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## **Existentialism: Providing an ideal framework for educational research in times of uncertainty ®**

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### *Abstract*

Issues such as anxiety, alienation, crises and concerns over self-identity typify this era of uncertainty. These are also recognised themes of Existentialism and have implications for educational practice and research. The purpose of this paper is threefold. Firstly, it aims to clarify Existentialism, as too often it is mistakenly assumed to refer to an atomistic view of the individual, who is able to exercise absolute freedom. This clarification refers primarily to the works of Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The second purpose is to present an outline of a particular existential framework. This is mainly structured around the notion of the learner, who is characterised as being in relation, culturally embedded, alienated and a meaning-maker. These attributes have direct implications for the ideal of 'the educated person' - an often-articulated 'aim' of education programmes. Becoming educated, according to this framework, means becoming authentic, spiritual, critical, empathetic, and having personal identity.

A third purpose is to argue how educators may usefully employ such a framework. By engaging with it, educators are able to examine effective pedagogical approaches using notions of 'the existential crisis' and anxiety. In this way, educational curriculums, programmes and policies can also be critiqued using this framework.

### **Introduction**

This postmodern era characterised by uncertainty and problematic futures can be considered as a time when alienation and anxiety are being fostered through crises which are produced as the result of the demise of various modernistic metanarratives (Lyotard, 1991). A multitude of global pressures have led individuals to question the legitimacy of more 'local' frameworks that have once been relied upon to provide identities, meanings, values and purposes. They not only find themselves becoming alienated to these traditionally familiar 'givens', but they also experience alienation towards the newly developed alternatives which appear in constant states of negotiation and flux.

Becoming alienated can often manifest itself through feelings of anxiety or *angst*. Having one's 'world' dismantled and reconstructed in a perpetual 'unfinished' state by so many global 'others', produces so many possibilities that individuals must remain uncertain as to how the new world order is to emerge - or even *if* any kind of order is to emerge at all. It is no coincidence then that there is a growing interest in Existentialism (Cooper, 1999, p. viii), because this philosophical school of thought shares these themes of anxiety, alienation,

uncertainty, possibilities and crises, and offers a positive way through them. The recognised father of modern Existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, claimed that life for the individual is a risk-filled existence, and it is on this premise that much of Existentialism is founded.

A central focus is upon the individual rather than on a generalised category used to represent people in mass. Existential writings are aimed to engage each reader as an entity. Kierkegaard often referred to 'my dear reader' and the 'existing individual', and Nietzsche often used phrases such as 'the sovereign individual' and 'the superman'. Heidegger referred to *Dasein*, meaning literally 'being there' - to represent where the individual is at, with regards to her or his concerns for existence in relation to being.

Initially Existentialism may appear to be a morbid philosophy because it deals with depressing themes such as alienation, anxiety, death and crises. To conclude this however, would be to misunderstand it. An expressed purpose of so many of the philosophers who have contributed to this school of thought, is to allow people to experience a greater richness and happiness in their lives and to feel at 'home' in their world. In order to achieve a richer and more valuable existence however, the philosophy often refers to some 'uncomfortable' suggestions. For example, it encourages the individual to stand on the edge of the abyss, to stare at potential non-existence of self, to contemplate the dizziness and terror of freedom, and then in passion to make a leap.

The researcher, while working towards a Doctor of Philosophy degree, has formulated a framework based upon Existentialism. The framework is much too extensive to report here, but some aspects are offered for the purpose of sharing with colleagues, how educational practice and research using the framework may be carried out amid such uncertain and problematic times. It is necessary to briefly clarify some relevant themes of Existentialism, as these are often misunderstood. Following this, some aspects of the framework will then be discussed, and then it shall be demonstrated how such a framework may be useful for others.

## **Existentialism**

As a term, 'Existentialism' appears to refer to a unified school of thought, but this is a problematic assumption, because it is derived from a variety of existential philosophers. Amongst the best known are Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Sartre. Other important contributors include Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Paul Tillich, Martin Buber, Miguel de Unamuno and writers of literature such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Franz Kafka and Joseph Conrad. 'Existentialism' refers to the common themes found amongst these and other thinkers, and is able to stand as a recognised integrated system of philosophy in its own right (Cooper, 1999).

Since its introduction by Gabriel Marcel in the post-war period, 'Existentialism' has suffered from various interpretations and misinterpretations to such a degree that even Sartre (1948, pp. 25-26) wrote that "the word [existentialism] is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all". As a term, it is derived from the word *existence*, implying that the individual has presence-in-the-world. Heidegger included the hyphen in his term *Ek-sistenz* to accentuate the Greek and Latin origins which mean 'to stand out from', and applied it to mean that the individual stands out from, or beyond, his or her present. He described this as 'possibilities' or 'ways to be', and explained it as, "The analysis of the characteristics of the being of Da-sein is an existential one. This means that the characteristics are not properties of something objectively present, but essentially existential ways to be" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 126).

Heidegger used the term *existential* to refer to the structure of the individual in general. He designated his term *existentiell* to mean self-understanding, how an individual understands himself or herself. But this self-understanding is only possible through existence itself, as Heidegger often emphasised the practicality of his lived philosophy. He argued that "We come to terms with the question of existence always only through existence itself. We shall call *this* kind of understanding of itself *existentiell* understanding" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 10).

The nature of this school of thought demands that several themes be recognised, as they are considered here to be interdependent upon one another, but it is not possible in this particular paper to provide more than a brief overview of some of these. This section shall now briefly address several themes that have importance for the formulation of a framework that can be used for educational research, particularly for this era of uncertainty.

### Subjectivity

According to Existentialism, individuals cannot understand their own being ontologically, because this requires knowing objectively what *is*. Kierkegaard's (1992, vol. 1, p. 203) claim that "subjectivity is truth" was not a declaration as to what 'Truth' in an absolute sense might be. He argued that such a claim clearly identified that his interest regarding human existence was not upon any 'objective' *what*, but rather it was upon *how* the individual made sense of and related to entities (Kierkegaard, 1992, vol. 1, p. 202-203). Existential subjectivity, sometimes referred to as *inwardness*, focusses upon the way that the individual believes, rather than the object of the belief.

Heidegger went to great length to argue that the subjectivity of the individual did not refer to an arbitrariness. He too shifted the traditional Western emphasis of conceptualising 'truth' as the correspondence between statement and fact, and promoted instead the Greek term *aletheia* to represent truth. This term refers to the uncovering of hidden things, taking them out of their concealment, and therefore he argued that one's subjectivity could be "in" truth through *how* one related to entities (Heidegger, 1988, p. 18, 217; 1996, p. 202). Subjective understanding is conceived through how one finds oneself in relation to what one relates to.

### Freedom

Individual freedom can be understood through the possibilities that an individual has. Therefore existential freedom cannot be absolute as it is always contextualised to the situation of each individual. Freedom is therefore inextricably linked to the notion of choice, in that one can choose from amongst one's own possibilities. Once a choice has been made and acted upon, then one possibility becomes actuality, while other possibilities become negated. The dynamics of this interface between possibility, actuality and freedom of choice, is a major part of Existentialism.

An inherent aspect to this notion of freedom of choice, is responsibility. The existential perspective developed here considers that the individual who exercises personal freedom of choice must also be willing to accept responsibility for these decisions. The challenge then, as many existential writers have identified, is that individuals find it difficult to accept that they always have possibilities and are free to choose between them. They may not have the freedom to affect the 'objective reality' of certain entities, but they do have possibilities in how they relate to their relations with other entities. This implies that individuals are responsible for their subjective/inward existence, which can be a daunting challenge.

## Authenticity

According to the existentialists, becoming *authentic* allows one to determine how things are to count towards one's situation and how one is to act in relation to them. This term 'authentic' is derived from the Greek *autos*, referring to 'one who does a thing for himself'. Derived from this is the German *eigen* meaning to 'own', and by implication, 'to have, possess'. Heidegger (1996, p. 40) combined this with *eigentlich*, meaning 'real(ly), actual(ly)', to describe the authentic Dasein as being 'my own'. The degree of voluntariness associated with this mode of being, is not always entirely clear.

Generally the existentialists consider authentic individuals to take responsibility for determining and choosing possibilities and not to simply become a determined product of a cultural moment. Heidegger stated that the '*existentia*' has priority over the '*essentia*', and this view has been made popular through the works of Sartre, although it appears that Heidegger did not always agree with Sartre's interpretations. The concepts of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* are built upon the works of Kierkegaard (1987, vol.2, p. 259) that state when becoming authentic, "the individual has known himself and has chosen himself". This is necessary to prevent one simply 'losing' oneself, which is so much easier to let happen than to becoming authentic. Kierkegaard's writings call the individual back out of the crowd to live an authentic existence. By living authentically, one can choose one's own identity and possibilities rather than have these dictated by the crowd.

## Anxiety & Alienation

Feelings of alienation can emerge from the recognition that one's world has received its meaning from the crowd or others, and not from oneself, or that one is out of touch with one's 'inner self'. This latter notion is emphasised by Zohar and Marshall (2000, p. 170-171) who argue that our present "personal and collective mental instability follows from the peculiar form of alienation associated with alienation from the centre - alienation from meaning, value, purpose and vision, alienation from the roots of and reasons of our humanity".

Existentialism diagnoses alienation as a *spiritual* condition (Cooper, 1999, p. 32; Zohar and Marshall, 2000), and can be traced back to Hegel's notion of *Geist* (spirit, mind). However, Existentialism does not promote dualistic models of self and the world, or self and an 'inner self', but explains this condition as self-estrangement. Alienation is seen as a necessary prerequisite before the individual can dwell authentically at 'home' with self and the world.

To experience feelings of alienation, one questions and doubts the way that one relates to the relations that one has with other entities. The term 'doubt' is etymologically related to *doubleness*. This reflects the uncertainty of the tension between actuality and possibility. The phenomenon of anxiety - as an important characteristic of the existential crisis - is regarded as a rarity and has been described as "the manifestation of freedom in the face of self" (Sartre, 1969, p. 35). Experiencing anxiety *individuates*, hence 'death' as an issue readily lends itself to this crisis because only oneself can die one's own death.

When Heidegger's Dasein is confronted with the structure of its existence, it experiences *angst* - or anxiety. This experience individuates, it acknowledges the *thrownness* by which one is in the world with its entities, including language and culture. He argued that that "What *Angst* is anxious for is being-in-the-world", and yet is "nothing and nowhere" (Heidegger, 1996, p. 175). In *angst*, Dasein is anxious for itself. This individualizing experience lays before Dasein the choice of authenticity or inauthenticity as possibilities of its being.

## Existential Crises

An existential crisis is understood as a 'crisis' because it offers a potential turning point to *change*. It is 'existential' because it produces an *angst*, or anxiety, characterised by feelings of doubt and uncertainty, and it *individuates*, in that the meanings decided upon become one's *own* for which one becomes *responsible*. An existential crisis challenges whether the meanings of society that have been accepted inauthentically as 'givens', offer real significance for one's own experiences. Through this, one recognises what is of most significance for one's life, and this allows one to prioritize the things that matter in order of their importance.

Making sense of one's existence in a world of uncertainty, requires one to *question* the way one *relates* to the taken-for-granted basic concepts or meanings, that are disclosed to the self. Possibilities are only recognised as *one's own* through authenticity, as one first discloses them and then *chooses*. Existential choice refers to a commitment with one's *whole* existence (passion) to a sense of meaning for one's situation. Without a crisis to make one become aware of public meanings that give sense to life, the meanings and purposes of the individual would remain essentially inauthentic and under-developed.

Existential crises do not require only extreme life-threatening events. A crisis may be made quite indirectly, as has been the method of many existential writers. What is necessary is that the individuals be confronted to *doubt* their own understandings, and consequently be motivated by an *angst* to question one's assumed understandings. This individualises by asking each person to engage with disclosing activities that 'unconceal' and make coherent, his or her meanings and purposes. An existential crisis is argued by Kierkegaard (1987, vol.2, p. 228; 1992, vol.1, p. 622) to provide the *jolt* that is needed for the individual to engage in the "ambiguous art of thinking about existence and existing". 'Doubt' is considered by Gadamer (1992, p. 234) to be "the condition that loosens rigid thinking and makes it possible to explore alternatives and clarify where we stand". Therefore an era of uncertainty can be considered to offer a rich potential for the development of individuals to be able to feel at 'home' with themselves and their world.

## Self-Identity

From an existential perspective, a sense of self-identity is gained by *how* an individual relates to and values his or her relations. For meaning to be made of one's self-identity, one needs to engage with the issue of 'who am I?' It is not made through objective or abstract categories, which relate to the 'what' of one's being (for example gender, age, rationality, career, sibling status, etc.). This latter categorisation can only be an attempt to answer the question '*what* am I?' which is an aspect of the metaphysical question 'what is man?'

While these frameworks offer some useful reference for making sense of one's self-identity, Charles Taylor (1989) argues that personal identity is also spiritually dependent. His notion of spirituality is described as a 'strong evaluation' and it is 'strong' or 'deep', because the individual "goes deeper" and "characterizes his motivation at greater depth" (Taylor, 1985, p. 25). Strong evaluations contribute to one's spirituality because they are chosen and made valuable by the individual on the basis of what she or he considers to be worthwhile. They identify the reasons why one does (acting, judging, etc.) what one does. These reasons reveal both what is of importance and the criteria by which they are valued. This accords well with contemporary acknowledgement that the individual, within a cultural context, has an active role in crafting and unfolding personal identity.

## An Existential Framework

There are many aspects to the framework that have been developed by the researcher, and these are mostly based upon the notion of the existing individual. This framework is argued to have a rich and useful potential in this era characterised by problematic futures and uncertainty, because such challenges can manifest themselves as existential concerns for individuals, such as 'who am I?', 'what is the meaning of life and of my life in particular?' 'how am I to make decisions and how am I to live my life?'. These are often experienced as crises, anxiety and alienation.

The existential perspective adopted here may be problematic in some respects, but it is nevertheless argued to offer important value as a framework for educational practice and research. The emphasis upon the individual allows the framework to be applicable for addressing specific educational issues involving the learner, such as pedagogy, curriculum and policy, which shall be considered in the following section.

The particular aspects of an existential framework to be shared here, involve the nature of the existing individual. Such a framework considers that the individual can be considered to be culturally embedded, a relation, free to choose, holistic, a meaning-maker, able to create self-identity and has authenticity to some degree. Only some of these aspects shall now be discussed.

### The Learner

The central element for an existential framework is the learner, who is characterised as being culturally embedded. This therefore does not promote a view of extreme individualism, where all value and meaning must originate from within each person. Rather, through the disclosure of culturally embedded meanings, the individual in subjective inwardness can ask 'how do these count for me?' and 'what significance do they offer my particular existence?' The fact that these cultural meanings are often uncertain does not problematise subjective truths here, because the individual makes a stand as to *how* he or she relates to them.

Existentially, all individuals are understood to be in-the-world, and therefore are already historically and culturally embedded beings. As an individual attempts to make sense of the world he or she is in, personal identity and the meaning of life operate from an already existing horizon of understanding. This horizon consists to a large extent of meanings received from one's culture. One cannot 'think' or reason without these because they constitute what one thinks with. This existential framework does not support the view that understanding on the part of the individual can be developed or constructed by imposing information from the 'outside'. It also rejects the Platonic view that a meaning can be developed simply by drawing it out from 'inside' the individual. While 'subjectivity', 'subjective truth' and 'inward looking' are terms of reference for this framework, they do not indicate that personal *inner* truth can 'emerge' independently from being-in-the-world.

While the individual is understood to be embedded within a particular culture, this does not negate agency. As has been previously discussed, a certain freedom can be exercised with regards to how one relates to the meanings that one confronts from being in a culture (Wertsche, 1998). A certain 'space' can be created between the frameworks provided by a society and the individually created meanings that offer personal significance. This space can be described as being a "dangerous" tension between "the upper millstone of its traditional definition, as a particular path given by a tradition or community, and the lower of its modern and post-modern definition as the individual's exalted or transcending experience" (Chater, 2000, p. 194). From an existential perspective there is no support for the metaphor of a 'space' that exists between these apparent polar opposites. However, it is

argued here that existential anxiety is present in this sort of anguish and struggle as one strives to exercise one's sense of freedom and decide which meanings offer greater personal significance, and therefore how one relates to these. Therefore, educational development of the individual is understood to involve the freedom to choose, where each choice must necessarily lead to a problematic future, as no decision can come with a guaranteed outcome.

There is encouragement from existential writers for one to choose authentically oneself (Heidegger, 1988, p. 170; Kierkegaard, 1987, vol.2, p. 259), and to create and own one's possibilities. Consequently, this framework is quite different from those that emphasise the immersion of the individual in particular traditions of various world-views or discourses. Such models only consider the internal consistency offered by formal frameworks or the diversity of world-views 'out there', without including the aspect of personal relevance being made with its associated ownership and commitment. These models could potentially promote only an inauthentic existence. The existential framework goes beyond this, and addresses the aspect of *how* an individual relates to and possibly finds personal significance and meaning in world-views, by exercising freedom to choose these meanings to be his or her *own*.

'Meaning' is always a derivative of the intention of beings and is not intrinsic to other entities (Bruner, 1990; Morris, 1992, p. 57; Smagorinsky, 1995, p. 165). Life, as an abstract concept, does not have meaningful purposes for individuals. Nietzsche (1990, p. 65) argued that "it is absurd to *hand over*" ourselves to some purpose, because "in reality purpose is *lacking*". The learner, as a being, is able to *make* life meaningful. The meanings that other entities in-the-world appear to provide for the learner, do not need to be accepted as 'givens'. The learner is able to *make* sense, meaning and purpose for all experiences and other entities that are encountered, including oneself. This meaning-making characteristic also extends to the sense of personal identity. One can make and choose how one understands one's personal identity, through giving meaning, value and importance, to one's relations to other entities.

One's *Existenz*, according to Heidegger, engages with one's choices both in 'everyday averageness' and in crises. Consequently he avoided the notion that humankind is an epistemological being, who comes 'to know' conceptually (*begreifen*) objective interpersonal norms, values and truths. 'Know-how', is embedded in the overall *understanding* or 'horizon' of an individual. Humankind does not know a way-to-be, but rather *exists by being*. Therefore rather than attempt to address 'knowledge' as if it were a separate component to an individual's existence, it is argued here that it is more helpful and relevant to engage with the *understanding* of existence, of being, of life itself, that the individual has. Kierkegaard (1980, p. 185) stressed the important difference between impersonal knowledge and personal understanding, and argued "every man, if he carefully examines himself, possesses within himself a more complete expression for everything human than the *summa summarum* of all the knowledge that he gains".

According to this existential framework, in order for learning to occur, the very *understanding* that the individual has, needs to be challenged, and not just his or her 'knowledge'. This notion of understanding as represented through the German *verstehen* implies a holistic and clear grasp of something, and is not simply a conceptual comprehension in a more cognitive sense, as represented by *begreifen*. Due to this notion of understanding being so all encompassing, the implication is that the very meanings that people live by - their *beliefs* - must be confronted if educative change is to be made possible. This is much more challenging than addressing only conceptual frameworks on a cognitive level.

As the individual is understood to be in relation, the major emphasis according to this existential framework is *how* she or he *relates* to the meanings that are provided by cultural frameworks (e.g., religions) or by the self. As the individual is uniquely situated among relations-in-the-world, his or her sense of identity can be gained from such a position. However, more revealing of one's identity is the value that one places in these relations, whereby one identifies the criteria by which one can prioritize and value each of the relations that one has in the world. These criteria form a basis of what one is willing to stand for - or even die for. They identify who one is.

### The Educated Person

An articulated aim of many educational programmes, often refers to the educated person. There are five characteristics of this ideal that are formulated by this existential framework. These include becoming more authentic, more spiritual, having a critical attitude, having a clear sense of personal identity and a developing empathetic awareness towards others.

Educational intervention should not simply provide an awareness of the coherence of cultural frameworks or 'objective' discourses, but should also enable understanding to become authentically developed. This is the first characteristic, where the educated person is able to *choose* and to make his or her life meaningful, and should not be conditioned to passively inherit meaningfulness from others.

While one is never completely able to authenticate or even to recognise *all* the meanings one has gained from being culturally embedded, the authentic use of one's existential freedom enables one to recognise and make possibilities for oneself. The exercising of one's agency is understood to be contingent and is not absolute. Cultural and institutional frameworks which offer universal meanings, should be engaged with by the individual who authentically is able to contextualise them with regards to his or her own experiences. Possibilities can be produced through such encounters which are then understood to be personally owned. Consequently as one chooses one's possibilities with regards to how one gives meaning and purpose to all of one's activities, one accepts ownership and therefore responsibility for committing one's existence and therefore all of one's decisions to the understanding that one has. Through this authenticating of the individual, a passionate commitment that gives meaning and purpose to the way that one exists can be developed.

Having such consistency toward the various experiences of one's existence is argued to be spiritual. From a unified spirituality one is able to make sense of and give value and purpose to all experiences. One is aware of the presence that one has in various roles. These roles may be superficially understood as fragmented, but through becoming spiritually educated one is able to draw oneself together and recognise the unity of one's spirituality that gives meanings to the presence that one has in these various life roles. Being aware of this spiritual core provides an essential understanding for the educated person as to how she or he is able to make experiences meaningful and is able to form judgements as to what is and is not to be valued.

In order to exercise one's freedom in an authentic manner it is also necessary that the educated person develop a critical attitude. Having a critical attitude is a third characteristic of the educated person and indicates that persons appreciate that they have a certain degree of unquestioned meanings that constitute how they make sense of, and give value and purpose to life. It is recognised that the educated person be necessarily a life-long learner. Through having one's understandings 'open' one appreciates the nature of what it is to *be* 'in' subjective truth.

The characteristic of being 'open' to possibilities includes a willingness to allow others to re-evaluate those aspects of one's understandings that can be articulated. If one chooses to 'close' oneself off from the criticisms of others, one is no longer educated. Having an 'openness' in this regard allows one to come to an understanding of self and others, which according to Faure (1972) is necessary if one is to *learn to be*.

The educated person should become aware of *how* s/he relates to the entire curriculum. One is understood to be 'in' truth by critically examining and reflecting upon all which one understands. Therefore, the traditionally accepted meanings attached to various issues should be "touched with a hammer" (Nietzsche, 1990, p. 32) both to 'sound them out' and to examine how the learner is attuned to them. This most certainly is *not* to imply that the traditions valued by a culture are to be overturned simply because they have not originated within the individual. Rather they are to be examined as to *why* they are valuable and ought to be retained. Societal members are more likely therefore to become *passionately committed* to worthwhile meanings rather than passive recipients of unquestioned and therefore unvalued 'givens'.

Understanding, creating and choosing one's personal identity - who one is and what one stands for - is a fourth characteristic of the educated person. Personal identity may reference historical, sociological, religious and biological frameworks, but to be effective in a world where these sources are undergoing many changes, it is necessary that personal identity goes beyond any system of categorisation and reach to the personal significance found in these. As was indicated earlier, much of one's sense of personal identity is established through one's *values* and the *reasons* for having such values. The development of personal identity demands that one clarify to oneself what one's 'strong evaluation' is, and the justifications for how one relates, evaluates, believes, feels, acts and therefore exists.

A fifth characteristic of educated persons is that they have the ability to make judgements with regards to what is worthwhile and valuable in themselves and in others. This should be demonstrated by an empathetic awareness for others whom they are in-the-world-with. This is more than having sympathetic 'feelings' or a moral disposition in the sense that one is *obliged* to follow certain behaviours because the culture - the 'they' - have determined that those behaviours should be 'what one does'.

This characteristic is found repeatedly in the works of Nietzsche (1989, p. 44; 1998, p. 36), where he argued that 'the *sovereign individual*' was free from 'the morality of custom' where traditional morals negated the intention and therefore the responsibility of the individual. After the death of God, the sovereign individual can only find the ground of obligation to others in himself or herself alone. One must have a 'why' to live by and from this one comes to know oneself and one's relation to 'the earth' in which one finds meaning. Through his educator Zarathustra, Nietzsche (1978, p. 77) argued that the individual should "serve the sense of the earth" and by helping yourself "you help your patient too". The notion of *care* is inclusive of others with whom one is in the world.

### **Employing the Existential Framework**

The existential framework as briefly described above, has important value for educators and researchers, especially for this present era. Current uncertainty produces challenges that can be surmounted through an existential approach. It is argued here that educational research is able to examine the effectiveness of pedagogies, curriculums, policies and programmes using this existential framework with regards to how effectively they facilitate learners into becoming educated persons.

The ideal of the educated person continues to be a dynamic notion contingent upon what is required for individuals to live well in particular cultural settings. It has been argued that there are a number of characteristics that need to be included in this ideal. These characteristics are able to incorporate uncertainty and enable people to live well. This is seen to be the fundamental aim of education.

From the perspective of this existential framework the confrontations of crises and the feelings of alienation and anxiety do not need to be seen as problematic ends in themselves. The framework can be used to understand these as potentially positive conditions for the educational development of persons. In order to demonstrate how this framework is able to offer value, guidelines are offered as to what researchers should look for in the areas of pedagogy, curriculum, policy and programmes. In order to engage positively with an existential approach there are certain conditions required within these areas which shall now be explored.

### Pedagogical Activities

The implications upon pedagogical activities that emerge from this framework are seen to require them to progress through three phases. The first phase should produce a coherent understanding of one's current beliefs, through disclosive activities. Through such activities, the underlying belief structure of learners should become both unconcealed and coherent - although these characteristics are never attained absolutely. However, there should be a *unity* of meaning in how all things 'hang together', concerning the meaning of one's existence. This needs to be clarified initially before any further authentic development is possible.

The second phase of pedagogical activities, is to be confrontational because the existing beliefs of the learners needs to be challenged. The purpose of the confrontation is to lead the learner to *doubt* her or his understandings. It is through experiencing doubt that one can seriously consider possibilities for one's spirituality. If there were no confrontations, no doubt to produce anxiety, then there would be no occasion to re-evaluate one's actual understandings and to consider other possibilities. At the interface between one's possibilities and one's actual understanding, one experiences anxiety as one considers how to exercise existential freedom in choosing and/or creating what one's beliefs and values are to be. A challenging *jolt* is argued to be the catalyst that is able to encourage the learner to move through such anxious moments. Consequently, it is argued that confrontational learning activities are appropriate to use in this development.

After students have attempted to articulate their beliefs and the reasons for having such views, crisis activities challenge whether they are able to make their life meaningful in specific circumstances. Individuals need to become aware that they, as individuals (rather than as identical members of a crowd) make life worth living through the making of purposes for which they become responsible. Authentic development depends upon one *questioning* the way one *relates* to the taken-for-granted basic concepts or meanings, which are disclosed to the self. Possibilities are only recognised as *one's own* through authenticity, as one first discloses them and then *chooses* oneself in one's situation.

The third phase involves activities that allow for re-evaluation. Once doubt and anxiety are experienced, the learner is 'ready' to re-evaluate her or his understandings. The re-evaluation activities can occur in two ways - through inwardness and through dialogue with other horizons. When re-evaluating by inwardness, the ideal learning activity is argued to be meditative and reflective thinking. Heidegger (1966, pp. 47, 56) has argued that humankind may be characterised as a meditating being. The meaning of one's life can often only be accessed in solitariness through reflection. This engagement is meditative in the sense that

it is not the 'rightness' or logical reason of a thought that is of concern, but it is the *meaning* of one's existence and *how* one is *attuned* that are of paramount concern. Without meditative reflection one cannot engage in existential thinking. It is an individuating activity that must be conducted away from the crowd.

The potential dilemma for adopting a 'subjective' means of re-evaluation of one's understanding is that it may become so relative that it may succumb to individual arbitrariness and become educationally unsound. However, the understandings that an individual has are not isolated from the other meanings found in society and therefore are grounded even further by being hermeneutical. What is valued through one's beliefs is necessarily integrated with the understandings found in society. There is consequently a unity of meaning to be found *both* in the holistic understandings of the individual, *and* through the fusion with other horizons found in society. Beliefs can be re-evaluated, and hence become validated as educational, through the unity they have with all the other understandings that an authentic individual has, and secondly through the fusing with the horizons of others.

Teachers are potentially able to offer a very valuable 'other horizon' which is able to assess qualitatively the understandings of students. Teachers can be most influential in the educational development of students' spirituality if, through their interaction, 'crises' can be created. Teachers can be the learner's '*best enemy*' (Nietzsche, 1978, p. 56), able to 'wound' (Nietzsche, 1996, p. 139) most provokingly. This is somewhat like playing the 'devil's advocate' in order to test and to clarify the understandings of others.

Using this existential framework, pedagogical activities can be researched and evaluated as to whether they effectively facilitate the development of characteristics argued to be necessary to live well amongst uncertainty. Researchers are able to examine learning activities using these three phases as guiding criteria. There are many other styles of activities other than what has been touched on here. However, these three appear to be most suited to engaging with an existential approach.

### Curriculum

In addition to pedagogical activities, the framework can be used to evaluate the curriculum. Researchers can examine various curriculums to determine if there is to be positive engagements with an existential approach. A traditional strategy for many subjects has been to transmit content that is thought to be worthwhile. Such worthwhile content is often considered to be a 'product', a 'what' that is valued of and by itself, and therefore as having 'closed' meanings. The 'curriculum' can be understood from a number of perspectives (Grundy, 1987) as it encompasses many facets. The subject content is the only aspect to be included here as this is potentially the most challenging for an existential perspective.

The subject content, according to this existential framework, is to be found in everyone's horizon. Heidegger's (1996, p. xix) 'ontological problem' of raising "anew the question of the meaning of being" can only be engaged with by the existing individual and not through any category of being including that of 'humankind'. An attempt to form an external body of information to be transmitted from the syllabus to the student degrades "existential thinking by moving it from a level of participation to a level of spectatorship" (Wingerter, 1973, p. 253). The existential framework could never support a position in which students are encouraged to accept 'knowledge' that they have never made their own (Wirth, 1955, p. 155). However, this does not necessarily make this framework 'contentless'.

From this existential framework it is argued that education should involve the notion of becoming 'truly human' and aim to *awaken awareness* in the learner, whose meaning of

existence becomes a concern. As such, this framework offers engagement with questions that address the central issues of life. Material argued to be potentially universally relevant for all students is constituted in *existential questions*. This content is not to be conceptually or cognitively speculated upon because it has no 'closed meanings'. Nor does it 'arrive' at any answers but rather it offers questions to be *lived* and reflected on. These questions are argued to have more value in this context than any formal 'content of answers'. There cannot be general answers to these questions, because all responses are contingent upon the particular existence of each individual (Ayer, 1990, p. 196).

Many understandings covered by various subjects found in the traditional curriculums can form a reference for the individual to ask and reflect on the question, 'what does this mean for me?'. This is more than just rational reflection on one's epistemology as it is meditative in the sense that one's very meaning of existence is an issue. Consequently, spirituality is able to offer a *unity* of meaning for each individual which embraces a personal relevance for the entire curriculum.

The individual cannot become detached in the pursuit of an 'objectivist' epistemology as per propositional truths but must be *in* relationships of truth. Therefore this existential framework implies that education should not assume that the subjectivity of the individual is to make sense of an absolute 'real' world 'out' there. The learner-is-in-the-world and therefore it is the world that the individual puts into perspective. Truth therefore refers to *how* the individual *relates* rather than what he or she cognitively 'knows'. This notion of truth presents a challenge for the inclusion of any subject content into the curriculum as the emphasis is on the *how* of attunement rather than the *what* of traditional epistemological propositions that readily lend themselves to the idea of content. It implies an attitudinal disposition.

### Policies and Programmes

When using this existential framework for examining educational policies and programmes, researchers can search for stated opportunities for the learner to give meaning, significance and value to educative experiences. This framework provides five qualitative indicators which include: that through education, one should come to know and choose oneself; that one should become aware of one's freedom to make meaning - including the meanings of one's personal identity; that one should live life purposefully by making one's own meanings and purposes; one should be passionately committed to these; and that one should have a critical attitude to both the meanings for one's life and one's identity. If these five indicators are present, it is argued that learners participating in such programmes will be able to live well in this era of uncertainty.

The *Adelaide declaration on National Goals for Schooling in the twenty-first century* shall be briefly referred to here to offer an example. The preamble to these national goals states that, "Schooling provides a foundation for young Australians' intellectual, physical, social, moral, spiritual and aesthetic development" (Australian Ministerial Council of Education, 2000). These dimensions are listed in such a way that they almost reflect the inverse of the list in England's *Education Reform Act 1988*. This Act states that the curriculum should be one that "promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society" (1988, quoted by Gilliat, 1996, p. 161). The significance of this difference is argued to involve the spiritual dimension (Webster, 2002). In England, the spiritual dimension involves "our responses to challenging experiences, such as death, suffering, beauty, and encounters with good and evil. It has to do with the search for meaning and purpose in life and for values by which to live" (National Curriculum Council, 1993, p. 2). The Australian national goals document has not developed any detail to describe this dimension that is argued here to be the most relevant for engaging with existential concerns.

Within the Australian national goals document the statement is made that when students leave school they should -

1. have the capacity to exercise judgement and responsibility in matters of morality, ethics and social justice, and the capacity to make sense of their world, to think about how things got to be the way they are, to make rational and informed decisions about their own lives and to accept responsibility for their own actions.

(Australian Ministerial Council of Education, 2000)

The phrase "to make sense of their world" may be assumed to imply a type of indication that would be indicative of the existential framework. However, the criticisms that both Kierkegaard and Heidegger made about the dominance of the *logos* over the *mythos*, appears also to be present here. There is little indication in these national goals of how learners are able to make sense of their existence in a world of uncertainty.

Another example of examining an educational programme using this framework is shared here using the State government of Queensland's "2010 Strategy". The content found in the purposes of education section of this programme would suggest that State education in Queensland is responding to the issues of competition and the alarming downward spiral of the socio-economic demographics challenging political leaders rather than the existential concerns of human existence (Education Queensland, 1999, p. 5-13).

In one of the early drafts, this strategy referred frequently to the UNESCO report *Learning: the treasure within* (Delors, 1998). This report focussed on a model of four pillars - learning to live together; learning to know; learning to do; and learning to be. The fourth Pillar, 'Learning to be', is described as -

*Learning to Be*: This type of learning leads to self-knowledge. It should contribute to the development of the whole person - mind and body, intelligence, sensitivity, aesthetic appreciation and spirituality. Learning to be develops an independent, critical way of thinking and judgement so that individuals can make up their own minds on the best courses of action in different circumstances throughout their lives. (Schofield, 1999, p. 17)

This description accords well with the implications developed from the existential framework. The description of this same pillar as given in a draft of Queensland's strategy, stated that "learning to be: the development of individual personalities to be creative, independent and responsible, with opportunities for aesthetic, artistic, scientific, cultural and social discovery. These skills are a building block for economic progress" (Education Queensland, 1999, p. 22). This second sentence is a direct misrepresentation of how the Pillar appears in other sources.

The agenda of the 2010 project appears to be primarily one of economic interest rather than having a concern for the development of the whole person. Queensland State education is not alone in creating this imbalance between the pursuit of economic goals over the development of the individual as a social being as "economic goals have dominated discussion and policy initiatives both in the US and in virtually all advanced industrial countries" (Rumberger, 1998, p. 7). However, it is *not* suggested here that an engagement with existential concerns is unable to offer a usefulness for an economically competitive environment.

Each of the five components of the framework has sufficient power in its respective domain to allow a critical assessment of educational policy. It is argued here from this framework that an effective response to the challenges presented by contemporary forces for change is one that focuses upon addressing the holistic development of learners as individual spiritual and moral agents. In order to recognise one's ethical responsibility to the 'other' there first needs to be recognition of the self. This is because "only a self can recognise another" (Neiman, 2000, p. 574). Contemporary conditions of uncertainty do affect possibilities among which individuals may choose and these choices do determine the quality of future life. These choices are argued to be essentially *moral* choices not technical ones. Individuals need to be clear as to *why* they should be motivated to be moral in addition to being able to think skilfully and critically in ethically problematic situations. Such a response that recognises the need for the moral development of the individual is argued here to be largely dependent upon the existential concerns because these form the foundation for ethical judgements, choices and behaviour.

## Conclusion

This paper has endeavoured to clarify Existentialism and show how it incorporates conditions of uncertainty to positively promote living well. The 'objective reality' of uncertainties cannot be changed. Therefore, there needs to be an emphasis upon subjectively *how* individuals relate to, and give meaning to entities.

The existential framework shared here draws mainly from the themes of subjectivity, freedom, authenticity, anxiety, the existential crisis and self-identity. It represents the existing individual -the learner - as one who becomes individuated through experiencing certain crisis which disclose how he or she relates to his or her relations to other entities in the world. Such crises are inextricably linked to an existence in an environment of uncertainty with problematic futures. The individual, as a learner, can learn to accept that he or she has a personal freedom and to exercise it courageously and responsibly. Rather than passively claim to be a victim of circumstance the individual is able to recognise possibilities and make choices and meanings that offer significant value on a personal level. The framework also provides criteria by which pedagogies, curriculums, policies and programmes can be evaluated. The criteria developed from this allow learners to make their experiences and their existence meaningful in an otherwise uncertain and potentially pointless universe.

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