

Church Schools and Spirituality



This paper equips Diocesan schools with an approach to spirituality.

Our schools are committed to being an environment that is open to, and nurturing of, the spirituality of children. As a Diocese we begin with the stark distinction Jesus makes in the Gospel of John:

*"A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. ...The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit."
(John 3:6&8)*

Spirituality covers the relationship between the self to the whole of life as we experience it, including life's meaningfulness and mystery. It takes us beyond what we sense to our connection with the unseen. In Christian terms it is that within us that is born of the spirit.

In a Diocese of Sheffield school one of the primary resources for engagement with spiritual depth should be the school's Christian vision.

"Every step in the human developmental journey is spiritual because humans are fundamentally constituted to live in relationship to a self-transcendent horizon. We may not always be aware of that horizon but something in us reminds us that we are neither our own source nor our own fulfillment. How we respond to that larger-than-self horizon defines our spirituality."

David Benner, "Soulful Spirituality" (Brazos Press, 2011)

What is spirituality?

In the Ofsted School inspection handbook November 2019, spiritual development of pupils is shown by their:

- ability to be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) and perspective on life
- knowledge of, 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
- willingness to reflect on their experiences

OFSTED School Inspection Handbook,
November 2019 No. 190017, page 59 & 60.

As a Diocese, we define spirituality in our schools as having five branches:

1. Beliefs for life

“ability to be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) and perspective on life”

This includes an ability to identify and form individual beliefs, whether religious or more general.

It also includes the story or narrative we hold that may make life meaningful for us. This can be our religion, but can also be other beliefs and ways of seeing the world we gather to ourselves.

2. Understanding others

“knowledge of, and respect for, different people’s faiths, feelings and values”

The child’s appreciation of otherness involves an ability to understand that others have their own beliefs and inner life, to be aware of and respectful towards them. The sense of otherness and connection is integral to the way we form healthy relationships and experience of love and sense of belonging in our lives.

3. Joy, wonder and fascination

“sense of enjoyment and fascination in learning about themselves, others and the world around them “

This branch of spirituality draws on our growing awareness of the deeper things in life, including experiences of awe and wonder. It is here that we will often encounter a sense of the transcendent, in experiences that evoke awe and wonder.

4. Imagination and creativity

“use of imagination and creativity in their learning”

Our human capacity to create and imagine beyond ourselves is a unique, human quality and gives an outlet for personal expression. This aspect of spirituality also involves our ability to hold and deal with some of the tensions in life.

5. Reflectiveness

“willingness to reflect on their experiences”

Contemplation is the word used in Christian tradition for the human ability to take time to hold a moment or experience and not move on from it. This developing ability is seen in the way we become more able to show awareness and attention, and reflect back over moments in life.

“My Spirituality”

There is a difference between the terms “spirituality,” “a spirituality” and “my spirituality.”

“Spirituality” refers to the area of the spiritual and the nature of spirituality.

“A spirituality” is a term that can be used to refer to a spirituality shaped or orientated in a specific way. It is possible to speak of “Christian spirituality” or “Mystical spirituality” as specific religious or historical manifestations of the spiritual.

“My spirituality” is a phrase each individual could use. This may involve identifying with a specific religion or set of beliefs.

The Diocese does not seek a specific religious affiliation from members of staff. As a Diocese, we seek to work with the church as school to promote and develop the Christian foundation of the school.

In Diocesan schools we seek to enable all staff and pupils to develop their own personal sense of “my spirituality.”

A Spirited Curriculum

There are various ways in which curriculum content can foster spiritual development. Some of these should be approached critically – there are some shallow dips into subject matter on the market that sound like spirituality. In the Diocese of Sheffield we look to the above and apply these to the child’s whole school journey.

Beliefs for life

Activities and times that develop a child’s own sense of identity and self are healthy and spirited. This includes all the ways in which the primary curriculum enables children to form a secure and hopeful sense of self.

Through the exploration of world-view and belief, RE provides a way for pupils to explore their own beliefs. It is vital that this remain open to the child’s own personal views and no opinions be imported.

This aspect of spirituality also lends itself to PE. There is a strand of spirituality that is rooted in embodiment and our awareness of our own bodies and movement.

Any activity that is developing that move towards “my spirituality” (see above) is also hitting this nail on the head.

Understanding others

Activities that involve the exploration of meaning and understanding include the whole joy and adventure of reading – fiction and non-fiction. The encounter with character and motivation or the opening of new vistas of information should all be seen as seeds of contemplation in the curriculum. This is particularly evident in the way challenging experiences and news stories are related through texts.

Social subjects such as history and geography also engage in the understanding and appreciation of other lives and places, including the difference and diversity across times and places.

The culture of dignity and respect within a Church school should also develop a positive understanding of difference and diversity.

Joy, wonder and fascination

This area can also be found in activities that hold the attention through their ongoing fascination, such as the discovery of patterns in maths or they beauty and joy of poetry.

In the church school, rooted in wisdom, the connection between science and wonder is vital. Alongside the conceptual understanding inherent in the subject, science opens children's understanding of the world around and beyond them, giving insights into what is unseen until science opens our eyes. Any moment of seeing what science reveals and answering the questions it poses is a spirited moment.

Imagination and creativity

This branch of spirituality should be a facet of the whole curriculum, including the investigative and open activities afforded in maths and DT as well as the more obvious creative outlets such as writing, music and art.

Any curriculum opportunity that encourages a pupil to imagine a new imaginary or create a new creation should be held as a spirited experience.

Reflectiveness

Activities that call children to think again, to hold thought and to contemplate all present examples of reflectiveness.

Writing should be held up as a moment of self-expression and a vital part of the crafting of writing should be the way in which children are taught the connection between composition and self-expression.

Activities and times that promote critical thinking are also important for growing reflectiveness.

Depth Questions

In the wider Curriculum, Diocese of Sheffield schools are encouraged to use a few 'depth questions' to plumb some of the ethical, moral and spiritual features of any aspect of the curriculum.

When planning teaching about something, teachers can ask one or more of these questions:

- who (was or) is affected by the things we are learning?
- what is good, here?
- why is this important to anyone? ...to me?
- what is my experience of this?
- what difference does this make?

Spiritual Development

As with any aspect of child development, it is vital to acknowledge the stages children grow through as they develop their own spirituality. The Diocese offers regular training in spiritual development, supporting schools in discernment and listening to children. This involves valuing the stages of affiliation and critical awareness (covered in the training) that are essential parts of spiritual development.

In the Diocese of Sheffield, children's personal enquiry into faith will be cultivated, but their journey remains theirs.

So what?

In response to this paper and this Diocese's approach to spirituality, schools are asked to:

1. Enable everyone to identify their spirituality. Take every opportunity to affirm to children the fact that they are always forming their personal worldview. Staff are also encouraged to use whatever resource the school affords to their personal development of their spirituality.
2. Draw on your school's vision. In class and staff room, make regular reference to the Christian insights from the school's distinctive vision and the connection between that vision and the day-to-day life and learning of school
3. Identify those spirited places within the curriculum, and share and discuss them as part of your planning within the staff team.
4. Create hallowed times and spaces. Consider the place of prayer in the classroom, including use of the Diocese's simple prayer formats. Make sure you have a space in the classroom that can be a focus for things spiritual. It should include some identifiable Christian materials such as a Bible, a cross etc. It can also include something that connects with, and hallows, the stuff of life – in a class enthused by dinosaurs, why not place a plastic dinosaur. If planning a trip to the seaside, place a shell on it.
5. Check the pulse. Ask where the places are where the school's spiritual heartbeat is apparent. One place should be collective worship. If something matters, it should feature there, with an understanding that Christian faith believes God cares about all aspects of creation and life.

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