Recognising Spiritual Development in a Primary School Context

A project based in schools in Worcestershire and Gloucestershire, led by Shahne Vickery

The following article is a summary of work undertaken by four schools in the Worcester and Gloucester Dioceses during 2018. Three of the schools had an 'Area for Development' identified in a recent SIAMS inspection relating to opportunities across the curriculum for spiritual development.

The **aims** of the project were to:
- explore the different ways in which spirituality can be recognised and expressed
- develop a common language to enable meaningful reflection to take place on the significance of spirituality in the whole life of the school
- be more alive to the possibilities and opportunities for spiritual growth across the curriculum

The teachers were all clear that they felt opportunities for spirituality to flourish were actually plentiful in their schools, but a common language had not been established to enable them to share and build on good practice and to plan effectively for development as a staff team.
In this respect, the words of Israel Salanter Lipkin seemed to resonate powerfully with everyone;

> *"Spirituality is like a bird:*
> *If you hold it too closely, it chokes,*
> *And if you hold it too loosely, it escapes."*
>
> Israel Salanter Lipkin

One teacher's comment seemed to sum up a common feeling amongst the group.

"In our school I think the spirituality bird often flies away before we have a chance to acknowledge its presence."

The teachers were provided with a range of publications, resources and reports as background reading in preparation for their work. One publication that they found both stimulating and practical was *Making Sense of Spiritual Development* by David Smith[1]. Whilst the colleagues were keen to adapt and modify some of David Smith's ideas, they felt that three elements outlined in the book helped to provide a useful roadmap as they sought to address the aims of the project.

The elements were:

1. *spiritual capacities*
2. *spiritual contexts*
3. *spiritual experiences*

1. Spiritual Capacities

David Smith notes a number of human capacities commonly identified as related to spiritual development.

The teachers studied these (as well as other material) but were soon keen to create their own version of the list to reflect the spiritual life of the children in their schools.

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A summary of this part of the project is included below. It is important to make clear that the list was not meant to be either exhaustive or arranged in any particular order of importance. In fact, it has been striking to note that different teachers identified different capacities as being 'the most significant expressions of spirituality' for them or their children.

Neither did the teachers intend that the list should be used to 'assess' the spirituality of individual children. However, they *did* believe that it may be helpful in thinking about how to provide opportunities in class that would build on what had gone before. In this sense 'spiritual development' could be planned for.

Spiritual Capacities include children's ability to:

- be guided by their beliefs and values and be willing to take a stand to defend them

- be self-aware and empathise with the experience of others in the school and wider community

- love themselves, care for themselves, believe in their potential to achieve, and find inner strength and resilience when facing challenges

- exercise imagination and creativity, appreciate beauty in the world and be alive to experiences of awe and wonder

- be intrigued by mystery and be open to an awareness of the transcendent in the whole of life

- be comfortable with stillness and silence and open to engage in reflection/meditation/prayer

- be ready to say sorry when mistakes are made, to forgive themselves and to forgive others

- be willing to take risks and to reflect, learn and grow following experiences of failure as well as success

- demonstrate curiosity and open mindedness when exploring life's big questions

- appreciate and be thankful for what is good in life and show generosity towards others

This part of the project probably generated the most excitement and engagement, as can be sensed in the words of colleagues below;

"These capacities have given us a common language to help staff and children express the different ways in which spirituality can be recognised across the whole of our school life. We are all buzzing about it!"
<div align="right">Headteacher - Gloucestershire</div>

"Spirituality in our school tended to be mainly thought of as 'awe and wonder'. We now have a much broader understanding of what it can be."
<div align="right">Collective Worship Lead Teacher - Worcestershire</div>

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"We now have the spiritual capacities listed down the side of all our planning documents to keep us mindful of them. It is helping us to be much more intentional about planning opportunities for spiritual as well as cognitive development."

<div align="right">Middle School RE/CW Lead - Worcestershire</div>

2. Spiritual Context

Spiritual capacities are relevant to all pupils, of any religious tradition or none, and to all areas of the curriculum. They are an important area to explore when considering spiritual growth………….
However, these capacities can be exercised in various ways in the service of various purposes.
We do not encounter them in the abstract. The ways in which we exercise them are bound up with our beliefs, values and commitments.

<div align="right">David Smith - Making Sense of Spiritual Development[1]</div>

David Smith makes the point that spiritual capacities do not exist in a vacuum. The spiritual context will govern, to a great extent, the way in which they are understood and exercised.

During the period that this work on spirituality was being undertaken, the schools were beginning to address the requirements of the new SIAMS Evaluation Schedule (2018). In particular, they were reviewing their school's Christian vision and this was bringing into sharp focus the distinctive *context* of a Church of England school.

In articulating this context the teachers found the following paragraph from the *Way Ahead Report* useful:

The Church school offers a spiritual and moral basis for the development of human wholeness and a sure foundation for personal and social values based on the person and ministry of Christ. A distinctive language is provided for understanding life and interpreting human experience. As a community of faith, the Church school should, in its best expression, reflect the nature of the Trinity, a life shared and defined by reference to others. Here we can begin to discover who we are, why we are, and - perhaps most importantly - what we might be.

<div align="right">The Way Ahead Report, Church of England[2]</div>

In exploring what a school's Christian vision, aims and values might look like when lived out, the teachers have focused afresh on '*the person and ministry of Christ'* as *The Way Ahead Report* puts it. One of the ways that they have done this is by considering together the question: What would Jesus do?

"We invited a youth worker from a local church into school. He talked about the wrist band that he wears with the letters WWJD printed on it. He explained that the letters stood for the words 'What would Jesus do?' It made us think that this would be a good question to ask, not only about our personal day to day behaviour but also our response to some of the big issues facing our planet."

<div align="right">Class teacher - Gloucestershire</div>

"We have been piloting the new collective worship publication Roots and Fruits 2 which is based on the life and teaching of Jesus. Focusing for a whole year on the person of Jesus has provided a role model and a reference point for us in our thinking about what the spiritual capacities might look like."

<div align="right">Headteacher - Gloucestershire</div>

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3. Spiritual Experiences

There is a danger that spirituality .... could be trivialised if it is reduced to a welter of nice feelings or gasps of momentary admiration. Spiritual growth will involve reflecting on the significance of an experience for our lives. If there is no such reflection, a feeling remains just a feeling.

David Smith - Making Sense of Spiritual Development[1]

As mentioned previously, schools felt that spiritual experiences were an everyday part of school life. However, the impact of reading David Smith's work and discussing it at length emphasised the crucial importance of reflection in facilitating learning and growth. The schools decided that the quality of the opportunities they offered for the children to reflect needed to be much more carefully planned to enable the learning from the experiences to have greater depth.

We looked together at a wide variety of ways in which meaningful reflection could be facilitated. They included discussion, silence, meditation, listening to music, drawing and drama improvisation such as hot seating and freeze framing.

At this point the teachers decided to produce a working document giving examples of how they were trialing a variety of 'ways of reflecting' to support the development of different spiritual capacities that they had identified. The schools were already familiar with Liz Mill's[3] work on the *Windows, Mirrors, Doors* model as a way to describe the journey, from experience (window) through reflection (mirror) to growth and transformation (door). They therefore thought it made sense to use this as a scaffold to present their work.

Appendix 1 of this article includes input from teachers in the different schools. It is arranged so that each of the ten capacities is exemplified through the work of a year group. (Clearly, all the capacities will be addressed a number of times during the year by every class).

Appendix 2 provides a Christian context for each of the capacities. This has proved helpful when considering spiritual development in collective worship.

It seems appropriate to conclude with the words of one of the teachers who was part of the project. She was reflecting on the journey that the school had been on and recalling the image of the spirituality bird.

"We never want to crush spirituality by holding the bird too tightly, but at least now we have a better idea about how to recognise him when he perches near us for a moment or two."

References:
[1] Making Sense of Spiritual Development by David Smith, The Stapleford Centre
 ISBN 09516537 92
[2] The Way Ahead, Church of England Schools in the new millennium. Church House Publishing   ISBN 071513857 X
 Church Schools Review Group
[3] Liz Mills Farmington Millenium Research 1997

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