Paul Cummins, founder of Crossroads School for Arts and Sciences (California), once wrote, “Most of us do not flunk out of life intellectually; we fail emotionally and spiritually.” I imagine that most readers would agree with this view. Even a fortunate life includes its share of emotional struggle and spiritual questioning. Moreover, we all know of otherwise high-functioning adults who have trouble with certain invaluable skills — how to listen deeply to another, how to resolve conflicts, how to create a life of meaning and purpose, how to be in the present moment.

Still, even though these kinds of competencies are tremendously helpful in life — and, thus, highly valued in the adult world — you wouldn’t know it to look at the curriculum of the majority of schools. Perhaps it is thought that exploring these areas is beyond the purview of schools, or that the skills mentioned aren’t even teachable. Or maybe it just seems there are more practical things to cover. Fortunately, there are many schools that still believe in educating the whole child. The question is: how far should we go in this direction? What I like so much about Crossroads School, where I work, is its striking and unwavering commitment to human development, keeping it front and center as much as possible.

“An educator who excludes consideration of the interior life of young people from curricular priorities,” says Roger Weaver, headmaster of Crossroads School, “is like a physician who excludes talking to the patient from the protocol of diagnosis. Children and adolescents do not live in the cognitive realm, yet this is where too many schools put virtually all their resources. Crossroads puts human development on the same shelf with academics and the arts because that is the only sensible thing to do. Cognitive development is obviously a core element of education. Personal, social, human development and creative, imaginative, expressive development are equally important. This view is reflected in Crossroads’ school philosophy, in our allocation of resources, and in our program.”

**Education and Human Development**

Crossroads demonstrates this commitment, in part, through its Human Development department, and through the department’s Life Skills program in particular. Crossroads proclaims five basic commitments, two of which — “commitment to the greater community” and “commitment to the development of each student’s physical well-being and full human potential” — provide the foundation upon which the experiential programs of the Human Development department are built. Our intention in all grades, kindergarten through 12th grade, is to help students understand the importance of developing their mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual capacities as an integrated process within their lives. To develop something is to “work out the possibilities of” that thing. In Human Development, then, we ask the students to explore the question: What are the possibilities of being human?

Each of our five Human Development programs — Life Skills, Community Service, Environmental and Outdoor Education (EOE), Physical Education, and Counseling — assists students in this exploration of what it means to be human. In each, we want students to ponder essential questions: Who am I? What matters to me? How can I support others and be supported? In what kinds of physical activity can I express myself? How can I give back to the community? Where is my place in the world of nature, and how do I want to enjoy and protect the Earth? Fundamentally, the questions revolve around relationships — the relationships we have with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us. As for the answers... students have to discover those for themselves.

Because we have integrated these programs into one super-department, we are able to explore links between mind, body, heart, and spirit. For example, EOE and Community Service team up to offer environmental service projects; Physical Education and EOE collaborate to offer rock climbing during our upper-school physical education classes, and so forth.

**Focus on Life Skills**

While all the Human Development programs reflect the school’s desire to assist students in their full human potential, it is our Life Skills Program, created early in the school’s history, that is perhaps most uncommon. It was originally called the Mysteries Program, since it addressed the deeper “mysteries of life” that preoccupy students, but which are rarely addressed in most schools’ curricula. In the beginning, says Cummins, “there was, naturally, some resistance on the part of a few students and parents who feared that the program was disguised religion or quasi-therapy or a watered-down encounter group. But gradually, everyone came to see it was not.”

At first offered only for seniors, the need was soon seen to include other grade levels. Eventually, through the efforts of many dedicated faculty members and administrators, it evolved into the Life Skills Program in operation today.
In the elementary school, the main classroom teacher facilitates the Life Skills curriculum. Time is set aside weekly to explore units such as conflict resolution, bullying prevention, family diversity, safe touch, and (in the fifth grade) puberty education. Often, teachers will take time to address classroom issues that arise spontaneously. In the middle and upper schools, the structure of the program changes as Life Skills becomes its own class at every grade level, a pass/fail class required for graduation. Classes meet weekly for an hour in grades 6 through 9, and for two hours in grades 10 through 12. Classes are coeducational and range in size from 12 to 18 students, with the larger classes occurring in the higher grades.

In the Life Skills classes, we use a variety of methodologies, including art projects, initiative games, role-playing, discussions, and visualization. But at the heart of the program is Council. Adapted from Native-American and other cultural traditions, Council is a process where participants sit in a circle and use a talking piece that signifies who can speak (students always have the right to pass). There are four intentions of Council: speak from the heart; listen from the heart; be brief; be spontaneous. Councils can be open or thematic, depending on the needs of the group. Through Council, students have the opportunity to become present, to practice the art of deep listening, to feel heard, and to appreciate the fuller humanity of classmates they may have stereotyped or written off for years.

In addition to the four intentions, classes generate group agreements regarding respectful behavior and issues of confidentiality. Generally, what is said in the group stays in the group. However, students are told that if a student shares information that leads the teacher to believe that the student might be in danger of being harmed, or of hurting himself or herself or others, the teacher may have to refer matters to the school counselors or deans. In this way, the Life Skills classes provide an extra layer to the safety net.
around our students' physical and emotional well-being.

All Life Skills teachers are trained in adolescent development, active listening, group facilitation, Council practice, and the use of a wide range of methods designed to support personal growth. Most of our teachers have come from the fields of psychology, education, and theater. Some are trained and licensed as therapists. This, however, is not essential. What is most needed is an open heart, presence, creativity, flexibility, and a functioning sense of humor.

We cover a wide range of themes in the program: transition into middle school (or upper school), friendships, parents, values, self-esteem, social cruelty, drugs, stress reduction, grief and loss, wellness, sex education, social justice, and so on. In many classes, we ask the students early in the year to anonymously write down their "mysteries" — what they wonder about, what keeps them up at night, what topics they might wish to discuss in Council. Their responses help to form the basis of our instruction.

Friendship and self-identity issues are particularly relevant for middle schoolers. Students wonder where they fit into a rapidly changing social environment and experiment with the persona they will present to the world. Our seventh-grade Mask Project reflects this interest. In it, we ask students to think of a side of themselves, positive or negative, that they don't often show to others. They mold and paint small clay masks representing that part of their personality, learning a great deal about themselves and each other as they share their works of art.

Over time, the students themselves have helped us learn the most critical themes to explore during certain grade levels. In the tenth grade, for example, students frequently grapple with issues of balancing increased freedom and responsibility. The tenth grade is also a year when we offer students the opportunity to choose between a regular Life Skills class and one of several specialized sections — Peer Leadership, Leadership and the Environment, and Peer Mediation. While still including Council and covering the general themes of the year, these special sections provide additional training in leadership skills that allow students a greater chance to give back to the school and wider community. As one tenth-grader says, reflecting the views of many students, "Of all my classes, I learned the most in this class. By listening to other people and hearing how they deal with and solve their problems, I learn."

During the senior year, we discuss, among other themes, what it means to be an elder to a community and how to say goodbye well, a skill that is often not taught by the larger culture. By the time our seniors graduate, they have an ability to be articulate about their emotional lives in a way that visitors often find surprising and impressive.

One of the more valuable aspects of the program is how it connects students. Sometimes an adolescent can feel as if he or she is the only one in the history of the universe to experience certain trials and tribulations. Through Council and Life Skills, students often experience what I call the "you, too?" phenomenon. They see that while everyone may have his or her own unique path through the teenage years, adolescence is a bumpy ride for most people, and there is great reassurance in realizing they are going through it together.

"Of all my classes, I learned the most in this class. By listening to other people and hearing how they deal with and solve their problems, I learn."

Transitions

Of course, not everything always flows so smoothly. Also, as with any subject, students vary in their enjoyment of Life Skills. Some love it at every grade level while others may be less enthusiastic. For many students, the program comes to its full fruition in the senior year when all the learning comes together, particularly during the "Ojai trip."

The culmination of the Life Skills class for seniors is a five-day "rites of passage" retreat held at the Ojai Foundation. While the trips are voluntary, more than 95 percent of our seniors choose to go because they have heard from previous participants that these trips are often a life-enhancing,
transformational experience. According to Peggy O'Brien, former longtime chair of the Life Skills program, "The Ojai trip is representative of the major life transition these young people are about to make; it is a time to talk at length and in depth with friends and teachers, to reflect on their lives up to this point, and to look for guidance for the future."

In an age when it seems students are constantly "plugged in" to cell phones, computers, iPods, video games, and television, we ask that participants bring no electronics on the trip. Furthermore, bringing textbooks, tapes, and even homework is discouraged. The natural setting is glorious, and the trip is a time for tuning in instead of out. Through a variety of activities — including Councils, mindful work on the land, and a sweat lodge — the Ojai trip provides an opportunity for students to connect with nature, their deepest selves, and each other.

Internship Program

In order to support practitioners of emotional-intelligence-based curricula, Crossroads maintains a year-long Life Skills Internship Program. Some of our interns are eventually hired as Life Skills faculty while others go on to teach at schools where Crossroads has helped foster similar programs. Still others, including some academic faculty on our campus, intern for a year just to get a sense of this remarkably unusual program. In addition, all new Crossroads teachers (in every grade level and discipline) are introduced to the Council process, so that they can better understand this way of working with young people.

Says Sheila Bloch, chair of the Life Skills program, "New faculty benefit from learning about the Council process because Council is woven into the fabric of a Crossroads student's education. It is a kind of 'language of listening' that is unique from other traditional forms of education, and a language that new faculty members often find unmistakable."

All of this requires a strong institutional commitment to the goals of
the department. We are often asked how we balance the Human Development programs with all the other demands on time and money at the school. Headmaster Weaver puts this way: “The most powerful instruments of policy in a school are the budget and the schedule. Regardless of what other assertions the institution may make, if you want to know what the institution values, it is budget and schedule that will most clearly reveal that. Given Crossroads’ values, then, the question of how to balance the Human Development program with the rest of the school’s commitments is as irrelevant as it would be to ask how we balance the mathematics program with the other demands of time and money at the school. Commitment to human development is a fundamental component of the school’s philosophy and therefore is imbedded in the architecture of the whole school program.”

A Program in Progress
Just as the students evolve over time, so do the Human Development programs. We are always on the lookout for ways to improve individual programs and the partnerships we create between programs, academic classes, parents and the wider community. As we learn from many sources — especially from the students — we refine existing offerings and follow new visions. In fact, the department looks a little different from the way it did three years ago, and I hope that it will look different three years from now.

Ultimately, it’s challenging to give a true sense of our Human Development program in words. Part of the nature of experiential education is that it is difficult to describe. It is only in the experiential moment when the value becomes apparent, revelations occur, and a sense of wonder arises. It might happen while rafting down the river, feeding the homeless, finally getting that serve down, or sitting in the sweat lodge at Ojai. Whenever it happens, it’s a little bit of magic, and a marvel to behold.

Crossroads students get these opportunities all the time. Lucky them. And lucky, too, are those of us who get to accompany them on their wondrous journey, developing more than a little bit along the way ourselves.

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Resources
The Mysteries Sourcebook, Crossroads School Human Development Department, Santa Monica, CA, 1990. Contact Crossroads Auxiliary Services at (310) 829-7391, ext. 522.
The Ojai Foundation, www.ojaifoundation.org The Ojai Foundation also offers trainings through the Center for Council Training (www.counciltraining.org).