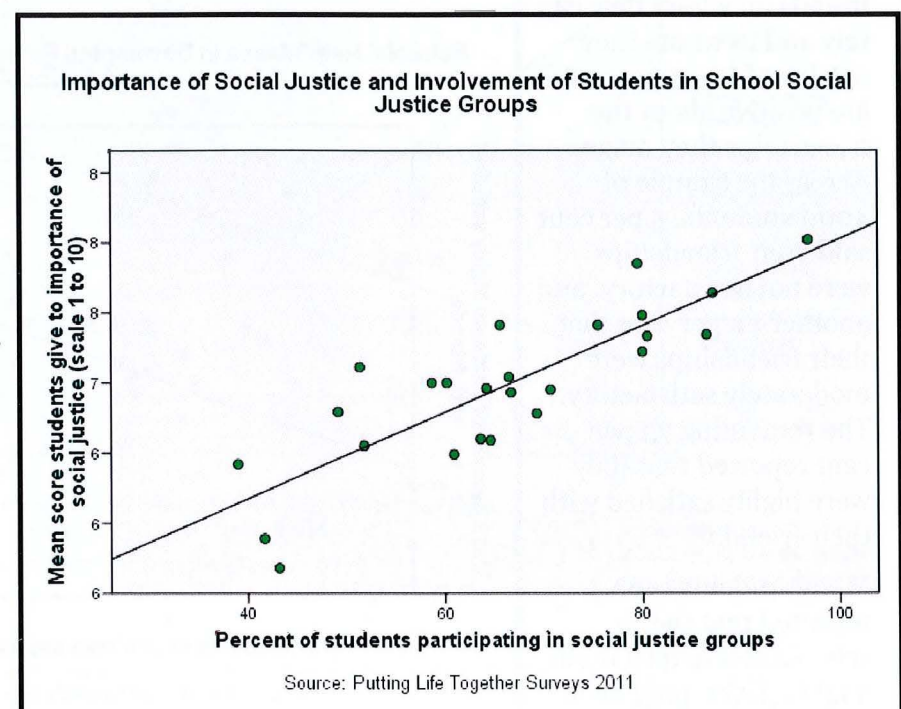


Figure 7.



interested in social or political matters:

- 24% had a strong interest,
- 41% moderate interest, and
- 35% little interest.

Over recent years that level of interest has fallen a little. In 2005, 33 per cent of students said they had a strong interest in social and political matters, and just 27 per cent said they had little interest. Nevertheless, the responses to the surveys indicate that students talked more about such issues with their friends in 2011 than students did in 2005.

Interest comes partly through understanding and partly through the opportunity to make a contribution. As students better understand the society in which they live, so they are more likely to be interested in it, and feel empowered to contribute to it. Schools' community service and social justice programs contribute both to the value that students place on social justice and, even more, to their level of interest in social and political matters.

Community service programs are not easy programs for schools to run successfully. Overall, of the students surveyed, just 28 per cent strongly affirmed the community service program in the school. The large variation between schools is illustrated in Figure 6 which shows the average score for the community service program in each participating school. One school had an average score of 3.4 out of 10. Nine schools had a mean score of less than 5. At the other end of a spectrum was a school with an average score of 7.5 out of 10.

However, comparison with 2005 data shows that the affirmation of community service programs has risen. In 2005, the average score for the school's community service program was 5.1 out of 10. In 2011, it was 5.5

Figure 6 shows that in schools where students strongly affirmed the community service program, more students were interested in political and social issues. While it is likely that such interest may have contributed to a greater appreciation for

the community service program, it is likely that it also works the other way around. A good community service program contributes to a higher level of interest in political and social issues. The proportion of students affirming that they had a strong interest in social or political issues varied from 13.5 per cent to 45.5 per cent as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 7 shows a similar relationship between the level of participation in social justice groups within the school and the importance given to social justice. The levels of participation in such groups varied greatly from one school to another: from 39 per cent to 97 per cent of students occasionally or frequently involved in social justice groups or activities within the school. Figure 7 shows that where more students were involved in such activities the average score for the importance of social justice was higher. (These mean scores were on a scale of 1 to 10).

Projects through which students are encouraged to contribute to others through giving and through fund-raising also contribute to building the valuing of social justice and to the levels of interest in social and political issues.

Overall, 24 per cent of students said their schools encouraged them a lot to be good citizens in society, with a variation from 12 per cent to 46 per cent in the various schools as shown in Figure 8. Across the schools, 35 per cent of students said their schools helped them a little. However, 42 per cent of students said their schools made little difference or

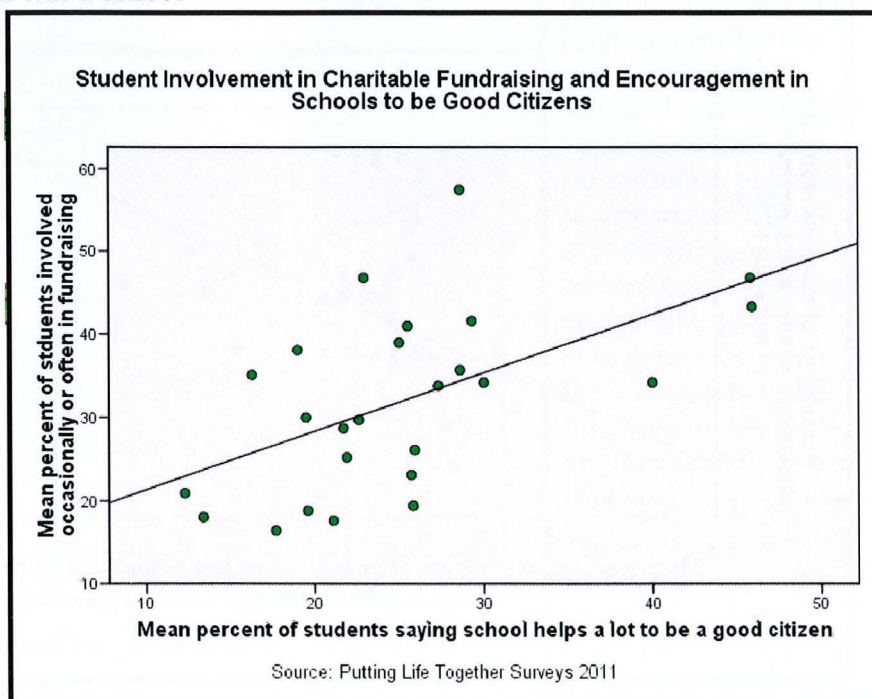


Figure 8.



discouraged them in being active citizens.

Figure 8 shows that, in those schools where more students affirmed that the school was helping them to be good citizens, more students were involved in fund-raising for charitable purposes occasionally or often.

Overall, 86 per cent of students said they had given to charity in the past year and 66 per cent said they had been involved in fund-raising. Again, there was large variation among the schools. The proportions who had given to charity varied from 75 per cent to 97 per cent of students. And the proportion who had been involved in fund-raising occasionally or often in the past year varied from 16 per cent to 58 per cent as shown in Figure 8.

Building an understanding of society among students is one thing. Developing the sense that people can make a difference to society is a further step. The latter is best achieved when students have the experience of making a difference. Community service programs, social justice action groups, and fund-raising for charitable purposes can all provide such experiences. Those experiences are most meaningful when students become aware of the consequences of their actions, when they see the impact that their activities are having.

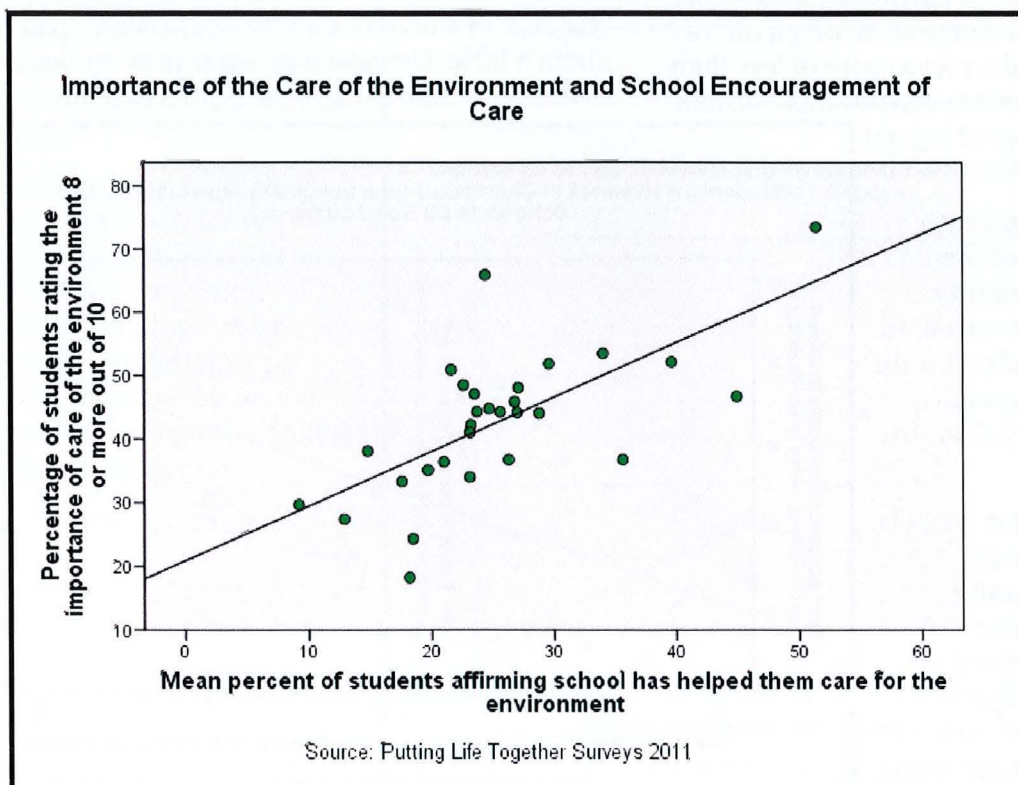
### *How Young People Think about the Natural Environment*

Attitudes to the natural environment correlate strongly with attitudes to social justice. Indeed, one of the reasons to care about the environment is because the failure to do so will have major consequences for human societies in the future. In the surveys conducted in 2011, students rated the importance of the environment in the following way:

- 42% as very important,
- 43% as moderately important, and
- 15% as of little or no importance.

This level of importance of the care of the environment has changed little over recent years. In 2005, 41 per cent of students rated its importance as high. In 2005, 26 per cent of students said they often or occasionally discussed environmental issues with their friends. In 2011, the rate was very similar with 27 per cent of students saying this was occasionally or often a topic of conversation.

However, schools varied greatly in the importance placed on the protection of the environment by the students. In one school just 18 per cent of students said the protection of the environment was very important, compared with 74 per cent of students at another school as shown in Figure 9.



Schools can have a considerable impact on how students view the care of the environment. About one quarter of the student population (26%) affirmed that the school had helped them a lot to care for the environment. As shown in Figure 9, this varied greatly among the schools: from 9 per cent to 51 per cent of students affirming their school's encouragement.

Figure 9.



There was a strong relationship between these two measures. In schools where more students said they were encouraged to care for the environment, more students affirmed that care as important. While it is likely that students concerned about the environment will be more open to the school's encouragement to care, it is likely that the relationship also works in the other direction.

It is salutary to note that in the sample of 4000 students, 38 per cent said that the school had made little difference or had discouraged them in their care for the environment.

Schools have an impact on student attitudes partly through teaching about the state of the environment and the global changes that are taking place. The Putting Life Together surveys did not ask specifically about environmental programs in the schools. However, if participation in social justice programs leads to greater concern about social justice, one would expect that environmental programs would have similar results.

Many students say they feel most spiritual in nature, either by the sea or in the bush. In 2005, 33 per cent of students affirmed the natural environment as the context in which they felt 'most spiritual'. While the overall interest in spirituality declined, in 2011, 34 per cent affirmed the natural environment as the context for their spirituality.

*How Young People Think about Religious Faith*

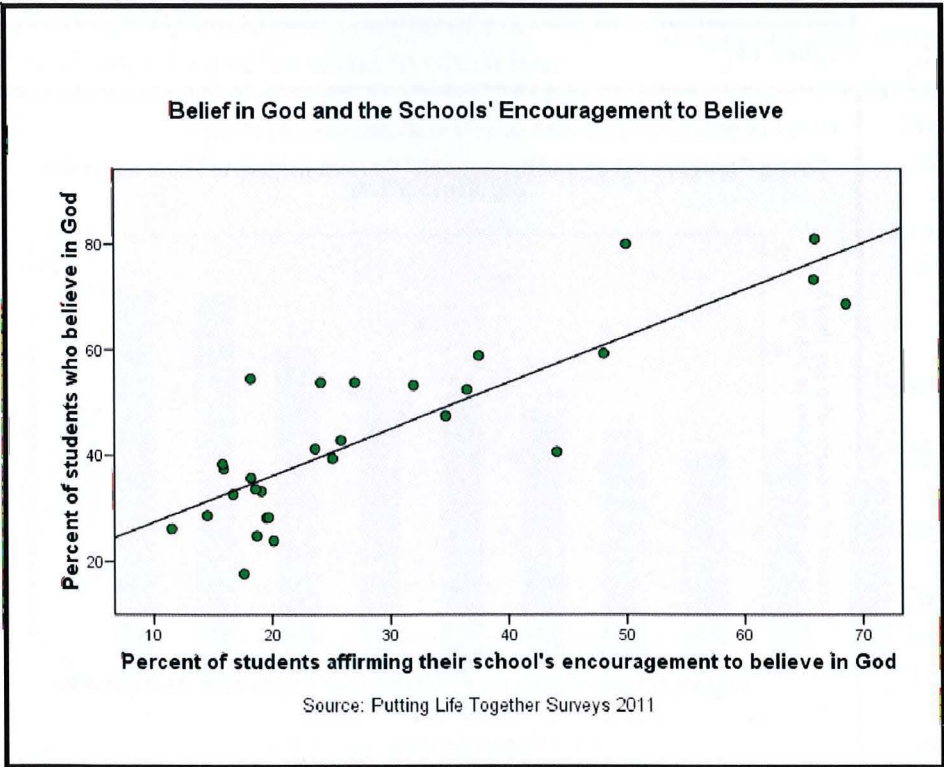
Students vary greatly in what they think about religious faith. Students were asked in the surveys about various ways in which religious faith was important to them. Overall,

- 34% said spirituality was of little or no importance;
- 39% that it was moderately important; and
- 27% that it was of high importance to them.

Since 2005, there has been a fall in the importance of religion which is reflected in the following measures.

Measures	2005	2011
Believe in a personal God	40%	38%
Pray frequently	28%	23%
Attend church monthly or more often	30%	25%
Definitely try to base their lives on the teachings and example of Jesus	13%	10%

The background of the students has a significant impact on the ways students think about spirituality and religion. Those students who have families with little interest or who are negative about it will often adopt those attitudes, whatever the school does.



Yet, the school can make a difference and there are very different levels of affirmation of religious faith in different schools. Figure 10, for example, shows the variation of belief in God across the 29 schools surveyed. In one school, just 18 per cent of the students said they believed in God, whereas, at the other end of the scale, in another school, 81 per cent said they believed. There was also a wide variation in the affirmation that the school encouraged the students to believe. As

Figure 10.



shown in Figure 10, at one school, just 12 per cent of students affirmed the school helped them to believe in God, whereas at the other end of the spectrum, 69 per cent of students said their school helped them to believe.

Schools also varied greatly in the extent to which their students attended church services. In one school, just 9 per cent of students said they attended monthly or more often. At the other extreme, there was a school in which 66 per cent of the students said they attended monthly or more. Most of the schools with high numbers of students attending church services were schools with high numbers of first or second generation immigrants. Thus, for many of these students, church attendance was part of the activities of their ethnic community.

Families have the greatest influence on whether young people attend church or not, although friends and the general cultural environment also play a part in forming attitudes. The school also has some impact. Figure 11 shows that students varied considerably in the extent to which they felt that their schools encouraged church attendance. In one school, just 7 per cent of students said they were strongly encouraged by the school, compared with 54 per cent of students at another school. Figure 11 shows that there is a relationship between the schools' encouragement and the practice of church attendance.

Students from church attending families are more likely to believe in God and attend church and will generally respond more positively to encouragements for their faith within the school. On the other hand, students with little interest in religious faith will often act negatively when they encounter it in the school.

Overall, 11 per cent of students (all of whom were in Catholic schools) said that the school discouraged them from attending church. Undoubtedly, this means that they reacted negatively to the form of encouragement they experienced.

How church schools respond to the many students who have negative attitudes towards religious faith is a major challenge. Many students feel negatively about the liturgies, prayers and religious services they experience at their schools. Out of the 4000 students, half rated the religious services as less than 5 out of 10 in terms of their helpfulness. Just 16 per cent of students rated them 8 or more out of 10.

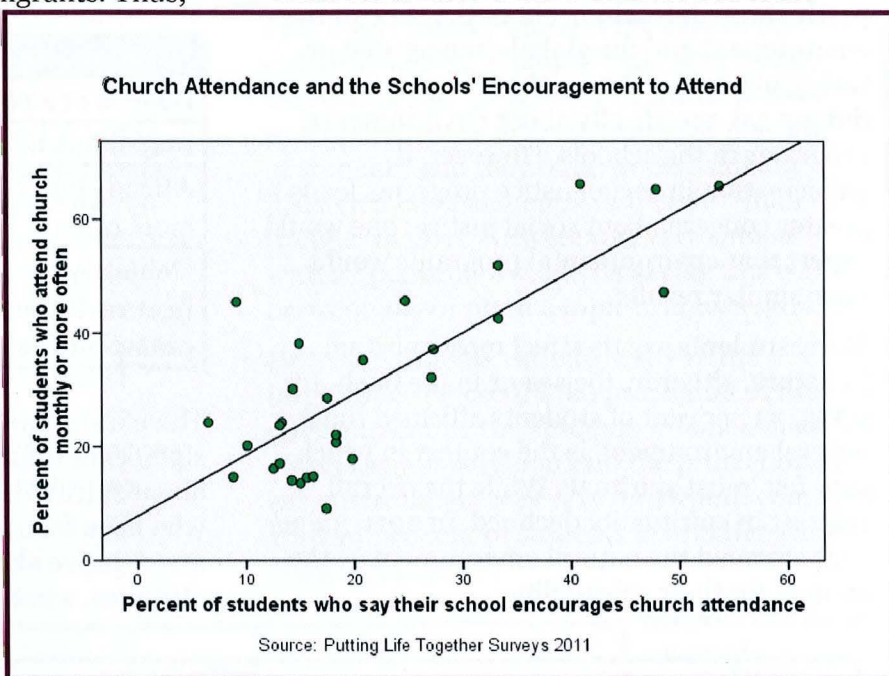


Figure 11.

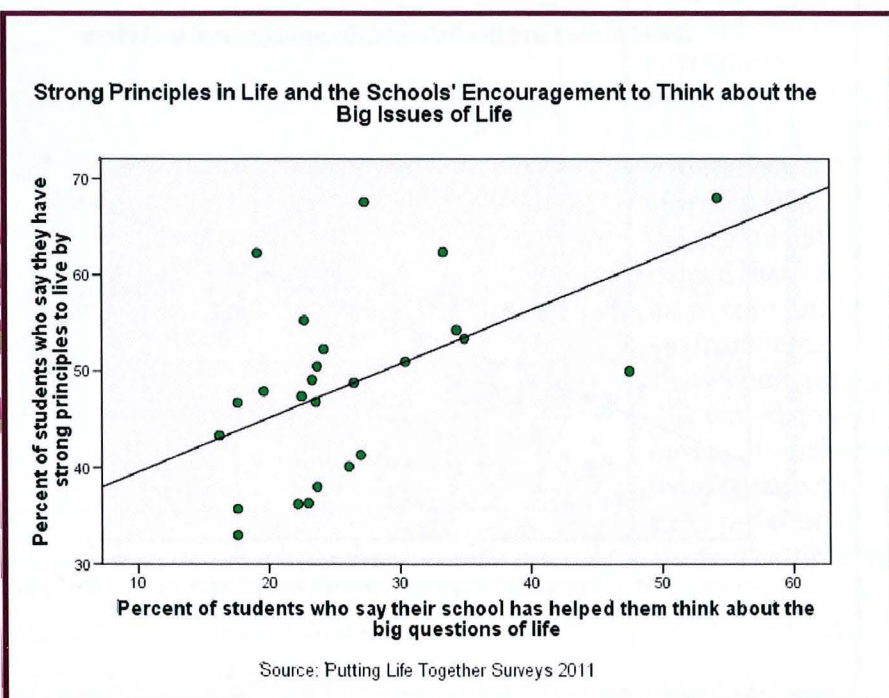


Figure 12.



Responses were very different in different schools: the average score for the helpfulness of the liturgies varied from 2.9 to 7.7. Where there was a higher regard for the school liturgies, more students affirmed the school’s encouragement to attend church.

Schools can also have a significant impact on the formation of principles for life among students. Schools varied from 33 per cent to 68 per cent of students affirming they had strong principles to guide how they lived. One way schools can encourage this is by helping students to think about the big questions of life, as shown in Figure 12. However, the spread of dots away from the line of 'best fit' shows that the relationship between the encouragement to think about the big questions of life and the formation of principles is relatively weak.

The Impact of Schools

When students are asked what has the most influence on their thinking about life, they most frequently point first to their families and secondly to their friends. The capacity for relationships, the values and principles they hold, and their sense of what life is about is formed firstly in the home.

However, school also has a huge impact on the lives of young people. Many of the relationships they first develop outside of the family are developed in the school. Not only are the basic skills of literacy and numeracy honed at school, but through their studies young people develop an understanding of the world in which they

live. They not only learn about society and the natural environment, but develop a sense of responsibility towards them, and a desire to contribute to justice and the protection of the environment. Their understanding of God may well be developed in the school, as are principles which guide them through life.

Figure 13 shows students’ ratings of various influences on how they thought about life. In many ways, schools act in these areas ‘unconsciously’. Students tell us that, although their learning in the school has a great impact on their thinking about life, so do the relationships that they have with the teachers. It is certainly not all about content and skills. Teachers can inspire or discourage. Teachers can follow the ‘twinkle in the eye’ of the student and develop passions, or discourage student interests. Teachers can build the belief in the self, or they can instill in students the notion that they have little to offer.

Students say that camps and retreats have a significant impact on how they think about life. Part of what they enjoy at camps and retreats is the opportunity to develop friendships with their fellow students. But there is also time within that environment to think a little more about what life is about.

Students in a class develop a ‘communal character’ over and above the sum of their individual characteristics. A few students who take their studies seriously can inspire the whole class. A few students who hold strongly to religious faith can encourage all students to

take it more seriously. To create the right ethos in a class means not just attending to individuals but to the dynamics of the class, the inter-relationships between the students.

Using the data from the Putting Life Together 2011 surveys, a

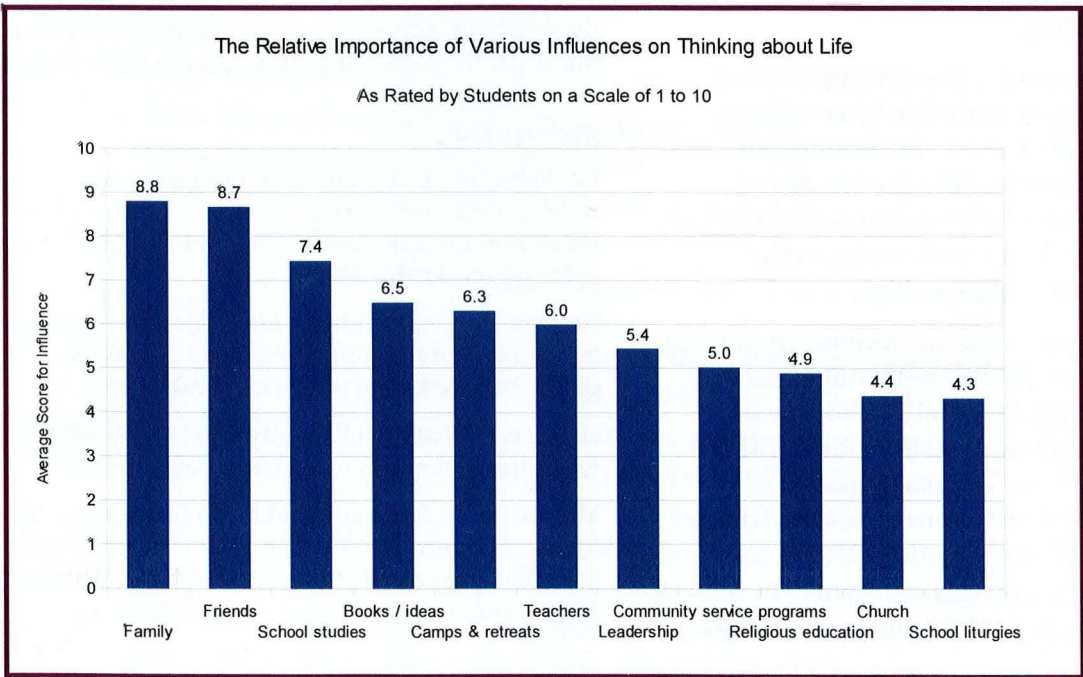


Figure 13.

Source: Putting Life Together Surveys 2011.



scale was created of student levels in the five areas of relationship with self, close others, wider society, natural environment and God or principles of life. Another scale was created of the impact students saw their school as having on those relationships. The average scores on each of these scales could then be plotted for each school as has been done in Figure 14.

Figure 14 shows that there is considerable variation between the schools in the mean scores of students in the aggregation of these five relationships. There is also considerable variation in the scores for the extent to which the school was seen as encouraging these relationships. However, the figure also shows that the two are closely related. While family and friends, personality and personal experience have a big impact on these five relationships, the school also is significantly related to the quality of these relationships.

### Making A Difference

This paper has outlined just a few of the areas in which schools can make a difference. Schools can help students to believe in themselves by their emphasis on the worth of each individual, and by building an ethos in which students respect each other.

Schools can encourage the development of mature and deep friendships by creating a friendly atmosphere and encouraging an atmosphere of trust within the classroom. The emphasis on helpfulness and cooperation within the school also contributes to the building of strong relationships.

Through their programs of community service and social action, as well as through teaching about the working of society, schools can encourage positive and responsible attitudes towards the society. The participation of students in social justice activities contributes to the valuing of social justice. Similarly, through teaching and through practical actions, schools encourage care for the environment.

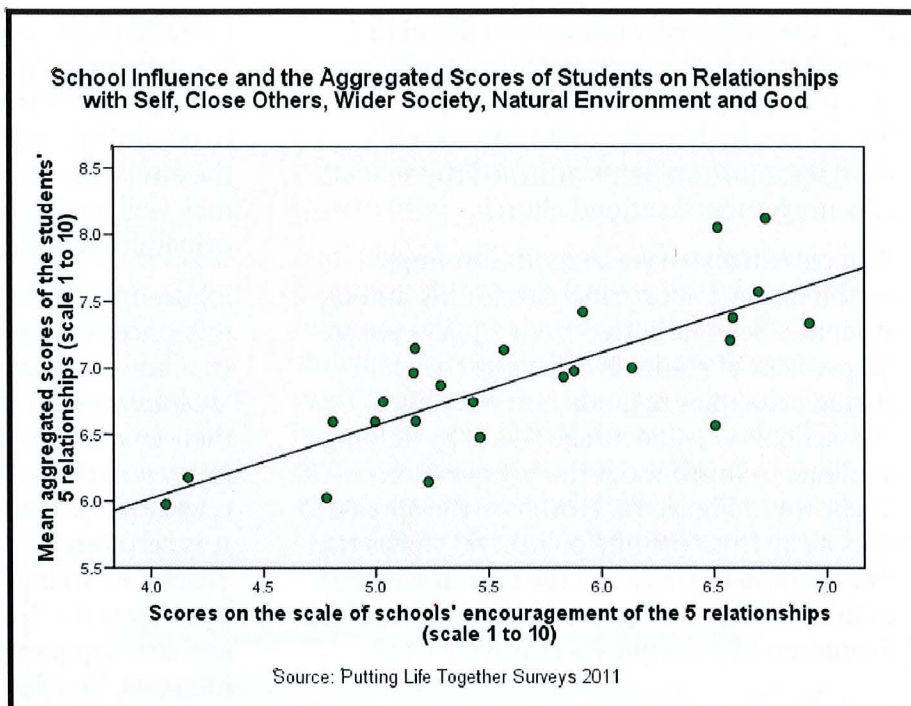


Figure 14.

In all of these activities, there are complex interactions between the schools and the students. Nowhere is this more apparent than in relation to religion. What some students find encouraging to their faith, other students report as discouraging. Finding ways of helping all students to see beyond their immediate interests to a transcendent God and/or principles for life remains a major challenge for Australian schools. Nevertheless, the surveys indicated that some schools are more successful than others in encouraging students to develop an appreciation of faith and a commitment to God.

The careful measurement of what is achieved will assist schools to act reflexively and responsibly. By so doing, schools can significantly enhance the ways they prepare students for their futures.

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