

### Education and Meaning in Life

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### Abstract and Keywords

This chapter explores the relation between education and meaning in life. People experience meaning in life when they (a) can make sense of their life and the(ir) world, (b) have purpose in life, and (c) experience significance and that they matter. The chapter describes how family life and parental upbringing, as well as students' participation in schools and teachers' education, can make positive and unique contributions to children's (future) meaning in life. It concludes that parents and teachers should open the complex world to help children find their way, present a meaning framework that provides a standpoint from which to evaluate what is significant while also giving sufficient freedom to engage with other views on the good life, and develop relationships with children that foster their feelings that they matter while at the same time instilling a desire and sense of responsibility to matter to others.

Keywords: upbringing, children, education, mattering, meaning in life, parent, purpose, significance, teacher, understanding

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## Introduction

HUMAN beings have the unique ability to give meaning to their lives. This is both a blessing and a curse, for it provides us with the opportunity to make something of our lives that is not predetermined by our nature, but it also gives us a (sensed) responsibility to do that well. This felt responsibility is, however, not alien or imposed. As stated by Viktor Frankl ([1946] 1985), we have a need to have meaning in life; without meaning, we will not be able to live a fully human life. We were therefore surprised to read that the inhabitants of the Netherlands are the most likely to say that their life has no meaning (Froese 2016, 62).<sup>1</sup> Paul Froese attributes this outcome to characteristics of our country that actually seem to be quite beneficial to people: 'The Netherlands is a highly modern and pluralistic country. It has a long history of liberalism and openness to new ideas, and it is currently one of the ten richest countries in the world. Secular, check. Wealthy, check. Open to newness, check. Seems like a perfect hot house for meaninglessness' (Froese

## Education and Meaning in Life

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2016, 62). We return to Froese's counter-intuitive depiction of our country in our discussion on upbringing in families and education in schools, although he does note a few pages later that specific groups indicated in the Gallup World Poll that they don't believe their life has an important purpose or meaning, namely elderly and poorer (p. 493) Dutch citizens, and suggests that they have special reasons for this evaluation, like relative deprivation (2016, 65).

We begin with a concise clarification of the meaning of 'meaning in life', as we understand it, which leads to an exploration of the ways in which education and the relationships between adults and children/youth can contribute to having meaning in life. The relation between education and meaning in life can be understood both as a constitutive and a contributive relation. In the first case, it is defended that whatever makes life meaningful also gives education its (ultimate) point (e.g. Allen 1991, 50; Puolimatka and Airaksinen 2001, 318). We adhere to the second view, namely that education plays an important role in (developing) meaning in life, but that meaning in life is not the final end or justification of education. It is among the various aims of education, which also include the acquisition of knowledge and skills and the socialization of the younger generation. The ultimate or final aim of education is, in our view, the dual, interrelated aim of the flourishing of human beings and the world.

## The Meaning of Meaning in Life

Meaning in life is investigated in both psychology and philosophy and there is much overlap in their understandings of the concept, although in both there is also diversity on (a) what 'meaning in life' means precisely or what constitutes meaning in life; (b) what can be regarded as (proper) sources of meaning in life; and (c) whether meaning in life is subjective, i.e. dependent on and defined by a person herself or if there are (also) objective criteria for meaning in life and what those could be. We briefly address these three points in this section. We will do so in terms of meaning in life, though without thereby implying a categorical difference with what is commonly termed *the meaning of life* (e.g. Schinkel 2015). That is to say, 'meaning in life' here stands for the whole range of possible meaning, from the experienced everyday meaningfulness of our activities, relationships, and so on, to possible answers to ultimate questions concerning (our) existence. That said, 'meaning in life' as we understand it here, does imply a focus on the meaning *in persons' lives*, rather than an abstract meaning of life as a metaphysical principle in itself.

## What Constitutes Meaning in Life

In previous work (Schinkel, De Ruyter, and Aviram 2016), we distinguished two dimensions of meaning in life, namely a descriptive cognitive and a valuative cognitive-emotional dimension. The first we can concisely describe as the idea that people have meaning in life when their own life, as well as the environment in which they live, makes sense to them—their life has a certain coherence and they understand the world around them to the level that they can meaningfully interact with others (p. 494) and the cultural and nat-

## Education and Meaning in Life

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ural world. With the psychologists Frank Martela and Michael Stegler (2016) and Login George and Crystal Park (2016), we agree that it is helpful to divide the valuative dimension into two distinct aspects, namely purpose and significance or mattering.

Purpose primarily looks to the future. People can be said to have meaning in life when they have and are able to pursue aims that are meaningful to them, aims that provide them with a reason to live their life (in a certain way). Purpose has been interpreted more strictly by various authors (e.g. Damon 2009; Moran 2018), suggesting that aims need not only be meaningful to the person herself but also lead to action that intends to have a positive impact beyond the person.

Significance or mattering primarily looks to the past and the present. People experience meaning in life when they believe their existence makes a difference—that they and what they do has some import and that this is recognized by others. Thus, significance or mattering comprises two sub-aspects: first, that one is engaged in activities or relationships that one believes to be worthwhile, and, second, that one is recognized by others—one's existence matters to others. Mattering draws our attention to an issue that is relevant to the topic of this chapter: while significance is primarily a construction of the person herself, although influenced by the values and circumstances of one's environment, that one matters is primarily attributed by other persons, although the person must pick up these signals and interpret them correctly. This shows that meaning in life is an inherently relational concept: one finds meaning in life by contributing something of value to the lives of others or the state of the world and by receiving the response of the other.

## Sources of Meaning in Life

People find or construct meaning in life through various sources. These sources can be described in terms of the spheres of life that provide people with opportunity for finding meaning: relationships with, for instance, family, friends, community members, or the natural world and activities like volunteering, activism, education, art, and play. Also the self—who one is and could become—can be a source of meaning in life, e.g. discovering one's true self and actualizing one's potentialities, as humanist psychologists like Maslow or Rogers suggest (see Baumeister 1991, 77–115; Froese 2016, 68–98). Baumeister (1991) distinguishes four needs for meaning in life: purpose, values, efficacy, and self-worth. These needs can also be regarded as sources that provide meaning in life. Finally, some authors interpret the previously described dimensions or aspects of meaning in life as sources of meaning, e.g. that purpose in life contributes to meaning in life.

The way in which sources contribute to a person's meaning in life not only depends on a person's characteristics and abilities and on the possibilities of the environment but is also influenced by a meaning framework, 'a complex web of propositions that (p. 495) we hold about how things are in the world and how things will be' (George and Park 2016, 206), which consists of a person's beliefs, worldview, and expectations (see also De Ruyter 2002, 36, 37). This meaning framework, which could also be regarded as a source

of meaning in life by itself, as Baumeister and Froese suggest, gives direction to all three aspects of meaning in life (George and Park 2016, 207, 208).

### Is Meaning in Life Subjective?

We underwrite the hybrid view of meaning in life, i.e., that meaning in life is not a completely subjective evaluation, but that there are (also) objective criteria that need to be fulfilled for a person to be justified in saying that one's life has meaning. This is relevant for a description of the qualities of education that are conducive to finding meaning in life, for in the case of subjective interpretation, educators would (aim to) be value neutral in their approach or value that children discover their own 'authentic' meaning in life, while if one believes there are objective criteria, educators would want and have to attempt to make sure that children adopt particular values, as these would be necessary for leading a meaningful life.

Our interpretation of meaning in life is similar to that of Susan Wolf, who suggests that meaning in life 'arises from loving objects worthy of love and engaging with them in a positive way' (Wolf 2010, 8), involving 'subjective and objective elements, suitably and inextricably linked' (Wolf 2010, 9). In her other, more often quoted, words, meaning arises 'when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (e.g., Wolf 2010, xii). We agree with Wolf that it is notoriously difficult to define what is objectively valuable, and follow her proposal that it be interpreted 'simply' as non-subjective: value needs to be found outside oneself—it lies in the object of one's action (which can also be a person).

Thus, we suggest that meaning is not merely dependent on an individual's taste or feelings; relationships and activities need also be good for others or at a minimum not harmful to others or the (social and natural) environment. This does not mean that people may not or should not spend time on activities that do not have this outside-the-self quality, like playing solitary games or unwinding on the couch, but that these are not their only activities or primary sources of their meaning in life. Nor does it imply that their activities and relationships should not be pleasurable to them, but it does mean that they are not only focused on their own well-being. This idea resonates with William Damon's definition of purpose, namely that 'purpose is a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at the same time meaningful to the self and consequential for the world beyond the self' (Damon 2009, 33).

With this groundwork about the meaning of life's meaning in place, we can begin with our explication of the relation between education and meaning in life. We will do so for two spheres in which children are educated, namely the family and the school.

## **(p. 496) Meaning, Upbringing, and Family Life**

Family life is a profound source of children's meaning in life, and both the children's relationships within the family and their upbringing influence all aspects of their future meaning in life.

## Education and Meaning in Life

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First, parents are the first and most often the primary adults who contribute to children's sense of who they are and who introduce them into the world. For instance, from the remarks of their parents, children learn that they are (regarded as being) friendly, smart, or conscientious, or sluggish or impatient. Children also pick up from their parents ideas about their abilities and the possibilities their parents believe they will have in life: parents tend to have ideas and ideals with regard to the (level of) education that children should receive, the type of work that they hope their children will get, their involvement in communities and society, and, last but not least, the types of relationships they will be able to form and maintain. On the basis of implicitly and explicitly given guidance and (emotional) responses, children begin to make sense of themselves, what their life could be, and what the world looks like and could look like. This guidance is not value-neutral. Parents' meaning framework(s) influence their interaction with their children and their upbringing. A powerful example can be found in Tara Westover's memoir *Educated* (2018), which describes her upbringing in a Mormon family closed from the wider world.

Second, as Westover's book also starkly illustrates, parents normally want to pass on their meaning framework to their children. With this meaning framework, children (begin to) develop their ideas about their purpose in life, as well as which types of relationships and activities are significant. With the rise of liberal philosophy of education that defends autonomy as an aim of education, discussions about parents' entitlement to bring up their children to endorse their conception of the good life also emerged. For instance, in the 1980s there was a lively debate in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* among Terence McLaughlin (1984, 1985, 1990), David Bridges (1984), Eamonn Callan (1985), and Peter Gardner (1988), and in the 2010s we find a similar discussion between, among others, Harry Brighouse and Adam Swift (2014) and Matthew Clayton (2015). The central question is if upbringing within a conception of the good life necessarily infringes upon the child's right to an open future (Feinberg 1980), which in the context of this chapter can be interpreted as the ability and freedom to choose a meaning framework that the child believes should inform her meaning in life.

We suggest that parents as adults should have the freedom to live their lives in a way that is meaningful to them, influenced by the values they hold dear. In practice, this will influence family life as well: the family will have certain customs related to their worldview, attend community gatherings, and friends of the family will tend to have similar convictions (e.g. McLaughlin 1984). This not only gives parents the opportunity to live a meaningful life as they see it, but also offers children the opportunity to acquire a conception of the good with which they can begin to construct their own meaning (p. 497) framework (but see Callan 1985 and Clayton 2015 for an opposite position). However, in line with McLaughlin (1984, 1985, 1990) and Brighouse and Swift (2014, 2016; see also Schinkel, De Ruyter, and Aviram 2016), we do want to argue that there is a boundary to this freedom of parents, which is the freedom of children to develop their own conception of the good. After all, parents' particular conception of the good can be a significant source for themselves, but it does not have to be so for their children. Children may come to value another, even conflicting, conception of the good. It is possible that both meaning frameworks meet the criterion of objective worth, while still being incompatible, for instance a

religious and an atheistic conception of the good life, or two different deeply held religious ones. Diminishing children's freedom could seriously hamper children's possibility to find meaning in life.

That parents raise their children with a particular conception of the good that guides the children in their quest for meaning in life may actually have become more important in recent years than was the case in the 1980s. Liberalism has triumphed in Western countries, which has provided more (experienced) freedom and openness and has supported increasing pluralism, to which Froese (2016) points. However, freedom and a plurality of options may also come with a loss. Without guidance and an inspiring sense of the good and sense of purpose, available options for life's purpose can be overwhelming and could contribute to depression and anxiety. If so, then the discussion should indeed not be about *whether* parents may raise their children with a conception of the good life, but *how* they should do this. A perspective that supplements our position is offered by Hartmut Rosa's resonance theory. That children need to discover their meaning in life themselves is one of the conditions of modern life that Rosa believes to be problematic: 'the answer to "what kind of life should I strive for?" has become very elusive, shrouded in uncertainty' (Rosa 2017, 41). To this he adds that modern society does give advice, be it unhelpful, namely to acquire the resources to be able to lead a good (or meaningful) life. Thus, people are currently busy with collecting resources—making resources available, accessible, and attainable (what he calls the Triple A Approach)—rather than living a meaningful life by having meaningful relationships and activities. The simple example he gives is that people take thousands of pictures with their phones but don't have the time to reconnect with the experience they had. Against this Triple A Approach, Rosa suggests that we should stand in a resonant relationship to the world and other human beings. Resonance has four elements: (a) the experience of being truly touched: af-fection; (b) the experience of responsive self-efficacy: e-motion; (c) a transformative quality; and (d) an elusiveness—it cannot be controlled in the sense that it cannot be brought about at will (Rosa 2017, 47, 48). While parents are often the adults who promote the Triple A Approach, they are (also) particularly well placed to foster the development of resonance. Although resonance cannot be controlled or forced to appear in everyday family life parents can provide ample opportunities (time, space, and place) to experience resonance in relationships with others and the world. We have to be realistic, though. Neoliberalism has seeped into the fibres of contemporary life, and counteracting it takes more than a few parents. Furthermore, those parents who wish to foster resonant relationships might also become anxious that they actually diminish (p. 498) their children's future quality of life if they did not prepare them for the rat race, thereby experiencing conflict regarding their duties.

Third, empirical research shows that families are an important source of meaning in life (e.g. Lambert et al. 2010, 2013). Lambert et al. (2013), for instance, argue that a person's sense of belonging, which denotes both having positive relationships and the feeling that one is fully accepted (which goes beyond simply having social relationships), is particularly satisfied in families. An explanation for this could be the unique way in which family relationships satisfy the needs for belonging of its members (Lambert et al. 2010, 374, 375).

## Education and Meaning in Life

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The value of family life for children's (developing) sense of purpose and significance as well as the profoundness of their primary caregivers' recognition are hard to miss; many children whose parents are engrossed in their own lives, for instance because of an addiction, come to believe that they do not matter. The relationship with their children and raising them are also special sources of meaning for most adults, though not all adults want to start a family.

The importance and unique contribution of the family for meaning in life of both children and parents provides powerful reasons to respect the autonomy of families. The so-called dual interest position, as defended in philosophy of education and political philosophy (e.g., Brighouse and Swift 2014, 2016; Clayton 2006; Sypnowich 2018), stresses that the interests of both children and parents should be taken into account in reflecting on the relative autonomy of families, because both have interests in upbringing as a significant activity and in their unique relationship. Focusing on children's interests only could easily become too demanding on parents, or a reason to claim that children should be raised by the best carers, which affects the source of meaning in life of parents. On the other hand, children should not be seen as their parents' property with which they can do whatever they want, as this affects children's meaning in life, as we described under the second point in this section. We agree with the dual interest position but do want to stress that autonomy is relative, because parents can seriously harm children, which justifies intervention by outsiders. But as importantly, autonomy should not be interpreted as complete self-sufficiency. All families need support from outsiders, and this is particularly true for disadvantaged families. If families make the significant contribution to children's meaning in life as is suggested, then children should have parents who are not overwhelmed by financial worries or who have to have two jobs to be able to make a decent income, but who have time and energy for engaging with their children (see also Brighouse and Swift 2016), which contributes to parents' meaning in life as well.

Thus, we argue that families and parental upbringing have a profound influence on children's experienced meaning in life and their developing ideas about themselves and the world as well as their purpose in life, which are influenced by the meaning framework of their parents. However, when children mature, other social relationships gain import as well. The school is a particularly important environment where children and youth can increase their understanding of the world, develop a purpose in life, and explore which relationships and activities are significant to them. Schools are also places that can build up or confirm, but also deny or diminish, children's experience that they (p. 499) matter. We therefore now turn to schools and explore how the education of teachers and school life (should) impact children's meaning in life.

## Meaning, Education, and Life in Schools

Children between the ages of four and eighteen spend a considerable portion of their lives in schools. These formal educational institutions are designated places for children to get to know the world in some of its many aspects. They are also supposed to be places

where children become equipped for life—not least of all a working life—in adult society, for citizenship, and for political participation. Finally, schools are often charged with a role in helping children develop their identity and become responsible, self-governing adults; as citizens, they are supposed to become critical thinkers, not uncritical conformists. One may well wonder how realistic these expectations are. Schools can be critiqued for ‘failures’ of many kinds. Much that is learned in school turns out to have little relevance beyond the test and is soon forgotten. Preparation for the labour market tends to dominate over concerns for broader kinds of meaningfulness. Even apart from such considerations, it is easy to overestimate the influence of schools relative to families, peers, and the wider society (existing social relations as well as cultural influences). Finally, we must keep in mind the reality of the classroom, which much of the time is not an ideally hospitable climate for meaningful teaching and learning, for instance because of a lack of order, a lack of attention on the part of students, a lack of motivation to teach or learn, difficulties in bringing controversial issues to the table, and so on.

That said, if compulsory education can in principle be justified in spite of the preceding points (and we will here assume that it can), it seems that its justification must include reference, at some level, to what makes life meaningful. As education makes up a significant portion of people’s lives, *and* is supposed to make people better equipped for life, education that would be oblivious to what makes life meaningful or would even detract from its meaningfulness would be deeply problematic.

So it should at least be an aim of education to contribute to the meaning in people’s lives. Given the hybrid view of meaning we accept, it can in theory do so by contributing to the objective meaningfulness of children’s lives (now or in their future) and by contributing to the subjective meaningfulness of their lives; but for any such contribution to be complete, the objective and the subjective would (at some point) have to meet (Wolf 2010). This meeting does not have to occur immediately. Apparently ‘useless’ stuff learned long ago can sometimes turn out to be—or can become—meaningful after all. But education’s contribution to meaning in life is not limited to such chance events and should be built into what education is or aims at and how it is organized.

**(p. 500)** Thus, we do think it is worth reflecting on the possible role of schools in contributing to the meaning in people’s lives, and in doing so we start from two premises: (a) any meaning or lack of meaning children (will) experience in their (future) lives stems from their particular lives and life situations; and therefore (b) education that aims to contribute to meaning in life will have to take account of this.

First of all, since education is by its very nature concerned with increasing children’s knowledge and understanding of the world, it can hardly fail to have an impact on the first dimension of meaning we distinguished: the cognitive dimension, the dimension of understanding or sense-making. There are reasons to be sceptical about (the nature of) schooling’s actual impact; Reber (2019, 453), for instance, refers to the criticism that the curriculum is too fragmented to provide coherence. But these are reasons to criticize a particular form of education, rather than the very real possibility of education having an



impact. At any rate, insofar as the curriculum helps children to understand their world in greater breadth and depth, it will also help them orient themselves in it and give them a measure of control over their environment (if not always actual control, then still intellectual control [understanding]). A growth in understanding of one's world will in principle help diminish meaning deficits that arise from an inability to make sense of one's world and/or oneself in relation to that world. For example, education can transform aimless anxiety caused by randomly picked up scraps of information about global warming and environmental crises into a more coherent and calmer perception of the situation (dire as it is). That said, nothing is ever simple, and this example may also serve to demonstrate this: to be better informed about our ecological situation may also mean to be *more* likely to panic, to feel *less* control, and to experience the world as in many ways *beyond* sense. The implication is not that it is better to keep children less informed (though naturally we need to consider carefully what to introduce to children and when) but rather that the dimension of understanding or sense-making should not be divorced from the valuative dimension(s) of purpose and significance.

Before we turn to those, however, it is important to look at the notion of 'understanding the world' or 'being able to make sense of the world' a bit closer. For the difference between 'the world', on the one hand, and 'one's world' or 'your world', on the other, is quite important here. The more schooling entails that children are being taught about the world in ways that do not connect to *their* world, the less children will be able to make sense of their school experience in general. There is thus a close connection between meaningfulness of the curriculum to the children and experienced meaning in life. The climate strikes initiated by Greta Thunberg are a case in point; for some children, climate change is, understandably, a source of existential concern (Thunberg 2019). What is the point of being in school if you may not have a future? What is the point of it, in particular, if what you're asked to learn in school has little relevance to the ecological problems that threaten this future and their causes? Connecting the curriculum to children's own (life)worlds does not necessarily mean, however, that a substantive connection is made with something that already interests them deeply; it may be enough if children trust that what they are learning (or, more broadly, their school experience as a whole) will have future relevance, even if they do not perceive it now. (p. 501) If even that is absent, all is still not lost, for it may be that what is taught is 'objectively' meaningful and that the children will, at some point in their lives, discover this—but in that case, this cannot redeem the school experience as one lacking in meaning (see Reber 2019, 448, 450). Judgements about education's contribution to the sense-making dimension of meaning in life will therefore always be complex. In between the extremes of utter meaninglessness and the ideal harmony of subjective and objective meaning, now and in the future, lies the whole of education in the real world.

As said, the descriptive cognitive dimension of understanding or sense-making cannot be seen as entirely separate from the valuative cognitive-emotional dimension with its aspects of purpose and significance or mattering. The school strikes for climate change clearly show how understanding and a sense of purpose can go together—though in Thunberg's case, the understanding and the awareness of the ecological crisis were

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gained not in school but through self-education. By drawing students' attention to societal problems or things of beauty and value that require protection, and by developing their understanding of these issues, schooling can also help children discover a purpose and develop a sense of purpose. In this case, the meaning of education is connected with meaning in life or the meaning of life—why they are in school makes sense in light of why they are there at all (Damon 2009, 173). Education and a sense of purpose can thus mutually support each other, since a sense of purpose, combined with awareness of the person one needs to become in order to be able to fulfil that purpose (including what knowledge, understanding, and skills one needs to develop, or even what qualifications it requires), can be strong motivators of learning in school (Moran 2018, 149). We will return to education's possible contribution to children's purpose and significance or mattering, but here we briefly wish to mention one other perspective that shows understanding and the valuative dimensions of meaning to be closely connected. From the perspective of Hannah Arendt's (educational) philosophy, teaching should both stem from and foster *amor mundi*, a love for the world that inspires (taking) responsibility for the world. 'World' here means the human and, in particular, the public, political world, the order we have created together, which must be continually maintained and renewed—which means people will have to take up the responsibility to do so. In Arendt's educational philosophy, teachers' authority depends on their taking responsibility for the world (even if it is not as they would like it to be); children's ability to take responsibility for the world and, in turn, to renew it depends on having acquired an understanding of that common world as it is, as well as 'love' for that world in the sense of a commitment to saving it, making it better, as opposed to an inclination to turn away from it in disappointment or despair. Importantly, for Arendt, the world is *plural*, because people are different and their perspectives on the good life and the good society differ. Therefore, love of the world must include recognition of plurality, rather than an effort to get rid of difference in pursuit of unity. In other words, education for meaning in life requires that we strive to help children accept that in the real world, meaning will always be plural; moreover, recognition of this plurality is at the same time a way of confronting the complexity of the world (Arendt 1958, 2006; and, for instance, Gordon 2001; Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019; Zuurmond 2016).

(p. 502) Following on from the previous point, in school children can and often do become acquainted with different worldviews, religions, and visions of the good life. Thus, a third way in which schooling, through its main purpose, can contribute to meaning in life is by offering children a means to orient themselves explicitly with regard to this very issue of meaning in life. This is often phrased in terms of enabling children to choose for themselves between worldviews and conceptions of the good life, or to make autonomous decisions about what they believe (e.g. Gardner 1988; Brighouse 2006; see Warnick 2012 for more examples), but this is much too simplistic—it caricaturizes the way in which people come to adhere to a (religious) worldview, or conception of the good life. It is closer to the truth to say that acquainting children with worldviews may help to create conditions for a (more) reflective way for them to relate to their own beliefs and convictions. It may irritate, stir something in the mind, by creating or heightening awareness of the contingency of beliefs that were until then perhaps seen as self-evident. Yet, in practice, the presenta-

tion of other worldviews often remains abstract, meaning they are in a poor position to compete with—i.e. become plausible alternatives for—children’s homegrown worldviews. Moreover, they can come across as exotic, as curiosities rather than live options for making sense of the world and one’s place in it. Serious worldview education needs to overcome these challenges; and at the same time it should take care not to be too successful at this too early, since children have an interest in developing a stable initial identity first, before they are confronted with a plurality of options that would otherwise be bewildering and result in ‘identity diffusion’ (Ackerman 1980; McLaughlin 1984; MacMullen 2007; Schinkel, De Ruyter and Steutel 2010, 283) and/or relativism (and possibly nihilism). An example of religious education pedagogy that aims to prevent exoticism and relativism was proposed by John Hull (1996). In the ‘gift approach’ or ‘gift to the child approach’, a *numen*—a religious item that ‘occupies a more or less distinct position within the life and faith of the religion’, ‘is charged with numinous power, or with the sense of the sacred or with the power of devotion’, and ‘has gifts to offer children’ (Hull 1996, 174–175)—is presented to (young) children in a careful way. The lesson goes through stages of engagement, exploration, contextualization, and reflection. Children are gradually familiarized with the item, which becomes revealed to them as an item of worship (for some), but first and foremost remains an educational object: ‘The child has a spiritual right to come close to religion but also a spiritual right not to come too close’ (Hull 1996, 178). In the contextualization stage, the numen—for instance, a figure of Ganesha—is treated as holy by all, ‘but only a child who belongs to Ganesha may approach him’ (Hull 1996, 177). What this example of a religious pedagogy suggests is not that a religious education that enables children to ‘choose’ for themselves what (not) to believe is possible after all, but rather that religious education can contribute to children’s education and spiritual development exactly when it does *not* present religions as options that are on a par with each other for each individual child.

Part of this more or less direct engagement with questions of meaning should also be that schools—and in particular teachers—respond sensitively to children’s sense-making and other meaning questions (e.g. around the death of a grandparent or a news p. 503 story about a school shooting), that they anticipate such (future) questions, and that they expand the range of possible meaning questions and experiences, for example through art education (and aesthetic learning more generally; see Reber 2019, 456) and engagement with nature. Nature education, or outdoor education, offers great possibilities to foster wonder and awe—modes of experience that generally speaking tend to heighten children’s sense of meaning, provide experiences of resonance (Rosa 2017), or at any rate promote their engagement with questions of meaning (Schinkel 2017, 2018; Washington 2018; Kristjánsson 2020).

As said, schools can also contribute to children’s (current and future) sense of purpose. A very concrete way in which schools may (attempt) to do this is through service-learning. Moran (2018, 149) suggests that service-learning ‘is the most likely educational experience to make salient all four dimensions of purpose because, by definition, it is engagement in actions expected to positively impact others and the common good’.<sup>2</sup> Again, we must be aware of possible divergences between theory and practice. Community service

## Education and Meaning in Life

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can also come to serve perverse purposes: it can become an instrument of résumé-building and popularity competitions, can become ‘evidence’ of one’s own righteousness or moral superiority, and can become problematic even by becoming primarily a way to enhance one’s *own* meaning in life. Some of these risks come along with particular (theoretical) models of service-learning, which may also suffer from more fundamental issues. The philanthropic model, for instance, is vulnerable to critique for ignoring issues of social justice and power inequalities (Marullo, Moayed, and Cooke 2009; Speck and Hoppe 2004): rather than highlighting that poverty and deprivation are injustices to be addressed on a collective level, a philanthropic model in which the rich and fortunate bestow benefits on the less well-off risks reaffirming inequalities in wealth and power and creating dependencies of the less fortunate on the goodwill of the advantaged.

It is worth noting the interconnections between purpose and significance or mattering. Contributing to the common good or to the lives of others through caring, community projects, or research—and finding a purpose in this—can also be a way of coming to experience that you matter, because you make a difference. But teachers and the curriculum can also contribute to the third dimension of meaning in life more directly. The two most obvious ways in which schools can and should do so are by communicating to individual students that they matter and by communicating to socially recognized or distinguished groups that they matter (ethnic minorities, cultural minorities, different genders, and so on). A teacher who not only knows your name but actually sees you and responds to you with pedagogical tact (Van Manen 2016) recognizes your existence and your worth, and this contributes to your subjective sense of meaning in life. A textbook of US history that does not acknowledge the role of slavery in the origins of the American Civil War—and in the development of the United (p. 504) States as such—commits not just a historical error, but also a failure of recognition toward African Americans.

The organization and ethos of the school can contribute to individual and group recognition, and thus to the dimension of significance, in similar ways—in short, by giving or withholding from individuals or groups a voice—but also through the message they communicate about what matters in life, for example the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, but also equality, caring, and mutual respect. This is just one example of a message communicated implicitly and explicitly through the ethos of the school, i.e. through the values embodied in its ceremonies, procedures, rules and regulations, mission statement, and so on. It is impossible to quantify the effect of such messages on children’s (future) outlook on life and where they seek and find meaning. It stands to reason that a small-scale community school based on ecological principles that attaches significance, ultimately, to educational outcomes such as caring for the community and for nature will have a different influence on its pupils than a large-scale urban school whose primary focus is academic achievement and winning in competition with other schools. It also stands to reason that their influence will differ from one pupil to another, depending on their temperament and character, family background, and other circumstances. However great or small the effect may be, it is important for schools (and school leaders and teachers) to be aware of what their effect *would* be, if indeed it lingered, and particularly to re-

flect on what they actually do in schools, which may well detract from, rather than contribute to, children's meaning in life.

It should be clear, then, that whether, and the extent to which, children's educational experiences contribute to the meaning they experience in their lives depends on various factors; but teachers play an important role in many of them. The meaning that education contributes to children's lives is to a considerable extent up to the teachers. This is, at the same time, one of the main reasons why education can also contribute to teachers' meaning in life. Teaching can be considered a meaningful profession, in the sense that it offers the opportunity to contribute positively to the lives of children as well as, indirectly, to benefit society (Damon 2009; Fourie and Deacon 2015). A passion for a particular subject and a sense of wonder about the world are other reasons why teaching is meaningful to many in the profession. The degree to which teachers can actually experience their work as meaningful does in part depend on circumstances; in particular, it depends on the extent to which the conditions in which they have to work allow them to actually teach and to do so in a meaningful way (Tomic and Tomic 2008; Johnson and Down 2013; Ainsworth and Oldfield 2019).

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have described the possible positive and unique contributions of family life and parental upbringing, as well as of students' participation in schools and teachers' education, to children's (future) meaning in life. We have also mentioned at [\(p. 505\)](#) several points that we need to be realistic in our expectations. It is all too easy to write a coherent theoretical explication and normative proposal, while losing sight of the real world. Meaning in life is a complex matter, influenced by various sources.

Families and schools can and normally do contribute to children's (ability to find) meaning in life as children and adults, but there are many other sources and enablers of meaning, as well as possible detractors. Life circumstances and conditions, such as one's actual opportunities to realize goods like meaningful work and fulfilling relationships, and inequalities in the distribution of such opportunities, bear significantly on the valuative dimensions of meaning. Social media, access to (fake) news, dominant cultural narratives, and discrepancies between the latter and one's personal experience and opportunities in life are examples of factors that impact the cognitive as well as the valuative dimensions of meaning. However, precisely given the unique position of parents and teachers, we do believe that they have to take responsibility, preferably in a collaborative relationship, to (a) open the complex world in a way that helps children to find their way; (b) present a meaning framework that provides a standpoint from which to evaluate what is significant, while also giving sufficient freedom to engage with other values, ideals, and beliefs that may inform children's own meaning framework; and (c) develop relationships with children or students that foster their feelings that they matter, while at the same time instilling a desire and sense of responsibility to matter to others. Although these are big words,

## Education and Meaning in Life

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small gestures can have a profound impact, and individual recognition does not require complex methods or magical qualities.

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### Notes:

<sup>(1)</sup> We were surprised because we do not have the impression that the Dutch are not living a fully human life. Furthermore, Dutch children are the happiest in the world (Adamson 2013), their (self-reported) well-being has remained the highest for several decades (Unicef 2020) and almost 90 percent of Dutch adults are satisfied with their lives (see <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2019/13/90-procent-tevreden-10-procent-sombert>). Finally, it is plausible to assume that having meaning in life is necessary for being satisfied with one's life or experiencing feelings of happiness. So, if the Dutch are that happy, we also presume they have meaning in life.

<sup>(2)</sup> The four dimensions are: personal meaningfulness, future intention, active engagement, and beyond-the-self-impact (see also Damon 2009).

## Education and Meaning in Life

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