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It's time to wake up and stem the decline in spiritual well-being in Victorian schools.

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Brief Bio:

Over 40 years ago, John Fisher started his academic career as a research chemist, studying the nature of matter. He then moved into science education and for the last 14 years John has been studying spiritual well-being (what really matters) in Australian schools and universities. John has taught at primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education in Australia. In his semi-retirement, John is currently the part-time Research Manager of the Grampians Regional Palliative Care Research Centre, where he is extending his studies into quality of life and is a Senior Research Fellow in the School of Education at the University of Ballarat.

It's time to wake up and stem the decline in spiritual well-being in Victorian schools.

Abstract

This paper reports the views of 820 teachers from State, Catholic, Christian and other Independent schools in Victoria. The purpose of the study was to investigate what factors relate to teachers' views on spiritual well-being personally, as well as the perceived help gained by students from school in this aspect of life.

Spiritual well-being is reflected in the quality of relationships that people have in up to four domains, namely with self, with others, with the environment and/or with God. School type and year level contribute most to the variance in these four domains of spiritual well-being among teachers and in the help they provide to students in this area of life. Very few differences were found by gender, age or subject specialty among teachers.

The teachers report that their lived experiences (how they feel) in each of the four domains of SWB do not generally measure up to their ideals. Both the teachers' ideals and how they feel were generally higher than the views they held of the help schools provide to students in each domain of SWB. A comparison with an earlier study shows a decline in the help being provided to secondary school students for SWB.

It is time to stop, step aside from the busyness in schools, take stock of what is happening and find ways to nurture the relationships which enhance the spiritual well-being of students (and staff).

Key words: teachers' views spiritual well-being

Introduction

Mention of the development of spiritual aspects of students first appeared in official curriculum documents in Australia in the 1990s. They seemed to signal an interest in the development of the whole child through education. This prompted at least one person to ask educators what they thought spirituality was and how it related to health/well-being and the curriculum (Fisher 1999a). Through interviews with 98 secondary school educators in 22 State, Catholic and Independent schools in Victoria, it was found that relationships in four domains (with self, others, nature and/or God) can be considered to have two related components of knowledge and inspiration, combining the 'head' with the 'heart' of a human being. These findings concur with the expression 'spiritual well-being' (SWB), which is reported to have first been used by the National Coalition on Aging, in Washington DC, where it was described as 'the affirmation of life in a relationship with God, self, community and environment that nurtures and celebrates wholeness' (NICA, 1975).

Fisher contended that the quality or rightness of relationship, in each of the four domains, constitutes a person's spiritual well-being in that domain (Fisher 2000). So, quantitative measures were developed to provide empirical evidence to support this model of spiritual well-being. One of these, the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM), which was developed with secondary school students (Fisher 1999b, Gomez and Fisher 2003), is used in this study.

Research among education students in universities has shown significant variations in SWB by gender and subject specialty. For example, in developing their spiritual well-being, females showed greater reliance on developing relationships, whereas the males tended to be more independent (Fisher, 2002). Other studies with adults have shown variation by age, especially in relationships with nature (Fisher & Sellers, 2000). Research about SWB among primary school teachers has been undertaken in the UK (Fisher, Francis & Johnson, 2000), but none has been reported in Australia, nor has there been a large-scale study with a broad range of secondary school teachers in Australia.

The research question for this study was 'How do gender, age, subject specialty, year level taught and school type relate to teachers' views on spiritual well-being personally, and with respect to the perceived help gained by students from school, in this aspect of life?' This study also compared the current views of teachers with those expressed by others five years earlier (Fisher 2001a). Changes had occurred in curriculum in Victoria over this time. Had there been any changes in the nurture of students' spiritual well-being?

Method

Ethics approval was gained from the University of Ballarat, Victorian Education Department and Catholic Regional Director of the Ballarat Diocese. Principals in the following schools then invited staff to join this project:

- 127 State schools in the Grampians Region, Victoria, Australia,
- 61 Catholic schools in the Diocese of Ballarat, Victoria,

- 186 Independent schools in the Association of Independent Schools of Victoria (AISV). (Many of these Independent schools have a Christian foundation, as do the Catholic schools, but for convenience, the Christian Parent-Controlled, and Christian Schools Association, schools in this AISV group (n=39) are referred to as Christian schools in this paper.)

After being given written information about the project, the teachers were invited to complete a one-page questionnaire, which asked for three responses to each of twenty items, which comprise the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM):

Please respond to each of the following items, by circling a number, to show
a. how important you think each area is for an **ideal** state of **spiritual well-being**, **AND**
b. **how you feel** each item reflects your personal experience most of the time, **AND**
c. how much **help** you think **your students gain from school** to develop these aspects of life.

Each response is graded:

1 = very low **2** = low **3** = moderate **4** = high **5** = very high.

The 20 items are grouped in fives to give measures for four domains of spiritual well-being:

Personal domain of SWB

Developing:

- 5. a sense of identity
- 9. self-awareness
- 14. joy in life
- 16. inner peace
- 18. meaning in life

Communal domain of SWB

Developing:

- 1. a love of other people
- 3. forgiveness toward others
- 8. trust between individuals
- 17. respect for others
- 19. kindness toward other people

Environmental domain of SWB

Developing:

- 4. connection with nature
- 7. awe at a breathtaking view
- 10. oneness with nature
- 12. harmony in the environment
- 20. sense of 'magic' in the environment

Transcendental domain of SWB

Developing:

- 2. personal relation with Divine/God
- 6. worship of the Creator
- 11. oneness with God
- 13. peace with God
- 15. prayer life

Teachers were also asked to indicate their gender, age, year level taught and subject specialty. Responses were returned to the researcher by mail and processed using SPSS for Windows 13.0 statistical package. A reminder was sent to the schools one month after the initial contact to provide every opportunity for teachers to participate.

Results

There was considerable variation in response rate from teachers in the different types of schools. At least one teacher responded from 16 percent of State schools, 33 percent of Catholic schools, 18 percent of Independent schools and 56 percent of

Christian schools. Further responses offering reasons for not participating were received from 3 percent of State schools, 8 percent of Catholic schools, 16 percent of Independent schools and 10 percent of Christian schools. The main reasons given for not participating were 'too many requests to participate in research' and 'too busy to present this material to staff.' The numbers of teachers who responded are indicated under column n in Table 1. The results must be interpreted with caution, as they cannot claim to represent the whole population approached for this study. The findings never-the-less provide some interesting comparisons within and between schools.

Twelve teachers did not reveal their age and gender, and another 15 females and 3 males did not reveal their age. From those who gave full details, the age of the primary teachers (female 36.0 years, male 36.7 years) was slightly less than that of those in secondary schools (female 37.1 years, male 38.9 years). As would be expected, there were less males in the primary schools (26%) than secondary schools (46%).

Factor analysis using responses to the five items in the four factors for each category (ideal, feel, help) yielded Cronbach alpha values for the Personal domain (0.80, 0.77, 0.84), Communal domain (0.78, 0.82, 0.84), Environmental domain (0.88, 0.86, 0.88), Transcendental domain (0.91, 0.91, 0.90). These scores indicate high internal consistency for these factors, which will be used for discussion in this paper.

The mean values of teachers' responses in the three categories (of *ideal*, how they *feel*, and *help* for students) for each of the four domains (Personal, Communal, Environmental and Transcendental) of spiritual well-being, are listed by school type and year level in Table 1.

Variations between categories (ideal, feel, help)

The teachers' ideals were generally significantly higher than their lived experience (how they feel) in each of the four domains of SWB. Both the teachers' ideals and how they feel were higher than the perceptions they have of the help that schools provide to students in each domain. There are a few exceptions to these trends:

- At primary level, the State, Catholic and Christian school teachers express similar ideals and lived experiences in relating with the environment. There are no significant differences between how the Catholic and Independent school teachers feel about relating with others and with God as well as the level of help they perceive schools provide to their students in these areas.
- At secondary level, only the State and Christian school teachers express similar ideal and lived experiences in relating with the environment. The Catholic school teachers are the only ones to show congruence between how they feel about relating with God and the level of help they perceive schools provide to their students in this area.

Table 1. Mean values of teachers' responses in three categories for each of four domains of Spiritual Well-Being (SWB) by school type and year level.

Domains of SWB		PER			COM			ENV			TRA		
School/year level	n	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C	A	B	C
State													
primary	44	4.46	4.23	3.75	4.55	4.40	4.08	3.90	3.77	3.29	2.65	2.29	1.79
secondary	24	4.42	4.10	3.48	4.48	4.28	3.78	3.93	3.89	3.13	2.94	2.37	1.80
total	68	4.45	4.18	3.65	4.52	4.36	3.97	3.91	3.81	3.24	2.76	2.32	1.79
Catholic													
primary	81	4.61	4.21	3.99	4.67	4.38	4.27	4.20	4.13	3.65	4.25	3.87	3.90
secondary	82	4.59	4.13	3.74	4.68	4.28	3.97	4.08	3.91	3.16	3.80	3.30	3.25
total	163	4.60	4.17	3.86	4.67	4.33	4.12	4.14	4.02	3.40	4.03	3.59	3.57
Independent													
primary	68	4.45	4.09	3.92	4.71	4.31	4.24	3.61	3.47	3.11	4.48	3.93	3.82
secondary	187	4.50	4.06	3.64	4.61	4.21	3.75	3.82	3.69	3.08	3.61	3.20	2.82
total	255	4.49	4.07	3.72	4.64	4.24	3.88	3.76	3.63	3.09	3.84	3.39	3.09
Christian													
primary	173	4.43	4.03	3.64	4.73	4.18	4.00	3.22	3.16	2.80	4.90	4.27	3.86
secondary	161	4.35	3.99	3.58	4.62	4.12	3.90	3.31	3.25	2.66	4.77	4.15	3.72
total	334	4.39	4.01	3.61	4.68	4.15	3.95	3.26	3.20	2.73	4.83	4.21	3.79
Total													
primary	366	4.48	4.11	3.78	4.69	4.28	4.11	3.59	3.51	3.10	4.41	3.88	3.61
secondary	454	4.46	4.05	3.63	4.62	4.19	3.85	3.69	3.58	2.95	4.02	3.51	3.17
Total	820	4.47	4.07	3.70	4.65	4.23	3.97	3.65	3.55	3.02	4.19	3.68	3.36

PER=Personal, COM=Communal, ENV=Environmental, TRA=Transcendental domains of Spiritual Well-Being. Values reported on scales from 1-5.

A= *ideal*, B=lived experience (*feel*), C= student *help*, category for each domain of SWB.

Variations within categories

For the *ideal* and lived experiences (*feel*) in all schools at primary and secondary levels, teachers rate the Communal and Personal factors highly (mean values 4.06-4.71 on a scale of 1-5). The Environmental factor is moderately important to teachers (means 3.47-4.2). Variation occurs in the stated importance of the God-factor for SWB. In the secular State school, it is of low importance as would be expected. In Catholic and Independent schools, primary teachers rate the God-factor higher than their secondary counterparts (with their ideals and how they feel of moderate to high import). The Christian school teachers express very high ideals on the God-factor, with lived experience being high, and not as marked variation between primary and secondary staff as in other schools.

The teachers' perception of the level of *help* students gain from school is lower than the lived experience teachers profess in each of the four domains and much lower than their ideals. Why don't teachers do more about this then? Is SWB not perceived as important for the students as it is for the teachers themselves? State school teachers see very little help provided in their schools for the God-factor, even at primary level, where Religious Education (RE) is provided in many schools for 30 minutes per week, by volunteers.

Variations between groups

Stepwise multiple linear regression analyses were performed on each category for each domain of SWB to determine the extent of influence of the type of school, year level, gender, age and subject specialty of the teachers. Table 2 shows the β -values, which roughly indicate the percentage of influence, attributed to the specified variables, and their levels of significance.

Table 2. β -values from regression analyses for domains and categories of Spiritual Well-Being

Dependent variables Domains & categories of SWB	Predictors			
	School type	Year level	Gender	Age
Personal-ideal	-.098**		.095**	
Personal-feel	-.107**			
Personal-help	-.079*	-.084*		
Communal-ideal			.098**	
Communal-feel	-.135***			
Communal-help		-.179***		
Environmental-ideal	-.307***		.079*	.108**
Environmental-feel	-.300***			.146***
Environmental-help	-.263***	-.096**		
Transcendental-ideal	.512***	-.175***		
Transcendental-feel	.441***	-.173***		
Transcendental-help	.398***	-.214***		

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

school type

At the primary level, the trend is for Catholic teachers to score highest and the Christian school teachers lowest (with State and Independent school teachers in-between) on the Personal, Communal and Environmental domains. The God-factor is different, with Christian school teachers scoring highest on their ideals and how they feel. However, there are similar perceptions expressed by the Catholic, Christian and Independent school teachers about what help is provided to students on the God-

factor. It is no surprise that the teachers in secular State schools score lowest in this area.

At the secondary level, there is not as much difference in the Personal and Communal domains that was evident with the primary teachers. There is a similar trend with Catholic highest and Christian school teachers lowest on Personal-ideal, Communal-feel and the three Environmental categories. On the God-factor, there is a consistent pattern of Christian higher than Catholic and Independent, which in turn are higher than State school teachers in this area.

year level

The primary teachers in the State, Catholic and Independent schools indicated that their schools provide greater help for their students' development in the Personal and Communal domains than in the corresponding secondary schools. This finding could add support for the old adage, 'Primary teachers teach students; secondary teachers teach subjects.' The primary Catholic and State school teachers also rated their Environmental development of students higher than their secondary school counterparts. Although the scores for Christian school teachers were generally lower than other teachers in the Personal, Communal and Environmental domains, they were more consistent across year levels, with no marked differences between primary and secondary levels being evident as in the other types of schools.

In the ideals for the Transcendental domain, the secondary State school teachers outscored their primary counterparts, which is the reverse of the other schools. The Council for Christian Education in Schools in Victoria provides education materials for volunteers to offer a 30-minute lesson each week in State primary schools. On the surface, it does not appear that the teachers in primary schools see this impacting to any great extent, as they rate this category at the same low level as their secondary counterparts. It might be a reality that 30 minutes per week is not enough to influence students markedly and/or it could be that the primary students keep their opinions to themselves in the secular State schools.

On the ideal, feel and help categories, the primary teachers in the Catholic and Independent schools scored higher than their secondary counterparts. This is a similar finding to the other three domains of SWB. This is interesting because all the Catholic and Independent schools participating in this study were originally founded on religious bases. These secondary school teachers report less personal connection with God than their primary counterparts. Are they also more subject-oriented and less concerned about the religious component of the SWB of their students?

There was greater congruence between primary and secondary teachers in Christian schools compared with other schools, both on how they relate with God, and their perceptions of the help provided to their students in this area. No significant differences were evident between primary and secondary Christian school teachers in these areas.

gender

The primary female teachers were more idealistic than the males in the Personal domain, with no differences in the corresponding feel and help categories. The secondary female teachers were more idealistic than the males in the Communal and Environmental domains, but again this difference did not carry over to the corresponding feel and help categories.

age

Older teachers indicated a greater connection with the environment as is evidenced by higher scores on the ideal and feel categories for this domain. This was a personal experience only, not one that carried over to their perceptions of influence on students at school.

subject specialty

Although not apparent from the regression analyses, ANOVA revealed differences on the Environmental-ideal and -help categories. The teachers with general interest across the curriculum scored highest and the health/physical education teachers lowest in these areas. There were no significant variations by subject specialty in the other three domains of SWB.

Discussion

In answer to the research question, the greatest variations in teachers' perceptions of their own and students' spiritual well-being were accounted for by differences in school type and year level. Very few differences were found by gender, teacher age or subject specialty.

It was encouraging to note that the teachers rated the Communal domain highly. This should augur well for building community among students as a high priority within schools.

Developing relationships with the environment was of moderate to low importance for teachers in each of the different schools. This leaves an opening for further instruction/ input regarding the importance of connecting with the physical world around them to enhance their own as well as students' SWB.

It was not surprising that teachers in the secular State schools rated the Transcendental factor lowly. However, some of the other schools with religious bases might benefit from close scrutiny of their results to see how well they concur with the stated ethos and religious practice in those schools, especially at secondary level.

Schools are very busy places, which are increasingly being pestered to become involved in research projects such as this one. The response rate could be taken as an indication of the level of interest and understanding of the topic reported herein, namely spiritual well-being. It was disappointing to note the lack of understanding among some school principals about the nature of spiritual well-being. The introductory letter from the researcher stated that 'spiritual well-being is expressed in

the quality of relationships people have in **up to** four domains, namely with self, with others, with the environment **and/or** with a transcendent Other.' But, some people merely see the 'God'-word featured three times among the 20 items in the Spiritual Health And Life-Orientation Measure (SHALOM) and decide that religion is the major emphasis in this study. SHALOM is being used in over 50 research studies in Australia and overseas. Its main strength is that it has a balance across existential (personal and communal), environmental and religious areas, four main factors in spiritual well-being.

The following comments support the contention that the concept of SWB has been misconstrued somewhat:

- In declining to participate in the study, a female principal of a State secondary school reported, 'I don't think it is appropriate for a secular institution to participate.' The female principal of an Independent school wrote, '...non denominational school so best to remain 'neutral' on this topic.' These comments show that these principals missed the importance of the three factors other than religion that go to make up spiritual well-being. The question could also be asked, 'Should not secular State, and non-denominational Independent, schools offer freedom *of* religion, *not* freedom *from* it?' if they are to provide an open education for all-comers in an egalitarian society. The author separates religion (man-made rules) from the Transcendental domain (relationship with God) but it takes time and a desire to really come to grips with an understanding of spiritual well-being, which allows identification of such subtle points.

- A male State secondary school teacher in his 20s who participated in the study wrote, 'I feel that our education system is shallow and devoid of meaning. It isolates us from nature and alienates us from God. This is one of many reasons why I will not be continuing to work as a teacher after this year is over.' This is a sad indictment on the failure of the system to adequately prepare this young man for the reality of the culture existent in at least some State schools.

- A female primary school principal in her 50s, who identified herself as 'a Catholic working in the State system' and 'very interested in this research' wrote, 'I believe that practising school values is vital for the development of SWB. In the state system it is difficult to promote spirituality and inner peace. We do try hard to promote "reflective self awareness" but have many challenges.' This comment focuses on some of the personal and communal aspects of SWB, but the principal appears to equate spirituality with things other than this, religion perhaps.

These comments show a need for further education about the nature of spiritual well-being and its place in schools.

Table 3 contains a comparison of the perceptions of current secondary school staff with an earlier study comprised of a smaller cohort of chaplains, religious education (RE) and student welfare coordinators (Fisher, 2001a).

In general, the current staff are not as optimistic as the previous cohort about the level of help that schools provide to nurture students' SWB. In particular, the RE staff indicate the same sort of decline in each domain of SWB over the last five years. Only Catholic and Independent schools have RE staff in Victoria, as State secondary

schools do not teach RE. There were not enough chaplains or student welfare coordinators in the current study, nor other staff in the previous study, to draw other direct comparisons. These general and specific results give some cause for concern. Are they reflecting curriculum change emanating from the Victorian Education Department, or is there a general societal influence dehumanising young people, or is Generation Y having difficulty connecting in post-modernity, or are teachers' perceptions failing? More research is needed to find out. One thing is certain, however, curriculum emphases are changing in Victoria.

Table 3. Comparison of staff perceptions on help students gain from schools for Spiritual Well-Being

Sample	All staff			Religious Education staff only		
Year of study	2000	2005	t ^{sig}	2000	2005	t ^{sig}
Domain of SWB / n	143	452		38	39	
Personal	4.10	3.63	6.80***	4.27	3.64	4.06***
Communal	4.24	3.85	5.72***	4.35	3.79	3.66***
Environmental	3.38	2.95	5.55***	3.62	2.98	3.31**
Transcendental	3.39	3.17	2.19*	4.01	3.24	3.80***

***p<.001, **p<.01, *p<.05 for independent T-tests.

There were explicit references to the spiritual development of students in the Curriculum & Standards Framework (CSF I) in Victoria (BOS, 1994) but these were removed when the crowded curriculum was pruned to become CSF II (see Fisher, 2001b). The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VCAA, 2004) has followed suit by offering a utilitarian, mechanistic framework through which students can be trained to take their place in the workforce. The psychological and spiritual development of students has been overlooked in these later documents, in spite of the Adelaide Declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the Twenty-First Century for Australian Schools, which expressly included the spiritual. 'These goals [of schooling] provide a foundation for the intellectual, physical, social, *spiritual*, moral and aesthetic development of young Australians' (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs, 1999)[Italics added for effect]. By the time the National Framework for Values Education in Australian Schools was published (DEST, 2005) explicit reference to spiritual development of students had disappeared, except for the restatement of the Adelaide Declaration. For example, in the Glossary on page 8, Safe and Supportive Learning Environment 'protects the emotional, psychological and physical well-being of students.' Reference to the spiritual well-being has gone.

I would like to agree with Bouma that Australian spirituality will provide hope for the future (2006, p.30). Bouma provides an insightful definition, 'At the core of spirituality is the encounter with the other, some other, be it God, nature, a tree, the sea, some other person or the core of our own being' (2006, p.12). But, when it comes to reporting quantification of spirituality in Australia he has conflated spirituality with religion in Chapter 3, quoting religious observances, etc not spiritual matters. His conclusions that 'Australia's religious and spiritual life is alive and well' and

'spirituality is on the rise' (p.85) are therefore dubious. We must be careful with our language and consistent with its use otherwise confusion will reign supreme. This has happened to too great an extent in our schools. We need to be clear that religion and relating to God can and do influence spirituality, but there are three other domains that also need to be considered, for a balanced discussion on spirituality.

It is to be hoped that close inspection of the findings from this study will provide valuable information upon which to reflect, for the provision of a balanced framework for the nurturance of spiritual well-being of staff and students in all primary and secondary schools. In so doing, we will hopefully see a restoration of fostering the essence of humanity in and through education. More specifically, teachers in a variety of schools are indicating that students are not being helped to relate as well with themselves, with others, with the environment and with God as previously. If there was a similar decline in literacy or numeracy, or students' performance in any other subject for that matter, we would most likely hear an outcry, such as, "What's happening in our schools?!" It is time to stop, step aside from the busyness in schools, take stock of what is happening and find ways to nurture the relationships which enhance the spiritual well-being of our students (and staff).

Crawford and Rossiter (2006, p.19) contend:

'In proposing a role for school education we do not want to give an impression that we think education is the principal means of communicating meaning, identity and spirituality to the young; family and cultural experience are considerably more influential....The opportunity for the school curriculum to bring about personal change in young people is limited.'

This might be the experience of Crawford and Rossiter in the Catholic schools with which they are associated, but secondary students from Catholic, Christian and other Independent schools in Victoria do not entirely agree with this contention. They report a similar influence from teachers as from mothers on their Personal well-being (~10% variance). Religion teachers have a similar influence to mothers on Communal well-being (~12% variance). Belonging to Catholic schools accounted for 15% of the variance on Environmental well-being and the type of school (with its teachers) accounted for 14% of the variance on Transcendental well-being (relating with God) (Fisher, 2006). Family undoubtedly have a significant influence, but the influence of teachers and schools should not be discounted too lightly. Crawford and Rossiter do, however, provide many valuable points for teachers to consider in educating young people in their search for meaning, identity and spirituality. They address implications for public education, religious education in independent schools and state-based Religion Studies course in Australian schools (ibid).

Principals have the primary influence on what happens in schools, especially when it comes to spiritual development (Fisher, 1999a). They set the tone and in many schools they choose the staff to implement the programs to nurture students in ways considered appropriate by the school community. This paper has hopefully created an awareness that all is not well with (w)holistic education of students in Victorian schools. Herein lies a plea for principals and other pedagogues, parents and pupils to take the challenge of spiritual development seriously.

Families and community have key roles to play in spiritual development of young people, but students and teachers see that schools also help. This help cannot be imposed on students by decree or doctrinaire instruction. But, by providing opportunities for students to reflect openly on the four domains that constitute spiritual well-being, they will hopefully be helped in their search for meaning and purpose in their lives; underpin their values; inform their inter-personal relations; and clarify their relationships with the world around them and/or Transcendent Other (known as the Author of Creation, the Divine Other, Ultimate Concern, or God). We need staff to be adequately prepared and willing to work with students toward accomplishing this task for the total well-being of students as well as the staff themselves.

If another review is done in a further five years, what will it show? We have an awareness of the situation. Now is the time for action, to stem the decline in spiritual well-being in Victorian schools.

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