Integrating Faith and Learning: an empirical case study from a Church of England Secondary School

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Introduction

The role of the religious schools in the English education system has been highlighted by several factors during the 90s. Firstly, legislation was created which required the external evaluation of a schools provision for the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of its pupils. Secondly, the long running debate about the public funding of alternative and faith-based schools moved significantly in favour of religious diversity, rather than secular uniformity. The current Labour government appears to value its Church schools, and is encouraging the creation of new ones. The Dearing Report challenges Church schools to be distinctive, and encourages the Church of England to invest in the nurture and education of its young through the schooling system.

Although there is a great deal of support for these ideas there is considerably less research undertaken which identifies how and in what way Church schools might be distinctive, or what it is about existing Church schools which makes them successful. This research project is an empirical case study into one Voluntary Aided Church of England Comprehensive Secondary School. It began in 1997 as the result of stimulus from at least two different sources. The first of these was the advent of a new headteacher, who was particularly aware of the legal requirement for spiritual and moral development of pupils to be delivered within the curriculum and this was included as a target within the school development plan. The second stimulus came from the Foundation Governors who were aware of their obligation to preserve the distinctive ethos and character of the school according to its Trust Deed, but were less clear about what that meant or how it might be implemented.

The research questions

The specific aims of the research in the first year were to identify the core spiritual and moral values which the school community - parents, teachers, governors and pupils - held to be of 'ultimate concern' and which should therefore inform a distinctive ethos and practice in the school. Once this was established, the task was to devise a way of implementing those core values, so that they could form a basis for a whole school approach to ethical and spiritual literacy across the curriculum.

Consultation and Investigation

The research team began by undertaking a community-wide consultation amongst pupils, parents, teachers and governors on the core values which they held to be important for the school community. 90% of pupils, all of the teachers and governors and a significant minority of parents were consulted in a planned programme of research, which involved student and teacher researchers. Having received the 'votes' of the many different groups the results were collated. There were certain values that occurred with remarkable consistency across all groups although the language employed to describe them often varied. The pupils in particular had very clear views about what they valued, although this only emerged after there had been some explanation of the terminology. Pupils were unfamiliar with some of the language and vocabulary of 'spiritual and moral'

talk, despite their church backgrounds. However once they began to express themselves it was clear that they had strong views on the sorts of values they would like the community to live by.

The second strand of this part of the process involved an investigation into what was perceived to be important to pupils and teachers in their school. This was designed to discover whether there were discrepancies between the espoused values of the school and the values in practice in the school. The theoretical framework of Personal Construct Psychology was selected because it is an attempt to talk about people in a unitary language, that is to investigate the psychology of the person as a whole and not to reduce the focus to just one aspect of personhood, such as feelings or beliefs. A person's constructs are not simply words, rather Kelly defines a construct not as a thought or a feeling but as discrimination, as part of the way one stands towards one's world as a complete person.[1]

This strand was interesting because what emerged was that people valued certain things about the school that had not emerged strongly in the consultation. Principally these things were – the Christian foundation of the school, positive interpersonal relationships, and learning and, from the teachers, equality or fairness for all learners.

The final set of core values which were then adopted by the community were: Valuing ourselves, Valuing others, Trustworthiness, Forgiveness, Justice, Stewardship, Truth, Fulfilling our potential, Faith in Christ.

Consensus or Tradition?
One of the central debates generated by this consultation work was that surrounding the tension arising from the question of whose values should the school be promoting. Historically there have been three broad theoretical approaches to "values education", which have been rooted into particular views of knowledge and development which have been influential at different times, and reflect the differing educational ideologies. These are: a) the a traditional approach which identifies a specific, and externally validated set of values or virtues; b) the romanticist approach which avoids identifying moral content at all since content is idiosyncratic, moral sensibility is latent in the individual and process is what matters; and c) a constructivist approach in which content is viewed as a pedagogical tool - a means to an end. These approaches to "values education" and spiritual and moral development are distinct from each other, lead to very different practices in the school and the classroom, and appear to be incompatible.

Towards a Critical Communitarian Approach
In developing this research project it became clear that, in terms of the content of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils, the school was drawing on both tradition, community and the lived experience of the pupil and teacher population. The consensus in a set of core values drew upon pupils' experience and on the school community's understanding of itself, as well as on the historical tradition both of the school as a participant in liberal educational discourse and as a participant in the tradition of Christianity. The three sources cannot be readily un-entwined in practice, though there was evidence, even in the investigation, of a tension between those sources. For example one of the teachers highlighted the inconsistency between the Christian value of justice and the school's historical connection with people involved in the Slave Trade. It is possible that the dissonance that sometimes exists between present experience, the community's espoused values and tradition is an important site for spiritual development which can healthily include critique and renewal of the tradition.

Wright's definition of spirituality is pertinent to this project: 'spirituality is the developing relationship of the individual, within community and tradition, to that which is, or is perceived to be of ultimate truth, ultimate concern and ultimate value'.[2] Wright goes on to say 'further, we learn through our place within the community, and our spiritual understanding is influenced by those with whom we live and work and the cultural traditions we inherit. Schools will inevitably transmit their understanding of spirituality: an impression of what, for that particular community, is ultimately true and of fundamental value. Given the diversity of spiritual perspectives it is simply common sense that schools should be pro-active in recognising, articulating and developing a set of spiritual values and in nurturing children into a received spiritual tradition'.

If Wright is accurate in his observation that spirituality is fundamentally concerned with the search for truth and can be explored within a plurality of traditions, then spiritual development is inseparable from moral, social and cultural development - indeed it informs it.

The Silence of the Curriculum
The most significant absence, however, from both the consultation and the investigation process, was any comment about the curriculum. In terms of the actual content of the curriculum there was silence, as though what is taught is simply a given, which is taken for granted. This was significant for this project exploring the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and citizenship. Curriculum

content can no longer be defended as 'value neutral' and the curriculum as well as the 'ethos' of the school is considered to be a vehicle for values education. The community was aware of the 'lived' nature of values in the processes of schooling but did not seem to be aware of the worldview/s or values imparted through the content of the curriculum. For this reason, the second part of the action research took an experimental approach to implementing the school's core values in the content of the curriculum.

Values or Virtues?

Each of the core values identified by the community were deemed to have spiritual, moral, social and cultural aspects to them, to be inter-related and to cohere within a larger narrative framework, or belief system. Most of those core values, with the exception of 'Faith in Christ', would be recognised and shared by most of society although precise definition, even within a relatively homogenous community, was difficult. Given the importance of critical thinking to the educative task, a focus was placed on critical dialogue rather than precise definition, an inclusive, rather than an exclusive and 'over and against' pedagogy.

The subjects of the taught curriculum inherently address most of these values. Identifying those 'moments' within schemes of work or programmes of study makes explicit what is often already implicit. Where a core value is used in an educative context some, if not all of spiritual, moral, social and cultural development may be taking place. This is not a precise science: it is more of a hermeneutical task. However, it is possible to produce SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time related) targets in this field as well as in the usual measurable learning outcomes.

Given this understanding, the school's core values were seen as more than simply 'add-ons' to the central task of the school. Rather they were seen as forming an important part of the story of the communities from which the pupils in this school derive their identities and from which they make sense and meaning from their experience. Furthermore these core values can be understood as 'ends' in themselves - rather than simply means to an end. The values were seen as central to the vision and purpose of the school, traceable through key policies and programmes of study.

Introducing values into the curriculum

During the second year the teacher researchers designed and taught 50 lessons to experimental classes, in which one or more of the school's values became a learning objective, linked to the content of what was being taught. At the end of the research phase the research team spent some time identifying those outcomes which could be validated with evidence from their observations, experience, assessment of pupils and from a research instrument which was utilised before and after the experimental classes, including a control group.

Findings

- There was a strong consensus amongst pupils in the school on the importance of the school's core values, although there was also a gap between pupils' espoused values, and those values in practice. This was considered to be an important creative tension in the process of nurture and education.

- After the experimental lessons, pupils' spiritual and moral vocabulary had increased compared to the control classes and they were more ready and able to express their thoughts and views in this dimension.

- Values interventions appeared to encourage pupil responsiveness. This may be because they engaged the whole child as a learner, including their emotions, their spirituality and their sense of activism and involvement in the community.

- Values interventions can influence the ways pupils perceive the school's core values within the content and context of subjects within the school curriculum. This finding was supported by quantitative analysis.

- Values interventions require teachers to set their lessons and their subjects in a bigger understanding of how the world operates. The teacher researchers found that in order to design and deliver a values intervention in their subject they had to move beyond the usual boundaries to more global concerns which might not normally appear in their teaching.

- Values interventions add a spiritual dimension to lessons because they encourage a reflective searching for deeper meaning to events and issues. Teachers found that the values interventions stimulated genuine discussion about 'ultimate concerns' and pupils often presented their own views on particular issues, whilst being challenged to think more deeply and in different ways about issues such as valuing others, or justice or truth.

- These core values provide a powerful conceptual framework that is applicable to all disciplines, to the everyday life of pupils and to the information that they receive daily from popular culture and current affairs. To the extent that these core values represent the ultimate concerns of individuals,

communities and traditions, then developing understanding, commitment and critique of the core values can be described as developing spirituality.

- Values interventions encouraged critical thinking because they stimulated pupils to make judgements which required abstraction, reflection and speculation. They also encouraged an inter-disciplinary transfer of ideas and a holistic perspective on the curriculum. The quality of discussion during value intervention lessons challenged pupils to search for meaning beyond the usual confines of the subject and to think about how they think.

This short summary of a case study in one Church of England Secondary school provides explanations and ideas which cannot be generalised, but which perhaps indicate that there is a significant research agenda in this area of diversity of provision and of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils and of citizenship education. There is enough evidence to suggest that there may be links between spirituality and learning itself which require much greater understanding by educators, from all communities, but especially from the faith communities.

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For Further Reading

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