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Engaged Teaching and Learning

You are here: [Home](#) › [About](#) › [Remembering Our Founder](#) › Soul of Education

Soul of Education

The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion, and Character at School

by Rachael Kessler (ASCD, 2000)

“In *The Soul of Education*, Kessler celebrates the diversity of beliefs in our free country and does not advocate teaching dogma. But she wisely understands the spiritual emptiness of our times and knows that we ignore the souls of our children at their peril and ours. Children need encouragement and guidance in struggling with the deeper meaning and purpose of life in a society that glorifies the material over the spiritual.” ~ Marian Wright Edelman, President, The Children Defense Fund

“*The Soul of Education* offers an inspiring, hopeful, and much-needed antidote to the malaise that afflicts too many children...a practical, inclusive and sensitive guide for helping children connect with their spiritual yearnings.” ~ Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*

“I wish I would have had the information found in *The Soul of Education* during the twenty years I served in public education. I believe Rachael Kessler has found the missing links to educational reform. Public Education does have a soul.” ~ Forrest L. Turpen, Executive Director, Christian Educators Association International

“The examination of the quest for meaning among today’s adolescents is both daring and needed.” ~ Howard Gardner, author of *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*

Sample Chapters

- **Table of Contents**
- **Chapter One: Honoring Young Voices**
- **Conclusion: From Fear to Dialogue – From Standoff to Collaboration**

Student Questions

- Why am I here?
- Does my life have a purpose?
- How do I find it?
- How can I NOT be a cynic?
- I have been hurt so many times, I wonder if there is God.
- How does one trust oneself or believe in oneself?
- Why this emptiness in this world, in my heart?

These are a sampling of real questions posed by high school students involved in an innovative in-school program that integrates heart, spirit and community into academic learning. *The Soul of Education: Helping Students Find Connection, Compassion and Character* by Rachael Kessler (Published by Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development / May 2000 / traces the development of this program and addresses the many issues surrounding it. The story is told through the compelling experiences of dozens of adolescents from classrooms around the country.

The Soul of Education is also the story of Kessler’s passion to understand what feeds the spirit of young people and her mission to create curriculum, methodology and teacher development that serves that need.

Does a child’s soul have a place in the classroom? Educators and parents have struggled with this question for years. “We decided to exclude the spiritual dimension from education because we adults couldn’t agree on what ‘it’ was or how to teach ‘it,’” says Ms. Kessler. “Liberals fear that ‘fundamentalists’ will sue them as ‘new agers’ if they introduce a spiritual dimension into the classroom. Christians fear that secularists will paralyze their efforts to provide spiritual guidance to children in schools.

Collectively, we reached a standoff, and our children have been the losers.”

The Soul of Education tells how Kessler and her colleagues successfully addressed the question of the inner life in the classroom. After listening for many years to the adolescents in her classes, Kessler began to see a pattern. She calls this pattern “**The Seven Gateways**” to the soul of young people.”

1. The yearning for deep connection
2. The longing for silence and solitude
3. The search for meaning and purpose
4. The hunger for joy and delight
5. The creative drive
6. The urge for transcendence
7. The need for initiation

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

The Soul of Education also demonstrates how nurturing inner the life can lead to success in all areas of our children’s lives — academic, social, and civic. It will be appreciated on a number of levels:

- For parents and educators
- As a thoughtful, understanding guide to living with, loving and communicating with adolescents.
- As a hopeful template of how to develop successful group interactions with teens.
- For adolescents
- As inspirational examples of how these young people learned to turn these experiences into triumphs.
- For policymakers
- As a framework for understanding that the spiritual void is one of the root causes of school problems and as a tool for developing concrete, practical solutions for school and community.

We continue to ask ourselves why our children hate school, why there is so much

hopelessness, failure and violence in those institutions. With the publication of *The Soul of Education*, we have access to new patterns in education that may help make a difference.

Soul of Education Stories

Senior Passages in a Nebraska High School

“*There’s an adage about how a book tends to find you when you’re in most need of its message or lesson. It was the fall of 2002 and I was beginning my eighth year as a third grader teacher at Bryan Elementary in Lexington, Nebraska. Winds of Change might be the title of that year as I began to develop a restlessness and hunger for change and something more sustaining.*

*I once again picked up the book *The Soul of Education* by Rachael Kessler and began to reread it—this time with more intent and application. My sister Sarah had given me the book the previous Christmas. She had met Rachael at a book signing and purchased the book. Little did my sister know, nor I, how this particular book would alter my teaching career and life forever.*

As I read the book I noticed Rachael articulated very effectively a message about the necessity of nurturing the inner life of youth. Prior to reading the book, I had always wondered why we, in the teaching profession, had placed such a high emphasis on the intellectual development of students but little on simply “being human” or the emotional side or guidance of the ‘whole child’. My fragmented thoughts and understandings began to take form with the words Rachael shared, as it seemed to provide a specific language to address the social and emotional needs of youth.

Later that spring, the high school principal ‘ironically’ approached me and asked if I would consider transferring to the high school to develop the ninth grade academy that focused not only on academics but relationships. I only agreed to do it if I could also teach a class called Senior Passages.

Lexington, Nebraska has such rich diversity of students with recent immigrants blending in with generations of cultural heritages of European decent. In addition, there is a range of socio-economic levels, though most of our students come from experiences of poverty; poverty beyond finances and resources, but that which includes emotional and spiritual poverty. Thus it is rewarding to honor the stories and establish connections that support these youth in who they are

I have learned to honor the significance of story, the power of listening and to welcome silence, thus influencing the students and athletes I encounter to value similar traits. This has allowed me and my students to fully appreciate the elements involved with our lives whether painful or joyful, hidden or viewed, neglected or nurtured, vulnerable or secure. ~ Sam Jilka Lexington, Nebraska

Working with Indigenous Youth in Alaska

“ I was working on a statewide youth development initiative in Alaska, and I used PassageWorks’ insights to create and articulate the goals for “Alaska Faith Communities Concerned For Children.” This project, embedded within the state school board association, used the language of Kessler’s work to bring Alaskans, from diverse backgrounds, together to find ways to allow, and invite “spirit” into the school, and into our conversations with students. Kessler’s work has both freed and guided teachers to explore the deepest longings of Inupiak and Yupik Eskimo, Athabaskan, Aleut, Haida, and Tlingit Indian teens. I personally watched kids “light up” and connect to something deep and personal and transcendent inside themselves. I see this “Soul of Education” approach as the forerunner to the awakening of their virtue and compassion. Rachael compelled us to ask big questions, in meaningful ways. Questions like – What does it mean to accept that this is my life and I have responsibility for it? How do I know I am normal? What is normal? What is our purpose in life? Why do some people tire of life? And, it was within these, and other questions, that teens were able to discover themselves, and uncover meaning in their lives. ~ Derek Peterson, Youth Advocate (Alaska project)

Learning to See My Students in a New Way

“ I attended one of the early PassageWorks weekend workshops, and I’m not exaggerating when I say that what I learned there changed how I taught forever. Rachael Kessler’s quiet and gentle approach to making education real and heartfelt spoke to me and convinced me that what I had instinctively sensed all the years I had taught could become an intentional and purposeful way for me to do my every day work. I’ve learned to see my students as valuable and worthwhile people, to listen to them with an open heart, and to be willing to push them towards emotional and social responsibility and

maturity. Rachael gave me tools to help my students grow and become confident and capable young adults. Most importantly, Rachael has encouraged me to listen to my own heart and to my body and to seek health in every area of my life. ~ Colleen Conrad Ft. Collins, CO



The Legacy of Rachael Kessler

SOUL OF EDUCATION

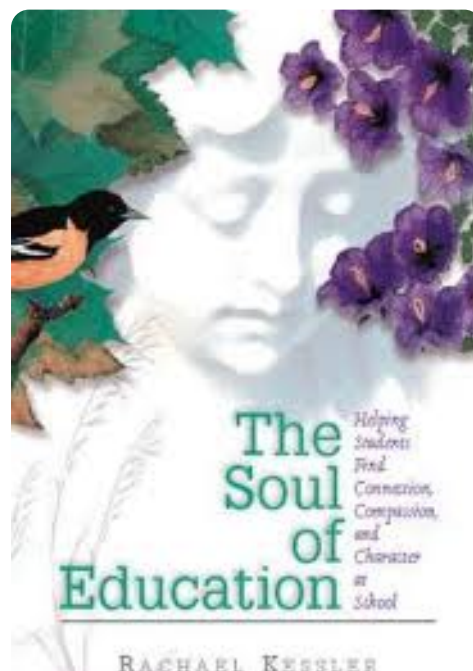
THE SEVEN GATEWAYS

PUBLICATIONS BY RACHAEL KESSLER

REMEMBERING RACHAEL KESSLER

"Rachael Kessler was a dear friend and greatly valued colleague in the movement to deepen, enrich and humanize education for students and teachers alike. She was caring, insightful, committed and courageous, and she had a beautiful soul. We miss you, Rachael -- may you rest in peace. And we hold you and your family in the Light as the journey, and the work, continue."

With love and gratitude, Parker Palmer



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