

## EDUCATING THE NEXT GENERATION IN UNIVERSAL VALUES?

### HINDU-RELATED NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS AND VALUES EDUCATION IN THE COMMON SCHOOL

Elisabeth Arweck

Eleanor Nesbitt

Robert Jackson

Institute of Education, University of Warwick

United Kingdom

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#### Abstract

*This article compares two values education programmes currently available for UK schools and the Hindu-related organisations – the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University and the Sathya Sai Service Organisation UK – with which they are associated. Attention is paid to the development of the programmes and the reasons for their implementation in certain schools. We conclude by considering the relevance of the cultic provenance for schools' uptake and whether the programmes are Hindu in content.*

**Key Concepts:** Hindu values, programme, educational context, religious communities

#### Introduction

The subject of this article is two values education programmes, Living Values: An Educational Program (LVEP) and Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV). Each is associated with a spiritual organisation which can also be categorised as a Hindu-related New Religious Movement (NRM) and each is intended for use in common or community schools.<sup>1</sup> LVEP is linked to the Brahma Kumaris (officially, the Brahma Kumaris World Spiritual University or BKWSU; following the Brahma Kumaris' usage we use the abbreviation *BKs* below). SSEHV is connected with the Sathya Sai movement. The official name of the movement in the UK is *Sathya Sai Service Organisation UK* or SSSO; we use the abbreviations *Sai organisation* and *SSO* to refer to the movement both nationally and internationally.

The LVEP focuses on twelve values: Peace, respect, love, tolerance, honesty, humility, co-operation, responsibility, happiness, freedom, simplicity, unity (BKWSU, 1995:1-50), while SSEHV comprises five values: Love, truth, peace, right conduct, non-violence, each combined with a number of *related values*.<sup>2</sup> The values are presented as universally

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<sup>1</sup> By *common school* we mean fully state funded schools not affiliated to any religion or philosophy, attended by children from any background living in the locality. In England and Wales such schools are called *community schools*.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the value of *Peace* has the following list of *related values*: Attention, Calm, Concentration, Contentment, Dignity, Discipline, Equality, Equanimity, Faithfulness, Focus, Gratitude, Happiness, Harmony, Humility, Inner Silence, Optimism, Patience, Reflection, Satisfaction, Self-acceptance, Self-confidence, Self-control, Self-discipline, Self-esteem, Self-respect, Sense control, Surrender, Understanding, and Virtue (Alderman, 1996:28).

recognised, universally applicable and universally desirable as guiding principles for behaviour.

This article provides the educational context in which a small number of UK schools (in our research, all primary schools) are coming across and utilising these programmes. It then introduces the research, briefly compares the organisations associated with the two programmes and summarises the stages in their production and their uptake by some schools. We outline the rationale of the two programmes and the reason for targeting schools as well as the reasons for schools adopting them. We conclude by considering educational and sociological issues raised by the fact that these programmes are prepared for use in common schools and that some schools implement them, albeit selectively.

First the educational context: In England and Wales there has been general agreement, supported by law, that it is inappropriate to promote the teachings of any particular religion or philosophy in publicly funded common schools. Religious education in the common school deals fundamentally with fostering an understanding of the main religions represented in the country, and encouraging pupils to reflect upon their learning. There is no formal moral or values education as a separate curriculum subject, but all schools are required to promote the spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development of pupils through the whole curriculum. Values issues also form a key element of citizenship education (mandatory in secondary schools since 2001 and supported by non-statutory guidance in primary schools) and of personal, social and health education (PSHE).

The research has been carried out in the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU), based in the Institute of Education at the University of Warwick.<sup>3</sup> Our investigation is ethnographic, taking a grounded approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) and employing documentary analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured and informal interviewing. The first phase ran from September 2001 to December 2002, while the second ran from January 2003 to July 2004. The first study involved three schools in the south of England, interviews with 15 teachers (head/deputy head/classroom teachers) and informal interviews with four groups of four to six pupils. The second study involved ten schools in various parts of the country (rural, urban, inner-city) and interviews with 21 staff (including volunteer teachers).

The aim of our studies was to understand why both organisations have attempted to develop values education materials for universal application (i.e. for use in schools, not for promoting membership) and how their programmes have been implemented and received by schools. Before looking into the origins and rationale of the programmes we compare briefly key aspects of the BKs and the Sai organisation.

### **The Brahma Kumaris and the Sathya Sai Organisation**

Since both movements came to prominence in the West in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there are grounds for classifying both as New Religious Movements (NRMs) (Arweck, forthcoming). Additionally, each organisation is Hindu-related in terms of some of its teachings and beliefs (see below) and could be represented as a *sampradaya*, or guru-led movement, typically with a charismatic leader. Although neither the BKs nor SSO require formal initiation by a guru and neither of their leaders (Brahma Baba and Sathya Sai Baba respectively) is *within a line of gurus* (Flood, 1995:11), both founders – and those followers who are of South Asian origin – draw upon concepts and images from their

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<sup>3</sup> We are grateful to the Arts and Humanities Research Board (AHRB) for funding both studies.

inherited Hindu tradition. These include reincarnation and *karma*, purity (including strict vegetarianism) and, in the case of the BKs, celibacy and daily meditation, as a means to purify oneself of all the *vices* which prevent union with God. Also central to both movements is the concept of *seva* (service), involving voluntary charitable work, regarded as worship. Both the BKs and SSO also celebrate some Hindu festivals (Babb, 1986:135).

Both organisations originated in India. The headquarters of the BKs are (now) on Mt. Abu, in Rajasthan, while those of the Sathya Sai organisation are in Puttaparthi, in Andhra Pradesh; both chose the UK (London) to establish their first branches outside India. The Sai organisation arrived in the UK in the mid-1960s and the BKs in 1971. The Indian centres of both groups have developed into substantial sites with a range of activities and outreach programmes. These attract thousands of people every year and have become places of pilgrimage for members. Both organisations have centres in many countries; the BKs claim 5,000 branches in 87 countries and over 700,000 students ([http://www.bktexas.com/About\\_us.htm](http://www.bktexas.com/About_us.htm), access date 1/12/03), while the Sai organisation claims 10 million followers, including 10,000 in the UK (Harris, Mews, Morris and Shepherd, 1992:311), although data obtained during our project suggest approximately half this figure (Heaton, 2003:8). Thus, both organisations (and programmes) have an international dimension. However, our research has focused on the UK, while taking some account of the global picture.

The concept of membership in both groups is similar in that no formal or outward rituals are required for membership. Instead, membership depends on following the practices, taking part in activities, and embracing the beliefs (Taylor, 1987). BK members are referred to as *regular students* and Sathya Sai Baba's followers as *devotees*.

Other aspects which the two organisations share are their attitude towards other faiths and their emphasis on education. Both are convinced that all religions share common traits and that their organisations' teachings incorporate those of all other religions. The Brahma Kumaris understand their organisation not as a religion, but as a university and their activities emphasise education and teaching. For the Sai organisation *The world is a university* (Alderman, 1996:32) and it stresses the importance of education, quoting Sathya Sai Baba who stated that *Of all the professions, the teacher's is the noblest, the most difficult and the most important (op cit:9)*. Sai schools have been set up in India and other countries, as has an *Institute of Higher Learning (Deemed University)* in India ([http://www.srisathyasaiorg.uk/2003/HTML/4\\_Projects/Indianeducation.htm](http://www.srisathyasaiorg.uk/2003/HTML/4_Projects/Indianeducation.htm), access date 1/12/03).

Both groups consider their leaders' discourses the most important writings for spiritual instruction and guidance, while also drawing on traditional Hindu scriptures, such as the *Bhagavad Gita* and the *Ramayana* (Babb, 1986:137; Walliss, 1999:378-9). However, there are a number of aspects in which the two organisations differ significantly. We shall comment briefly on leadership, membership, and organisation.

Brahma Baba, the BKs' founder (also known as Prajapita Brahma and originally named Dada Lekhraj), *left his body* in 1969. At 60 he gave up his business as a diamond merchant after having a number of visions. During his lifetime the organisation slowly took shape and found its physical and spiritual footing. The current senior leadership consists almost entirely of women, referred to as *Dadis* (elder sisters, although, in Hindi, *dadi* means *paternal grandmother*); they joined the group at an early age and are now in their 70s and 80s. The leaders are women because Brahma Baba believed that they have the necessary attributes for leadership – both administrative and spiritual. Each Dadi has a specific role in the organisation and the *Dadis* collectively direct the organisation; they are deeply re-

spected by members and hold charismatic authority.<sup>4</sup> Brahma Baba acted as a channel for God (Shiva) who communicated his messages (*murlis*) – a practice still continued through the mediumship of Dadi Gulzar (Whaling, 1995:7,13). The *murlis* include all the teachings and form the BKS' *canon*.

Regarding the Sai organisation, the founder, Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (b. 1926), the focal point for members, is now in his late 70s. Devotees believe that he is an *avatar* of the god Vishnu, in a line of such incarnations. The one before him was Sai Baba of Shirdi (d. 1918); the next will be Prema (Sathya) Sai. Sathya Sai Baba's qualities revealed themselves at an early age and stories of his miracles abound. Experiencing Sathya Sai Baba's charismatic presence in *darshan* is important to devotees. Sai Baba's paranormal powers, such as materialising objects and holy ash (*vibhuti*), were examined by Erlendur Haraldsson (1987). Since 1958, when the magazine *Sanathana Sarathi* and a publishing house were set up as means to propagate Sathya Sai Baba's message, a substantial body of his *discourses* has been published by the Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust. These are the fount of Sai teachings and their number expands whenever Sathya Sai Baba addresses his followers.

As to membership, there are differences between the two organisations, although in each case membership can be imaged as concentric circles. The BKS' *inner circle* members dedicate most of their time to the organisation and live communally. They are single (unmarried or no longer attached) and celibate; they live together, like a family, as brothers and sisters, but segregated. Often their spiritual discipline (towards purity) is reflected in their white dress. The majority of members live outside and visit a BK centre regularly – ideally, every day. They too strive to lead a pure life. In the Sai organisation, however, the *inner circle* comprises people who are close to Sathya Sai Baba or see him regularly. The majority of devotees have jobs and families and do not live communally. Celibacy is not part of the teachings; on the contrary, there are instructions on good parenting and educating children. Rendering service (*seva*) is an important aspect of Sai devotees' lives. This can be done through local centres which have various sub-groups or *wings*, including the service wing. This reaches out into the wider community, whereas the BKS reach out by offering lectures, seminars, retreats and courses to the public, free of charge.

### Origins of Values

We now return to the question of the selection of the values on which LVEP and SSEHV are based. Both programmes express the belief that the values are inherent in each person, but dormant and needing activation. Every person has inner potential which only needs to be developed. Everyone has inherent virtues which can overcome vices – bad habits and social ills. The BKS say: “*When we change, the world changes*” (Brahma Kumaris, 1998), and the SSEHV manual states: “*In order to have peace in the world, we must start with ourselves*” (Alderman, 1996:34).

The BKS started values-related projects in the late 1980s, with a series of international projects connected with UN initiatives. However, the project from which the LVEP arose began in 1994 to celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the United Nations. Called *Sharing Our Values for a Better World*, this focused on the twelve universal values on which LVEP was subsequently based. During this project, *the Brahma Kumaris assigned to each month of the year one of the 12 specific values discussed in Living Values* (BKWSU, 1995:xiv).

<sup>4</sup> This material on female leadership in the BKS is based on Arweck's field notes of 2001/02. See also Skultans, 1993.

Throughout that year, BK centres around the world organised dialogues, seminars, workshops, lectures and community projects on these values in order to reach a deeper understanding and a practical application of them in the local context (*ibid*). The resultant book (BKWSU, 1995) focuses on the twelve ‘universal values’ and includes a short section on values in the classroom (BKWSU, 1995:98-105). This was written by an American educational psychologist, Diane Tillman, and inspired LVEP (see LV Abstract).<sup>5</sup> The section was developed further by a group of *educators* (including Tillman) and gradually became an educational programme. It went through a pilot phase in the second half of the 1990s and was then distributed in the UK in ring-bound form, finally becoming available as printed manuals in 2001 (Arweck field notes, 2001-02).

SSEHV, too, had its constitutive phase in the mid-1990s, although the idea goes back to the mid-1980s, when a precursor was created (Sathya Sai Society for Education in Human Values, 1985). SSEHV results from the initiative of a small group of people in London who had been working on the programme (interview, 11/2/03). Again, there is an interesting parallel with the LV programme in that one key person in this group, Carole Alderman, has a background in counselling and psychology. However, unlike the values in the BK programme, the five *core* values in SSEHV are central to the founder’s teachings. Sathya Sai Baba introduced them in the 1970s, primarily as a programme for children (Jackson and Nesbitt, 1993:156-7). In 1983, during an international conference, he stated that *all* children should be taught the values (adjusted to the respective countries) as a way of complementing their cultures. Teachers from the UK attended this conference and this led to the writing and publication of the first manual in the mid-1980s. According to Sathya Sai Baba values in education will bring about world peace (interview with devotee, 11/2/03).

The material of the Sathya Sai Society for Education in Human Values was further developed in the early 1990s, and this led to two programmes, *Education in Human Values* (EHV) and *Sathya Sai Education in Human Values* (SSEHV), both based on the five Sai values. Our research has focused on SSEHV, since its promoters retain their link with Sathya Sai Baba whereas EHV no longer acknowledges this link. The basic assumptions on which LVEP builds are that *Universal values teach respect and dignity for each and every person. Learning to enjoy those values promotes well-being for individuals and the larger society; each student does care about values and has the capacity to positively create and learn when provided with opportunities; students thrive in a values-based atmosphere as a positive, safe environment of mutual respect and care; where students are regarded as capable of learning to make socially conscious choices* (Tillman and Hsu, 2000:xii).

These assumptions can be said to apply to both the LVEP and the SSEHV programmes, although the language in SSEHV is different; e.g. *values-based atmosphere* would be a *secure base* (Alderman, 1996:11). Given these assumptions, this kind of values-based education can be seen as a *tool-kit* for children, young people, and adults for thinking about the *values* in their lives, applying them to relationships and social situations, and shaping attitudes towards others, property, and social structures.

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<sup>5</sup> This document was available on the Living Values web site as a pdf file on most of its web pages. It provides information about the programme’s development. Headed *Living Values: An Educational Program* (dated July 2000), it is cited in the text by the title of the pdf, *LV Abstract*. During 2002 the title changed to *Living Values: An Educational Program Overview* and its contents were revised. Sections of this document are reproduced in some of the Living Values manuals.

### **Rationale for LVEP and SSEHV**

Repeated statements in the LVEP and SSEHV manuals and elsewhere indicate that the motivation for both programmes arises from society's parlous state locally and globally. There is, in the view of those closely associated with the programmes, a worldwide call for values, as educators, parents, and children are increasingly concerned about and affected by violence, the lack of respect for each other and the environment, and a lack of social cohesion (see e.g. LV web site, access date 16/8/02; Taplin, 1998; Ambasht and Singh, access date 1/12/2003). Thus, *positive* or *virtuous* values are the answer to the *negative* values or *vices* of post-modern societies.

Both programmes take a *holistic* approach to the individual; a person is not just mind, intellect, and body, but also a being with a spiritual and emotional/affective side (e.g. LV Abstract; Taplin and Devi, 2002). This approach seeks to address the individual in his/her entirety and provides activities and methods which allow exploration and development of universal values. There is also the desire to restore a balance between cognitively based education and the affective side of children *and* adults. SSEHV understands itself as a *self-development programme* (Alderman, 1996:8). This resonates with recent attention paid to emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995) and spiritual intelligence (Zohar and Marshall, 2000), sources referred to by the promoters of both programmes. Both emphasise intra-personal skills – the capacity to know oneself and use this knowledge to live successfully – and inter-personal skills – the ability to understand other people and work with them.

Both programmes aim to involve those who work with them in an interactive, but ultimately rewarding and mutually beneficial process. In the school context this means that teachers and pupils should be empowered: Pupils should gain inter-personal skills and insights for life while teachers should feel valued and motivated. Both programmes stress the need for the teacher to be a role model. For teachers who attend LV seminars/SSEHV training, the message (communicated in the materials, workshops, and sessions) is that teaching is a noble and challenging profession. For example, many LV seminars include a *Caring for Myself* session. Also, by extending the programme into the wider community, especially by involving parents, the aim is to permeate society and thus counteract current trends.

### **Embedding the Programmes in the Common School**

While recognising that the SSO additionally runs classes (Sai Spiritual Education) to nurture devotees' children in human values, this article's concern is not with religious upbringing but with LVEP and SSEHV in the common school. Both programmes have been designed for use in the school curriculum and have been lifted out of the religious context which has inspired them and arguably (see below) provided some of their content.

Both are presented to schools in the context of spirituality (not religion), so not primarily for religious education or collective worship. The values debate of the 1990s and its continuation in the discussion of citizenship in the late 1990s have gradually brought the issue of values in school to the fore in a number of respects. The content is shaped to contribute to the provision in schools in England and Wales, for spiritual moral social and cultural development (SMSC), personal, social and health education (PSHE) and citizenship education. Observation in schools (all primary) showed head teachers or senior management to be pragmatic in adopting programmes such as LVEP or SSEHV. They are interested in schemes which cohere with the school ethos and which close a gap in provision (e.g. PSHE) or address issues (e.g. bad behaviour). Some head teachers had no qualms about changing to a better programme if the opportunity arose.

Schools adopt a programme for different combinations of reasons. Personal and professional networks play a role, as does the situation in a particular school – for example, the need to improve pupils’ behaviour or an OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) report identifying a gap in provision. In the case of SSEHV, in two schools, a parent was a volunteer and introduced the programme to the head teacher. The provision of in-service training for teachers at no cost further encouraged uptake. With both SSEHV and LVEP, the fact that the programmes are non-denominational and suitable for schools with culturally diverse intake, and that ready made lessons are available, is attractive to teachers. Timing is also a factor: In one school, awareness of a programme coincided with the school’s revision of PSHE and SMSC. Citizenship education offers scope for using the programmes – both programmes indicate how they contribute. Different elements of the programme appeal to different schools: In one school (whose head promotes music) it is the songs which made the SSEHV programme appealing. In two schools it was explained that the programme concerned fitted the general school ethos (summarised in its mission statement or behaviour policy). In most schools the realisation that children have little time to *reflect* or sit quietly played a role. Once accepted in school, other factors will determine which teachers use it and with what omissions – for example two teachers were uncomfortable with silent sitting/reflection time and would not use it in class. Neither programme is used in undiluted form: The particular situation, motivation, and circumstances of each school and head teacher/senior management plays a role not only in whether, but also in what way, the programme is taken up. Each school considers it a resource on which to draw, rather than to be implemented intact. Flexibility applies to the use of the materials in class as well as to the time scale in lesson plans and termly schemes of work.

However, our observation in school did reveal some commonalities in uptake. Thus, when LVEP or SSEHV are used in a school, time is set aside for the exploration of values in various ways, often through a combination of talking about, experiencing, and practising values. In the case of each programme, our fieldwork found teachers offering visualisation (usually guided and accompanied by music), silence and artistic expression. Values are defined and explored in relation to self and others, made relevant, are *felt*, and represented artistically; creative skills are stimulated and social skills developed. Stories, songs, and games are used as stimuli and vehicles for conveying values – components whose relevance for allowing *spiritual* qualities to develop is recognised and used by other educators (e.g. Grove, 1993). Values activities are woven into the school day – at the beginning of lessons, during circle time (Mosley, 1993), in art or language lessons, or dedicated times, e.g. assemblies. The difference between the programmes was largely a matter of terminology (e.g. BKs’ *reflection* approximates to SSEHV *silent sitting*).

### Issues

Two questions have recurred during the research and its dissemination. One is the significance of the provenance of the programmes (i.e. their *cult* connections) to schools’ uptake. The other is whether the programmes are detectably Hindu.

First the question of provenance: In sociological terms LVEP and SSEHV are phenomena which began at the margins of society and have slowly moved towards greater acceptance, adaptation and institutionalisation. This move may not be a smooth one or one devoid of controversy – a number of NRMs have been associated with *cult controversies* (Beckford, 1985). With regard to the two movements under consideration, in the case of the BKs, there has been little, if any, controversy, since the movement has come to the West,

although there was fierce opposition in its formative period in India, while, in the case of Sathya Sai, serious allegations erupted in 2000 (Brown, 2000; Nagel, 2001). Thus a number of issues arise at the interface between these organisations and the common school.

Our conversations with religious education advisers (whose role includes recommending materials for teachers to use) in two local education authorities indicate that the provenance is an issue. This is because their recommendation of the programme can be perceived as support of the group which has some connection with it. This means that advisers may be wary of commending programmes, whatever their educational merits, and so fewer schools learn of their existence. However, as we have seen, schools learn of the programmes by other routes, and teachers' relative lack of awareness regarding their background suggests that, in schools, provenance is not in tension with the educational merit of such initiatives as a criterion in their selection.

SSEHV mentions Sai Baba as the *teacher* who inspired the programme (Alderman, 1996:66). Some quotations attributed to him appear in the manuals (*op.cit.* 18, 41, 44). The LVEP manuals have a section on the *background of the programme*, which refers to the BKs and the Sharing of Our Values project (e.g. Tillman and Hsu, 2000:ix-x). At LV seminars, the fact that a senior BK addresses the participants and that the location (Global Retreat Centre) is an important BK centre, suggests a link, but the promoters of the programmes do not make explicit connections with SSO or BKs.

Those who develop/promote LV and SSEHV are genuine in their endeavour to make a contribution and give freely of their time and effort. Given the harm to these efforts that being associated with a *cult* could cause, they are afraid of having their efforts ruined by misrepresentation and misunderstanding. This has serious implication for the field researcher and the dissemination of the research data, since potential and actual users could be put off the material if there was a protest against young people being exposed to *cultic* influence. Both programmes are promoted as de-coupled from their original religious context and as non-denominational, and include co-ordinators and supporters who have no links to this context. However, both LVEP and SSEHV rely on volunteers who are steeped in that context. LVEP also enjoys *sponsorship* from the BKs.

Second, there is the question of a Hindu hallmark. Belief in Kali Yuga (the final decadent age) could be seen as a motivation in the development of both programmes – as a contribution to counteract Kali Yuga's chaos and suffering. Devotees believe that Sai Baba has come to the rescue of humanity and the BKs say we are in the age of confluence which is the last stage before the Golden Age recurs (Babb, 1986).

However, this does not mean that the programmes' content detectably reflects this belief. Moreover, values such as love and peace (common to both) could equally be claimed by Christianity, for example. However, the Sai values especially suggest their Indic source. Sathya Sai Baba, whose formulation they are, was nurtured in a Hindu environment. *Right conduct* is the English translation of the centrally Hindu concept of *dharma* (appropriate behaviour) and non-violence is *ahimsa* – a value particularly advocated by Jain teachers and, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially by Mahatma Gandhi. A feature can, of course, be characteristic of a tradition without being peculiar to it. Certainly, many features of both programmes are in tune with elements of the Hindu tradition. For example, the claim to universality itself is one of the 'encompassing' characteristics of some Hindu teaching.

## Conclusion

The programmes can be understood as outreach into the wider community (or service to it) by movements that have reached a stage of establishment and maturity. Certainly for the SSEHV volunteers who are Sai devotees, the programme is part of *Baba's overall plan*. At the same time many schools are receptive of ideas and resources on values education in order to meet government guidelines and statutory requirements. Our research also suggests that some teachers and head teachers feel a need to introduce experiential approaches to values education as a means to counter an overly cognitive national curriculum and to address issues of behaviour and discipline. The programmes are also in tune with current ideas promoted by life coaches, personal trainers, creative management, and self-help programmes based on *spiritual* principles (e.g. Shevlin, 2002). In other words, both push and pull factors are at work simultaneously and the wider social climate is favourable.

It is arguable that there are generic skills and activities associated with religions and spiritual movements that offer an experiential dimension to fields such as moral development, citizenship education and PSHE. Activities such as *stilling* or sitting quietly while concentrating on an idea or value have features in common with some forms of prayer or meditation. The fact that some community primary schools adapt materials influenced by these movements to help children to experience calm and stillness or to explore values may also indicate a need for this type of experiential activity. Research on this interface between religious organisations and schools needs to be discussed as part of the debate on the relationship between religions and values education.

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