

Association of Christian Teachers (ACT)

www.christians-in-education.org.uk

Briefing Paper 1: Spiritual Development

How is 'spiritual development' to be understood and promoted?

The 1988 Education Reform Act states that the National Curriculum is to 'promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society.' In this it echoes the 1944 Education Act.

Each adjective presents a challenge to educators, but none more so than the word 'spiritual'. If it is put in the too-hard basket, then important aspects of education will be neglected or undervalued, as they have often been in recent decades.

The Association of Christian Teachers offers an interpretation of this term which, it believes, should be acceptable both to those who hold a religious worldview and to those who claim that religion is not necessary to a fulfilled life.

The meaning of 'spiritual'

It is not necessary to reach consensus on the source of the spiritual before agreeing on what is commonly considered to fall within its domain. The Oxford English Dictionary contrasts 'spirit as opposed to matter' and speaks of 'the inner nature' of a human being.

Human beings have a capacity to discern and construct new meanings about the natural and social world(s) they inhabit (including the human body itself) that go beyond the obvious and superficial. Such 'insights' or 'revelations' may be in response to a particular stimulus (e.g. a spider's web glistening with dew, the death of a close friend, a Bible verse) and may lead to a sense of unity or relationship with something greater than oneself. Sometimes people talk about feeling part of a community (e.g. family, nation, global humankind) or in tune with the natural world (e.g. plants and animals, the planet, the universe).

A sense of spirituality is something hardwired into all humans. It is part of what and who we are. This means that, regardless of age, gender, race, (dis)ability, cultural identity or religious belief, all people (non-deists included) are spiritual beings – whether they acknowledge it or not! The challenge for all educators is to help those they teach to recognise, value and develop their spiritual self. We often value the 'intellectual' and 'physical' but marginalise or overlook the 'spiritual' needs of the learner.

Encouraging times of reflection – whereby one is able to look back in memory, anticipate the future, and develop ideas about the world and one's self – is one simple way of exercising often underused spiritual 'muscles'.

So, too, is encouraging empathy – the ability to 'feel into' the interior lives of other selves and to enter into personal relations with them. Empathy has the capacity to turn a passing emotion into an enduring feeling or a remembered event from which we derive our ideas of, and sensitivity towards others and the world around us.

Spirituality in general, and reflection and empathy in particular, enable people to formulate long-term purposes and work towards them: purposes often far removed from such primary animal functions as eating, excreting and procreating. Coupled with this is the capacity for imagination, which prompts human beings to combine existing thoughts, feelings and images in new ways, often leading to fresh insight and creativity. These in turn have led to the development of history, culture, and modification of the human environment.

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In these and other ways, human beings transcend the immediacy of their functioning on the animal level. This has long been realised. It was what led Aristotle to speak of humanity as the 'rational animal'. In the light of the previous paragraphs, we regard this phrase as too limiting. The range of our transcendent powers both includes and exceeds rationality. That is why the adjective 'spiritual' is nearer the mark: humanity is a 'spiritual animal'.

The source of the spiritual

Where have these spiritual capacities in human beings come from? The Oxford English Dictionary relates the term 'spiritual' to ideas of an immortal soul or the rational, immaterial part of a human being in contrast to the material part or body, and to something that proceeds from God. Such elements point to the religious origins of the notion.

Some religions teach that the soul is everlasting, the body transient; Christianity teaches that God made a natural species and conferred His 'image' on it, resulting in an embodied spirit or 'person' with the potential to be resurrected as a whole being. This is dependent on the individual entering into loving, obedient relationship with the personal God through Jesus Christ. Humanism denies both accounts, but regards rationality as the characteristic that raises human beings above the rest of the animal kingdom.

In legislating for schools in the public sector of a pluralistic society, it is not appropriate to insist on acceptance of any of these accounts. But the 1988 Education Reform Act correctly implies that we owe students assistance in developing those spiritual aspects of their humanity, about which there is common agreement. It is also their right to be made aware of the accounts that various worldviews, and particularly Christianity, have given of the nature and source of the spiritual.

Spiritual development across the curriculum

Clearly the notion of 'spiritual development' has implications right across the curriculum, and at all ages. There is a risk that a technological society will set its sights too low, focusing on the satisfaction of material needs without sufficient regard for the spiritual nature and needs of human beings. In fact, there is already evidence that this leads to people becoming one-dimensional beings, trapped in consumerism, naïve about the political forces which manipulate them, and exploitative in human relationships. It should be noted that, unsurprisingly, 'spiritual development' often overlaps with 'moral development'.

Every subject area should include in its general aims such objectives as the following, and see that they are represented in the spelling out of detailed teaching units:

- a) to sustain the self-esteem of students as they approach new knowledge, ensuring frequent experiences of successful learning;
- b) to assist them in their efforts to develop a stable self-concept and personal goals for living;
- c) to develop the individual's capacities for reasoning and critical thought, especially about the models of enquiry, and views of human nature, which the subject area in question presupposes, and the relation of this subject area to self-development and social responsibility;
- d) to foster the emotional life of the individual, particularly in regard to being able to express one's feelings, increase one's appreciative range, and control one's emotional behaviour;

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- e) to encourage the setting apart of moments for stillness and reflection on the direction of one's life;
- f) to provide opportunities for the exercise of imagination and experiences of creative invention;
- g) to enlarge the individual's capacity to empathise with other persons;
- h) to encourage constructive and enjoyable interactions with them;
- i) to give the individual responsibilities, which create moral obligations towards other persons.

PSME and RE in school

It is increasingly common practice to provide a subject strand called 'personal, social and moral education' or PSME. Sometimes PSME is taught in conjunction with Religious Education (RE). The attention to PSME is to be welcomed as one particular way of providing learning experiences that go some distance to meeting the spiritual needs spelled out above. We are concerned, however, that often the 'M' is deleted, implying that such studies do not need an ethical dimension, much less a religious dimension. In particular, the tacit substitution of PSME or some variant of it for the RE provision denies students access to the kind of study in which attention is most directly focused on the spiritual dimension. It also directly contradicts the 1988 Education Reform Act.

Enough has been said to make two things clear. First, fulfilling the educational aim of assisting spiritual development is not something that should be left wholly to the RE teacher. Nor, secondly, can this aim be adequately fulfilled without an RE strand in the curriculum.

Religious traditions have arisen from the quest of all human beings for a sense of meaning and purpose, and for deliverance from aspects of the human condition which they find distressing. Religions unite in emphasising spiritual attributes and in seeking to relate them to an ultimate reality, which most call God. No modern persons can be considered adequately educated unless they have been given access to this heritage, as a contribution to their understanding both of their own natures and of the modern world.

We urge that all people of goodwill agree to promote spiritual development across the curriculum in the ways suggested above.