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# Children's spiritual development in school<sup>1</sup>



## Trevor Cooling

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Under current legislation schools should be promoting their pupils' spiritual development. However, it is very difficult to define spiritual development and, in my experience, very few teachers are clear as to what it actually means. There is some help at hand in the guidance given by Ofsted, where it states: 'Pupils' spiritual development is shown by their:

- ability to be reflective about their own beliefs, religious or otherwise, that inform their perspective on life and their interest in and respect for different people's faiths, feelings and values.
- sense of enjoyment and fascination in learning about themselves, others and the world around them.
- use of imagination and creativity in their learning and willingness to reflect on their experiences.'

For Christian parents this may sound very vague. Where, for example, is the notion of relationship with Christ, or of prayer or of worship of God? There seems to be little sense of the notion of discipleship as part of education or of promoting children's maturing Christian faith.

The reason for this is that the education system is coping with increasing levels of diversity. In particular, the data reveals trends in society where (a) the traditional churches are in decline although the Pentecostal and evangelical churches are growing, (b) the numbers of people who belong to minority religions are rising, and (c) more and

more people are self-identifying as non-religious. Schools therefore look for understandings of the spiritual that are inclusive of this diversity and are appropriate for any child irrespective of their background. Understandably, they avoid making explicit references to particular religions. Certainly, Christians can no longer expect the school to undertake the nurture of their child's Christian faith.

## Christian-ethos schools

There is, however, one major exception to this trend, the existence of the so-called faith schools. This term is widely used to describe those schools that are state-funded, but run by a religious body.<sup>2</sup> The Church of England rejects the term faith schools as a suitable description of its schools because most people understand a faith school to be only for pupils of that particular religion. The Church of England, in contrast, is clear that it provides schools with a Christian ethos that are designed to be appropriate for pupils from a range of religious and non-religious backgrounds. In other words, they are inclusive community schools, but with a Christian ethos that makes the vision of promoting 'life in all its fullness' (John 10.10) something that is appropriate for all pupils in a local area. It has recently produced a significant document that elaborates on that vision and is one of the few clearly enunciated, inclusive theologies of education that I have ever seen.<sup>3</sup>

The Church of England founded Canterbury Christ Church in 1962 as a teacher training college for its schools. It is now a large university covering a

wide range of disciplines, but still with a strong emphasis on education. The University hosts the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) which has the specific remit to undertake research into the work of Christian-ethos schools.<sup>4</sup> Recently, we have undertaken two projects looking at how these schools interpret the notion of spiritual development.

## Ten Leading Schools

In this project, we arranged a nationwide competition to find ten secondary schools that were committed to promoting the spiritual development of their pupils in ways that were shaped by the schools' Christian ethos. Dr Ann Casson, our researcher, spent an extended period in each school.<sup>5</sup> It was clear that the success of these schools was not dependent on the application of a universal formula that works for all schools, but rather on the effort that the senior staff put into designing an approach that was appropriate for their particular context and into winning the commitment of the teachers and pupils to that approach. Of great importance was the attention given to each school's particular context, especially to devising strategies that were appropriate to the backgrounds of the pupils. Above all the notion of giving agency to the pupils, by which is meant ensuring that they took responsibility for their own spiritual development rather than just having it done to them by teachers, emerged as a fundamental element in achieving success in this area. Brief descriptions of three schools follow, which will give a flavour of the full ten case studies.

St Mary Redcliffe and Temple School in Bristol adopted the phrase 'the glory of God is the human person fully alive' from the Church Father, Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons as the inspiration for its Alive model, which is at the heart of its approach to spiritual development. This consists of 15 values that are rehearsed with students; as one student put it, 'that's to do with things that you should practice during the week'. Included in the values are faith, hope and forgiveness. A member of staff described the interplay of these three in these words: 'The climate of hope is the fact that we believe that God has everything in control and is greater than human ability, even at times when it's difficult to see that, and the valuing of each other when things go wrong, whether we're students or staff'. Pupils were encouraged to see strong connections between hope and social justice. Thus, the music teacher emphasised how the discordant notes of blues music from people who know that, 'we don't quite fit, don't quite belong here.' In practical terms, students are encouraged to involve themselves in this interplay of hope and justice, such as the school's partnership with a secondary school in Uganda or with work for the disadvantaged and the vulnerable in their own city.

Archbishop Tenison's School in Croydon serves a community comprising a variety of Christian

traditions. Unusually for an English school, many of its students join in Year 7 with a good grounding in biblical teaching. The school therefore took the decision to take biblical and theological literacy as one of the key themes in its approach to spiritual development. The headteacher describes the aim as follows: 'The Bible doesn't stop the minute they

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put a full stop in, because there is this gap ... the gap we're filling at the moment, so actually our story becomes important when we place ourselves within that grand narrative that's there.' Thus in a Year 8 lesson, a lively debate about the Arian controversy can be seen as students work out for themselves how they understand Jesus. The emphasis is on the need for the church children that enter Archbishop Tenison's (the majority) to develop an educated faith. Eschatology and the book of Revelation were particularly popular topics. Annual retreat afternoons run by the chaplaincy team, where students are encouraged to take ownership of their faith development, complement the academic classroom work. Very unusually, the senior team themselves focus on their own biblical literacy by giving 15 minutes of their weekly meeting to studying the Bible together.

One of the striking physical features of Bishop Luffa School in Chichester is the outdoor sacred space known as 'the Quiet Place'. It epitomises one of the strands that characterises the school's approach to spiritual development, namely, the prioritisation of reflection. Inspired by the death of two pupils, the garden was designed by an artist in residence to highlight the notion of a spiritual journey. Students are introduced to the Quiet Place early in their school career in an RE lesson and can then use it as they feel the need. This reflective approach is encouraged across the curriculum, as evidenced, for example, in history trips to the World War One battlefields and the Wannsee conference room where the Nazis planned the Final Solution.

One manifestation of this reflective approach is the school's policy for when things go wrong, which is based on the principles of restorative justice. One teacher made this comment: 'There's a lot of things which sometimes you don't always feel are tangible; the way in which we're using restorative approaches with young people, a sense in which you're trying to be inclusive and recognise that we're not perfect and that we're trying to grow together.' The aim of behaviour management then is not just to secure good behaviour, but rather good behaviour arising out of reflection on the impact of bad behaviour and on the importance of reconciliation.

## NOTES

1. Education systems vary enormously. This article focuses on England and Wales, although most of the points made are applicable to schools in other jurisdictions.

2. The two largest providers of these schools are the Anglican and the Catholic churches, but there are also a small number of schools run by minority religions including Jews, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs.

3. *Deeply Christian: Serving the Common Good*, published by the Church of England in July 2016. The main author was David Ford, Emeritus Regius Professor of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. The Church of England shares this inclusive aspiration with a number of the multi-academy trusts, including that established by Oasis. [www.oasiscommunitylearning.org/](http://www.oasiscommunitylearning.org/)

4. See [www.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer](http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/nicer)

5. Ann Casson's research will be published by Church House Publishing in the autumn. The book will be entitled *Lessons in Spiritual Development*.

6. See [www.whatiflearning.co.uk](http://www.whatiflearning.co.uk)

7. T Cooling et al., *Christian Faith in English Church Schools: Research Conversations with Classroom Teachers* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2016).

## Notes

8. See [www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2016/09/lessons-in-character-building-show-positive-results-in-schools.aspx](http://www.churchofengland.org/media-centre/news/2016/09/lessons-in-character-building-show-positive-results-in-schools.aspx)

9. A requirement on English schools.

10. L Bretherton, *Hospitality as Holiness: Christian Witness amid Moral Diversity* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

11. Further discussion of these questions of public theology can be found in other NICER publications.

## What If Learning<sup>6</sup>

What If Learning is an approach to teaching and learning in schools that helps teachers to frame their lessons within the Christian ethos of their school. It particularly focuses on the practices that teachers use and how these contribute to pupils' spiritual development. We have conducted two research projects to date; an intensive, year-long study of 14 teachers in three secondary schools<sup>7</sup> and a shorter study in 18 primary schools.<sup>8</sup> Both studies were designed to document how teachers went about the task of 'teaching Christianly' and to understand the challenges that they experienced in doing this. Two examples illustrate how teachers' approach to designing learning can promote pupils' spiritual development in subjects other than religious education.

Our secondary example is a physical education (PE) teacher who approached his subject wanting to offer his pupils a richer way of thinking about the place of sport in life. He was concerned at the impact of the celebrity culture of sport and the focus given to personal glorification in elite performance. He therefore set out to offer his pupils an alternative narrative. We saw that exemplified in a lesson on the push-pass in hockey. When asked what they imagined the lesson was about, the pupils told us 'learning how to encourage others'. In the lesson, the teacher first demonstrated the skill of executing the push-pass and then asked the pupils to work in pairs coaching each other. The main assessment task that they had to complete was to write down how they set about encouraging their partner in the development of the required skill. This may not sound particularly revolutionary, but when it is understood that this lesson was part of an overall policy to position PE as learning to be a good coach rather than just learning to be an elite performer, one can see its significance. Over seven years of secondary education, pupils learn to see sport as an opportunity to encourage others rather than as an opportunity to experience glory in personal success. For this teacher, that reframing of the pupils' learning reflected his determination to exemplify Jesus' approach as a servant leader in his pupils' learning.

Our primary example comes from a Department for Education funded project on character education in Church of England schools. This investigated the teaching of British values with a particular focus on tolerance.<sup>9</sup> We chose this focus because their opponents often present church schools as tribal and sectarian. We wanted to help children understand that Christian teaching is that our first response to someone different to us should be hospitality.<sup>10</sup> We should not respond out of fear or resentment to those who are different from us. The case study is of a Year 5 lesson on the durability of rocks. The children worked in table groups and were asked to work together to design an investigation. As they approached the point that they had framed hypotheses and were devising tests, the teacher

interrupted and asked one child from each group to move to a new group. The children were then asked to think carefully about working as a scientific team and how best to integrate the new member of their group. The point was to encourage curiosity about the newcomer's ideas. One pupil commented: 'The lesson made me think about how people reacted differently to each other.'

These two examples illustrate how the spiritual development of children is promoted through thinking Christianly about the design of learning experiences and how a Christian-ethos school can contribute to the people that pupils will become as spiritual beings.

## Big questions

These examples also raise a number of big questions about providing Christian-ethos schools for a wider society that increasingly does not share our faith. I will close this article with a brief consideration of just two.<sup>11</sup>

First, on hearing these case studies people's initial response (both Christians and non-Christians) is often to question whether they are indeed Christian if there is no explicit reference to Jesus or the Bible. This response rests on the notion that for an action to be *distinctively* Christian it must be *uniquely* Christian, so that no one else would affirm it. This is a misconception. What matters is that the schools' responses were grounded in reflection on how biblical truth makes a difference in the living of everyday life. Indeed, one of the tasks of a Christian educator is to convince the wider educational fraternity of the benefits for all pupils of the insights generated by theological reflection on education.

This leads to the second point, the context of an action is very important. The fact that, for example, restorative justice is practiced in the context of a school where prayer and worship are valued makes a significant difference. This is very contentious in wider society, because the assumption is often made that, for a school to be inclusive, there can be no collective religious activity that reflects the traditions of one particular religion. It is considered that to pray or worship with those who do not share your faith is intrusive and is interpreted as a hostile act. Our response, I suggest, should be to respond with models of prayer and worship in school that exemplify them as acts of hospitality not hostility and to model an approach which clearly respects the integrity of staff and pupils alike. Certainly, our Ten Leading Schools research showed that, when carefully and sensitively planned, a school culture of prayer and worship is greatly appreciated. When experienced within this framing context, the responses we have encountered in our research are deeply Christian in their service of the common good.