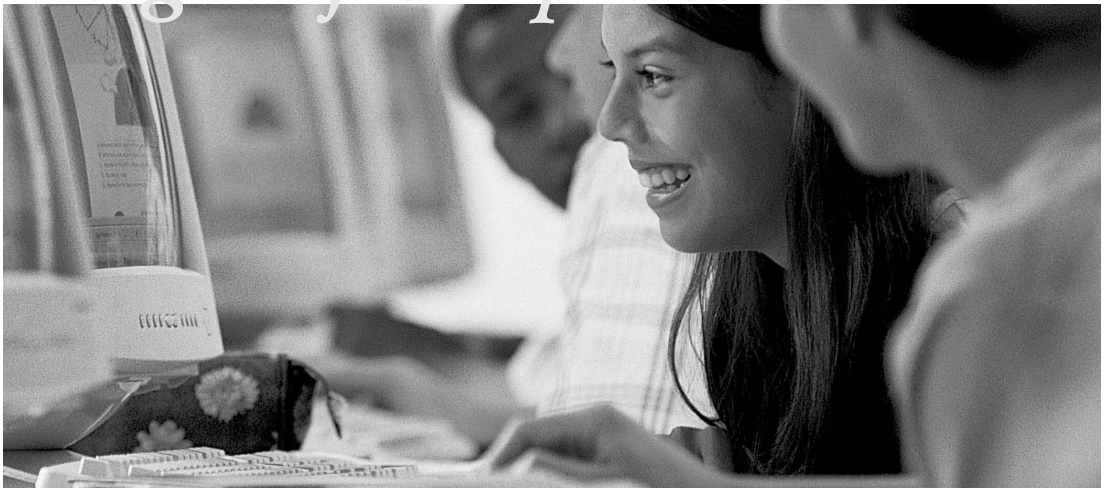
DEVELOPING A NEXUS BETWEEN CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES IN PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

BEVERLY CHRISTIAN
Lecturer in Education, Avondale College, New South Wales

insights from practice



Keywords: social science, teaching, pre-service teacher education, worldview, Christian

Anecdotal evidence suggests that young adults, despite their technological know-how and apparent sophistication, often seem ambivalent concerning the significance of worldviews in their lives. In the face of not only knowledge and information explosions and technology advances, but also social challenges such as eroding values, increasing stress, and uncertainty about the future, many appear to have a limited understanding of how an individual's worldview impacts on their interpretation of the world and their interaction with it.

© 2009 The Australian Christian Education Forum

Knight (1998, p.241) contends that 'Christian educators must have a clear understanding of both their basic beliefs and how those beliefs affect their educational practice.' Thompson (2004) in his research in Christian schools, however, found that

> *...in many cases, the story being told through Christian education is not true to the full revelation of scripture. Nor are the worldview contours that are shaping lives, educational priorities and curriculum choices (p.172).*

The significance of worldview is acknowledged directly or indirectly in Social Science syllabi of both Christian and government education systems; e.g. Education Department of the SDA Church (2000, p.A1) and Board of Studies NSW (1998, pp.13-14).

A study was undertaken to ascertain whether primary pre-service teachers' perceptions changed as a result of learning (within a Social Science Curriculum Studies unit) about the nature and composition of a worldview and its implication for professional practice. More specifically, were there any changes in pre-service teachers' perceptions in relation to:

a.) prevalence of individuals in the general population holding a worldview;

b.) competence to articulate a personal worldview;

c.) the impact that a teacher's worldview may have on subject content taught; and

d.) the importance of understanding worldview formation in the teaching of Social Science.

CONTEXT

The investigation was conducted at Avondale College a provider of Christian higher education in New South Wales. Although the institution is Christian based, and informs prospective students of this, it attracts students from a range of faith traditions and belief systems and welcomes students of varied backgrounds. Students graduating from teaching courses enter employment in both private and government schools, across all Australian states as well as overseas. The academic discipline area of the study is Social Science, a term used in this article within a primary school context. The term may be used synonymously with the acronyms HSIE (Human Society and its Environment), SOSE (Studies of Society and the Environment), Society and Environment and Social Studies. The Human Society and Its Environment Curriculum Studies unit (CP285), in which this study is grounded, introduces the teaching of Social Science in a primary school environment. One of the stated outcomes is for students to develop a logically consistent rationale for teaching Human Society and its Environment in a K-6 school.

WORLDVIEW AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

The worldview concept

The term 'Worldview', or 'Weltanschauung' is relatively recent – particularly in the English language – but as Naugle (2002, p. 5) points out, the concept of an overarching position that has its roots in religious, philosophical or disciplinary thought has always challenged humanity in its quest to find meaning in life.

Henderson, Henderson and Thomson (2006, p. 55), see worldview as an individual's window or viewpoint through which they view the world. Thayer (2005, p. 4) defines it as 'the meta-narrative by which we understand ourselves and our world.' For Sire (2004b), 'A worldview is a set of suppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic makeup of our world' (p. 10) and it is 'a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart' (p. 122). Naugle (2002) believes that the term Christian, or biblical worldview 'does not imply a mere religious possibility or philosophical option, but suggests an absolutist perspective on life that is real, true, and good.'(p. 266) and Christian (2008) proposes that in this way 'the steps of our existence are choreographed into the greatest story of all times.'(p. 7). Walsh and Middleton (1984, pp. 17, 31, 32) attempt an even 'wider and deeper' conceptualisation of the term:

> *Worldviews are best understood as we see them incarnated, fleshed out in actual ways of life. They are not systems of thought, like theologies or philosophies... A worldview is never merely a vision* of *life. It is always a vision* for *as well...*
> *Our worldview, then, provides a model* of the world *which guides its adherents* in the world. *It stipulates how the world ought to be, and it thus advises how its adherents ought to conduct themselves.*
>
> *...when a whole society is dominated by a particular world view, a cultural pattern emerges...*

The authors note that when a persistent mismatch occurs between our worldview and how we live, then, according to Walsh and Middleton (1984, p. 31), 'we experience a kind of spiritual schizophrenia.'

Developing a worldview

Many factors influence the formation of a person's worldview. For Naugle (2002) it is the product of their inherited and chosen belief system, the ideas of the time in which they live, and their circumstances. Mitchell (2004) lists family, friends, education, financial position, politics, media, health, religious traditions and life experiences as worldview forming factors. The worldview that emerges plays an important role in determining an individual's understanding of their world and their life within it. For the Christian, the Word of God is a vital source of their perspective on life and eternity and Naugle challenges Christians to distil their worldview to one that is biblically sound.

Educators observe that children, from birth, spend their lives interpreting the world in which they live, making sense of what is happening and constructing, in effect, a worldview that enables them to assess a situation and respond to it based on their belief system. This is thus a developmental process and developmental factors are significant including capacity for abstract reasoning and for moral judgment. We need to recognise this whilst accepting that their ability to respond morally is not unduly limited by stages of moral reasoning as advanced by Kohlberg or of faith development in Fowler's terms. Consideration of level of development is especially relevant when teaching children such as those these pre-service teachers will

be teaching. Barna (2003a) believes that a person's worldview is virtually complete by the time they reach their teenage years. Sire (2004a), however, maintains that it is a longer process in response to anomalies encountered and external influences.

Children, as much as adults, need a worldview that is internally consistent and satisfying as a basis for meaningful decision-making. There is a need for strategic guidance to help students develop their own worldview and, for Christians, one that is biblically based (Sire, 2004b, p. 67). To do this, without imposing beliefs on students requires a degree of 'committed impartiality' that questions and allows questioning (Hill, 2007, p.57). Harkness (2002, pp. 39-44) highlights the dangers of indoctrination and promotes an encouraging and open environment that acknowledges life situations and individual limitation in developing a belief system. In acknowledging the maturity levels of the students and the need for impartiality Hill (1991) advances a case for the teacher to be presented as an appropriate role model.

...a strong case can be made for allowing the teacher to reveal her or his own value stance in the classroom lesson, provided that it is in a manner consistent with the requirements of the lesson, the maturity levels of the learners, and impartiality in the treatment and assessment of all students. This provides an opportunity, even in the secular context of state schooling, for the students to be presented with role models of personally committed, as well as rationally critical, adults (p. 140).

Because Social Science is the study of humanity and its interaction with the physical and social world, it explores moral issues and ideas, and is an ideal platform for worldview development.

Worldview in a Social Science context

Social Science is one area of the curriculum where fundamental beliefs about society and its environment are viewed according to the perceptions of the students. It has few, if any absolutes; as human history and its interaction with the world is perceived differently by different people. Even our most accurate accounts of human history are tainted with personal and national bias. Social Science deals with human problems. It is about controversy, issues and argument. It is increasingly accepted that the study of Social Science is a useful tool for developing citizenship in students, and for giving them skills to function as responsible members of society (Land, 2006, pp.25-29). Furthermore, it is considered sound practice to encourage reflection and to promote thoughtful and meaningful discussion about powerful themes when teaching this subject (Brophy & Alleman, 2007, p.16). The present research sought to discover whether worldview impacts on how individuals perceive the underlying themes of Social Science.

The discipline of Social Science is by its very nature multidisciplinary. Grounded in history and geography, it deals with topics as diverse as political economics and women's issues. It attempts to cover aspects of human society that relate to its social, built and natural environment, and as such contains a number of broad ideas or strands. Within the primary education context, these broad

themes vary from country to country and even from state to state. The United States has adopted ten national thematic strands (Brophy and Alleman, 2007, p. 29). In Australia five have been used by curriculum planners of Studies of Society and the Environment – with minor variations in some states - and these are *time, continuity and change; place and space; culture; resources and systems* (Marsh, 1998).

It is suggested that worldview can play a role in how individuals perceive the events and human interactions that make up Social Science. According to Dyer (2005)

If curriculum policy and statements indicate and reflect current social, economic political, and cultural aspects of the society to which the curriculum is designed to serve, (Lovat and Smith, 2003) then these statements give insight into the way in which curriculum writers and political forces see the world at a particular point in time and choose appropriate content. (p. 7)

Hill (1991) argues that curriculum development is a value-loaded process (p. 100) and that neutrality is a myth (p. 168). Cocklin (1992), from the perspective of critical theory and pedagogy, asserts the necessity of revealing the ideological assumptions underpinning a curriculum and teaching practice.

A Christian worldview and Social Science

It is proposed that five basic premises arise out of the broad themes of Social Science when a Christian worldview is adopted. Each premise places God in a vital role when He is perceived as: **the God of history** (*time, continuity and change*), **the God of all the nations** (*cultures*), **the God of the natural world** (*place and space*), **the God of law and order** (*systems*), and **God, the providential provider** (*resources*).

A teacher's perspective of history is derived directly from his/her worldview, and it can be taught from different points of view. The Christian worldview provides a unique window into issues of *time, continuity and change.* Time in the Bible is not simply linear with continuous progress. There is a cyclical element in Old Testament history (whether with respect to fall and redemption, or with respect to captivity and exodus). The New Testament view, following Jesus' announcement in Mark 1:15 and parallels, is that his public ministry, death and resurrection are the central point in redemptive, and therefore human, history. This is **the God of history** who is in control of everything that happens and gives Christians a unique perspective on the past and a hope for eternity, because 'We have nothing to fear for the future, except as we shall forget the way the Lord has led us, and His teaching in our past history' (White, 1915, p. 196).

Social Science is the study of humankind, about attitudes and behaviours in the context of family, the wider community, national identity and sense of global belonging (*cultures*). A Christian worldview that grounds human origins firmly in a Creator God will determine personal attitudes, and break down social, ethnic and cultural barriers as well as having a regard for the sanctity and dignity of life (Acts

10:34-35). The Creator God also has a redemptive purpose for humankind (Acts 17:30-31). This is **the God of all the nations.**

The study of *place and space* encompasses environmental issues. It covers respect for the fragile ecosystems and balance that exists in nature and conservation. For the Christian, God is the Creator and we are to be his responsible caretakers, exercising stewardship (and acknowledging irresponsible practices in the past). This is **the God of the natural world.**

Civics and social responsibility involves equitable and just social systems and structures and moral thought and action (*systems*). With Sire, (2004a), the Christian rejects the post-modern view that ethics and morality are merely social constructs and therefore can be whatever society deems them to be (p. 226) and rejects deistic views as well (p. 53). A divine plan emerges from the Old and New Testaments. God is the One through whom knowledge of right and wrong is discerned. This is **the God of law and order.** For Fallding (2007) 'the standard of morality which any person adopts will be decided by how correctly he knows the nature of his natural environment, his society, his history and his Maker.'(p. 17)

Human history indicates how people have utilised the talents, time and resources at their disposal for either the benefit of humankind, or to their own advantage (*resources*). **God, the providential provider** is a theme which widens consideration of the scope of the resources available including time and talents. It can be studied through the window of stewardship, the management of God's gifts (physical, human and spiritual resources) to his children. 'As stewards working in the image of God, we have been entrusted with the task of using the earth's resources to promote life for all and for as long as the earth shall last' (Roop, 1991, p. 91). This theme can build on and reinforce the themes dealing with place and space, and systems.

In Social Science, beliefs about society and its environment are viewed from the perspective of the teacher and the student. It is, therefore, important that the pre-service teacher understands the worldview that he/she holds. To achieve this they need to be exposed to different worldviews, and in a Christian higher education institution a Christian worldview should be clearly presented. The present study was designed to investigate the extent to which the pre-service teachers in this unit of study gained an understanding of their own worldview and its significance for teaching Social Science.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

This investigation involved a cohort of 81 pre-service teachers. It utilised surveys administered before and after teaching the unit of study to obtain evidence of changes which may have occurred in the students' views. No attempt was made to identify the range or source of worldviews held by individuals within the class, and neither were participants coerced to share their worldview. Survey responses were given anonymously and could not be linked to any individual. It was made clear to participants that responses would not and could not be used in any participants' assessments.

Initial survey

A questionnaire was administered at the start of the unit to determine the pre-service teachers' understanding of the concept of worldview, their own worldview and its relevance to Social Science. The subjects were asked to respond to four major statements relating to various aspects of worldview on a five- point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The statements, which reflected the purpose of the study, were:

1.) Every person has a world view.

2.) If asked, I could give a summary of my world view in 2 or 3 sentences.

3.) A teacher's worldview can impact on how he/she teaches content.

4.) An understanding of how worldviews are formed is important in the teaching of Human Society and Its Environment.

Discussion of worldviews

After the initial survey, a lecture was used to introduce the concept of worldview and to encourage the participants to think through their position in relationship to the seven core questions proposed by Sire (2004a, p. 20):

1. What is prime reality – the really real?
2. What is the nature of external reality, that is, the world around us?
3. What is a human being?
4. What happens to a person at death?
5. Why is it possible to know anything at all?
6. How do we know what is right and wrong?
7. What is the meaning of human history?

Pre-service teachers were asked to examine their own beliefs in relation to each question and indicate their position on a given continuum. In order to encourage integrity in answering, the responses of each individual remained private. It was apparent that some of the class struggled with this clarifying process, while others appeared confident in their beliefs. They were challenged to be completely honest about their own responses, ask questions that tested for internal consistency, and were encouraged to reflect on whether their worldview was personally satisfying.

Relating worldview to the themes of Social Science.

Throughout the semester, students were challenged in lectures and tutorials to examine the themes of the Social Sciences curriculum within the framework of their own worldview.

Final survey.

Near the end of the semester, a second identical questionnaire was administered. In addition, the pre-service teachers were given the option of commenting on whether the worldview topic had helped them clarify their understanding of Social Science. An open-ended section gave opportunity for the students to offer any other reflections/ comments on worldview and its relationship to Social Science.

Collecting the data.

On the two separate occasions, pre-service teachers deposited the completed survey questionnaire in a ballot-type box at the end of the lecture.

DATA ANALYSIS

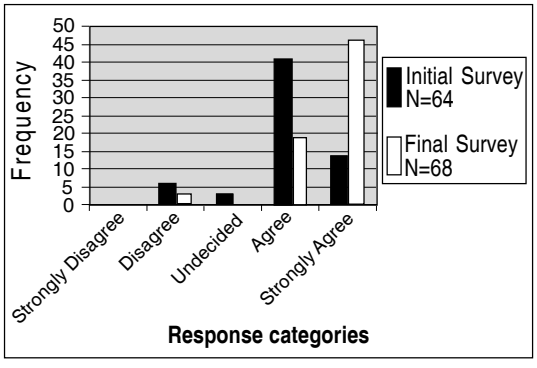
The response categories of all participants were tallied and a histogram for the group was constructed for each major statement. A comparison of data from the initial and the final survey was made and included in each histogram. The 'free responses' were also collected, examined and interpreted.

Results

Responses to 'Every person has a worldview'

Most of the participants believed that everyone has a worldview. In the initial survey 64% agreed and 22% strongly agreed with the statement, whilst, (9%) disagreed and three were undecided. The final survey indicated a movement towards stronger agreement with (68%) strongly agreeing and 28% agreeing. No one was undecided; a small number (3 individuals) still chose to disagree with the statement. (See Figure 1)

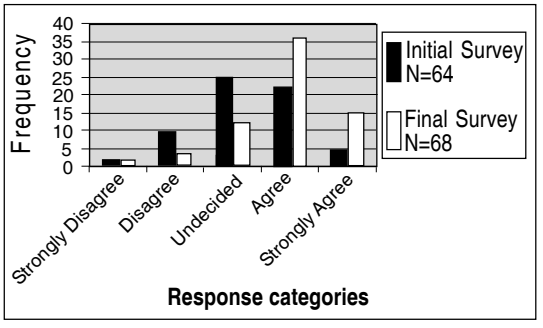
Figure 1: Pre-service teacher's responses to, "Every person has a worldview."



Responses to the statement 'If asked, I could give a summary of my worldview in two or three sentences.'

Responses to the initial survey were spread from strongly disagree (1 response) to strongly agree with the highest response category (39%) being undecided. In the final survey the majority (53%) chose to agree and a further 22% strongly agreed. Some participants were still undecided and (6%) still chose to disagree. (See Figure 2)

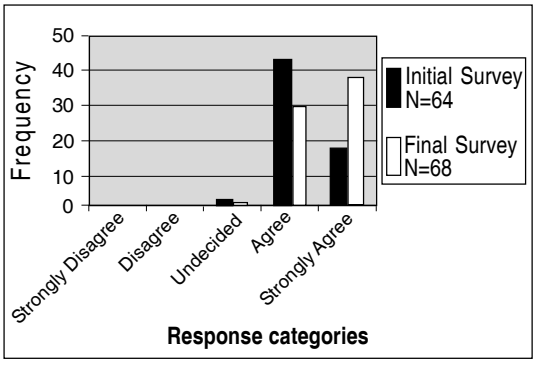
Figure 2: Pre-service teachers' perceptions of their ability to articulate a personal worldview



Responses to the statement, *'A teacher's worldview can impact on how he/she teaches content.'*

Most students agreed with the statement and stronger agreement was evident at the conclusion of the unit with (55%) strongly agreeing. (See Figure 3)

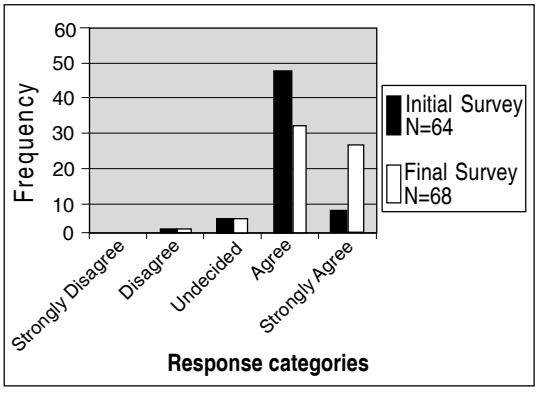
Figure 3: Pre-service teachers' responses to, "Worldview impacts on how content is taught."



R*esponses to the statement 'An understanding of how worldviews are formed is important in the teaching of Human Society and its Environment.'*

There was strong agreement with this statement. In both surveys, the majority of the participants responded with 'agree' (75% and 53%) with a shift in responses towards 'strongly agree', which accounted for 40% of the total responses in the final survey (See Figure 4).

Figure 4: Pre-service teachers' responses to worldview formation and Social Science teaching



DISCUSSION

The pre-service teachers in this study were generally agreed that everyone has a worldview. This does not support the conjecture of Nash (1999) that 'Most people have no idea what a worldview is; much less know what is the specific content of their worldview' (p. 190). However, the nature of the higher education institution and the fact that CP285 is not the only unit where worldview is discussed could be a contributing factor to these results.

Uncertainty about their ability to articulate their worldview was displayed by most students as shown in Figure 2 and there was still some evidence of uncertainty in the final survey, although to a lesser extent. Some of the statements in response to the open-ended questions exemplified this, for example, 'My worldview on life is still not fully panned out because I have still not found the right faith to follow.' and 'I am not sure if there is a purpose to life but I hope so.' One explanation of this uncertainty could be that worldview development is an ongoing process as suggested by Naugle (2002) and Sire (2004a) and young adults are still in the process of coming to terms with how they understand and interpret the world. This is supported by the student who wrote, 'I now feel that my worldview is developing,' and another who stated, 'I believe my worldview is still developing. It's ever-changing.' An alternative according to Poe (2004, p. 22) would be that individuals are so accustomed to their worldview that they operate unconsciously out of it, so when pressed to articulate it they struggle to do so, even though they may have a consistent framework of ideas and beliefs from which they function. The response of one pre-service teacher supported this idea, 'I had understandings and an opinion of my beliefs of the world, but I didn't know how to state it in regards to an actual worldview.' It is also possible that for some they see their worldview as related to their faith and that the idea of viewing Social Science from this point of view was new to them.

The evidence suggested, however, that some students did have confidence in expressing their worldview and the level of confidence in the group increased during the study period. The following statements are illustrative. 'My world view is that I was put

on this earth for a reason by a God who loves me and has a purpose for my life.....'

and

> I believe that humanity was created by a loving God and therefore all individual lives can have purpose and meaning when connected to Him. I believe pain and suffering entered into our world through Satan's rebellion. Jesus has overthrown the root of the problem in dying for our sin. I now stand, honoured by His friendship, with a desire to help others come to know Him and live the purposeful lives He intended for them too.

The results also indicated that using worldview as a platform from which to explore the themes of Social Science was a worthwhile exercise, both in terms of pre-service teachers clarifying their personal worldview, and from the perspective of establishing a nexus between worldview and Social Science. This is supported by statements such as:

'Throughout the last few weeks I have struggled to learn more about myself.'

and

> Thinking about world views over the past weeks has made me realise how an individual's world view can have a major influence on the way you teach and what you teach. It has made me realise how careful you need to be when planning and creating lessons.

and again

> I previously didn't understand how much HSIE (Social Science) linked to worldview. I now understand that Social Studies isn't just geography and history but our place in society and the world. Looking at worldviews has helped me understand the big pictures that are important in Social Studies, not facts about places and things.

The survey responses illustrated in Figure 4 provide evidence that the participants realised the importance of the ways by which worldviews are formed. The unit of study contributed to an understanding that the teacher can play a part in this process.

It was evident that to some students, the semester's journey had opened a window to teaching Christianly and that this included the relationship of a Christian worldview to the teaching of Social Science. One student wrote, 'Defining my worldview has made me aware that I can integrate God into most of the things I will teach in HSIE.' It alerted others to their moral responsibility as teachers: 'Our worldview permeates into every subject but because HSIE involves more controversial topics which ask students to think morally, it is essential for teachers to be careful.' This latter view seems to show an understanding of the emphasis of Hill (2007, p.57) on 'committed impartiality' in the teaching/learning situation.

CONCLUSION

After completing the semester's Social Science curriculum unit (CP285) the pre-service teachers' responses to each of the four major statements in relation to worldview, showed a distinct change towards greater concurrence with the

statements. This modest study showed, in particular, that an open examination of worldview helped pre-service teachers develop and articulate their personal worldview, and establish a worldview/ Social Science nexus. The juxtaposition of Social Science and worldview encouraged reflection on the role that teachers play in developing children's worldviews. In an age of moral relativism and constant change, children in a Christian school setting can benefit from a Social Science curriculum that is taught sensitively, openly and from a biblical belief base that allows questioning and reflection. In this way they can be assisted in developing values, attitudes and beliefs into an intelligent framework and using it to make life choices. 'Without application, a worldview is simply the intellectualization of reality – a head game we play that has no bearing on who we are, what difference our life makes or how we relate to God.' (Barna, 2003b, p.182)

In order to teach effectively in this context Christian teachers need to be aware of, and comfortable with a Christian worldview. The process of reflection, refining and defining a personal worldview could be beneficial for in-service Christian educators, especially when applied to Key Learning Areas of the school curriculum.

REFERENCES

Barna, G. (2003a). *Transforming children into spiritual champions*. California: Regal Books.

Barna, G. (2003b). *Think like Jesus*. Brentwood TN: Integrity Publishers.

Board of Studies, NSW (1998). *Syllabus, human society and its environment, K-6,* Sydney: BOS, NSW.

Brophy, J. & Alleman, J. (2007). *Powerful social studies for elementary students.* Belmont CA: Thomson Higher Education.

Christian, B. (2008). I love to tell the story. *TEACH Journal of Christian education*. Cooranbong: Avondale Academic Press. (2) 2, 4-7.

Cocklin, D. (1992). Teachers, critical theory and critical pedagogy, in T. Lovat (Ed.). *Sociology for Teachers*. Wentworth Falls, NSW: Social Science Press.

Dyer, J. (2005). *Opportunities and challenges for global education in social education curriculum*. Unpublished paper retrieved September 16 from www.edu.au/05pap/dye05656.pdf

Education Department of the SDA church, South Pacific Division (2000). *Studies of society and the environment: syllabus and resources for primary grades in Australian SDA schools*. Wahroonga, NSW: SPD Education Department of the SDA Church.

Fallding, H. (2007). Morals without religion. *Journal of Christian Education.* 50 (3), 15-21.

Harkness, A. (2002). Educational indoctrination in Christian faith communities. *Journal of Christian Education.* 45 (3), 33-47.

Henderson, M., Henderson, S & Thomson, D. (2006). *Leading through values*. NZ: Harper Collins.

Hill, B. (1991). *Values education in Australian schools*. Hawthorn, Vic: Australian Council for Education Research.

Hill, B. (2007). Is school chaplaincy being secularised? *Journal of Christian Education.* 50 (1), -49-59.

Knight, G. R. (1998). *Philosophy and education: an introduction in Christian perspective*. Berrien Springs, MI, USA: Andrews University Press.

Land. G. (2006). Educating for citizenship: social studies in contemporary education. *Journal of Adventist Education.* 69 (1), 25-29.

Marsh, C. (1998). *Teaching studies of society and environment*, 2nd ed, Frenchs Forest: Prentice Hall.

Mitchell, J. (2004). *Worlds of difference: exploring worldviews and values in English texts*. Melbourne: The Council for Christian Education in Schools.

Nash, R. (1999). *Life's ultimate question: an introduction to philosophy*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Press.

Naugle, D.K. (2002). *Worldview: the history of a concept*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Erdmans Publishing.

Poe, H. (2004). *Christianity in the academy*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

Roop, E. (1991). *Let the rivers run: stewardship and the biblical story*.

Sire, J.W. (2004a). *The universe next door*. Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press.

Sire, J.W. (2004b). *Naming the elephant*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.

Smith, D. & Lovat, T. (2003). *Curriculum: action on reflection*. South Melbourne: Social Science Press.

Thayer, J. (2005). Ten things faculty can do to nurture college students spiritually. *Journal of Adventist Education,* 67(4), 4-9.

The Living Bible (1973). Grand Rapids: Zondervan Bible Publishers.

Thompson, R. (2004). Genesis and Jesus...and Christian worldview, in J Ireland, R Edlin and K Dickens (Eds.) *Pointing the way: directions for Christian education in a new millennium*. Blacktown, NSW, Australia: National Institute for Christian Education.

Walsh, B. and Middleton, J. (1984). *The transforming vision: shaping a Christian worldview*. Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press.

White, E.G. (1915). *Life Sketches*. Mountain View CA: Pacific Press.