

Spirituality days in primary RE

Ruth Wills is the Scripture Union evangelist for the North West She has recently graduated with an MA in practical and contextual Theology, specialising in children's spirituality. She is also a qualified teacher and has several years of experience in school and church work.

▶ My experience as a teacher in Catholic Primary school a number of years ago was both frustrating and liberating.

On one hand, I constantly felt the pressure to attain good results and standards in the classroom and in turn disagreed with the pressure and stress that filtered down to the children. On the other hand, my school was a place where spirituality entered every part of school life. The OFSTED report wrote that 'Music adds a particular spiritual dimension to the life of the school' and during times when lower or upper juniors came together at the end of the day for collective worship, the presence of a spiritual dimension in school was tangible.

It was for these reasons that I left the demands of classroom teaching to explore the job I now do which includes taking 'Spirituality days' into Primary schools in the North West of England and to discover how schools can bring a spiritual dimension into every day activities.

Building my work on the belief that all human beings are innately spiritual (evidence to support this claim is biological and anthropological as well as theological), and that children are possibly the group of human beings that access the spiritual more readily, the starting point is not that of education, but of nurture. Each child has the resources available to engage with something spiritual and my aim is to provide the space and opportunity for this to happen in the midst of busy and noisy curriculum filled days.

My understanding of the word 'spiritual' is summarised by Elaine McCreery who says that spirituality is 'an awareness that there is something other, something greater than the course of everyday events.' This is explained further by David Hay and Rebecca Nye authors of the book 'The Spirit of the Child,' who identified many spiritual aspects in children's conversations and believe spirituality to be an innate human phenomenon that can find expression in every dimension of life, including day to day occurrences. Their description of 'Relational Consciousness' is helpful in indicating the contexts of spirituality: that of the child with 'God,' with the world, with the self and with others. They also name other aspects of spirituality as awe and wonder; imagination; mystery sensing; the here and now and 'flow' or the feeling of being 'at one.'

Through my spirituality days, I aim to consider all these aspects of spirituality through the framework of Christianity, but not at the exclusion of children from other faith backgrounds who can work through the same activities from the point of view of their own spiritual experience.

▶ The rationale for the day

Each event will be unique as the activities are related to the context of the school and children. However the objectives lie in allowing children to take part in creative activities, reflect on their lives and experiences and respond accordingly through discussion and other media.

There are no set outcomes. Each creative process is considered a spiritual experience; the end result does not provide the focus of each activity. The reflection that follows or is part of the process, is taken seriously by all in a context of trust and positivity. It is in the relationships that develop, the wider views that are considered, the feeling of self achievement and the existential questions that arise, that spiritual nurture takes place.

▶ A typical day

1. Introduction (25 minutes)

The day begins with all children sitting in a circle comfortably. Quiet, ambient music plays and a candle is lit which sits in the centre of the circle. The children are encouraged to keep silence and after an initial stimulus and bible passage, are led through a series of questions which they consider in their own mind. Themes for the day range from 'Light,' and 'love' to 'Creation' and 'friends.' There are many more including 'water,' 'growth' and 'celebration.'

The stimulus might be a PowerPoint presentation, the lighting of indoor fireworks or candles, looking at and feeling objects from nature such as feathers, leaves, pine cones etc. The bible passage might be a Psalm read three times (e.g. Psalm 8), it might be a bible story (e.g. Jesus calms the storm or the healing of the blind man) or might be a series of promises or encouragements such as the Beatitudes or 1 Corinthians 13. The questions are related and open-ended, allowing the children to consider what it might be like if...? what would you do...? how might you have felt...? what does this make you think of...? What does it make you want to do...? what have you learned etc.

The session ends by children sharing their thoughts with the group. Each child is listened to and taken seriously with significant points written down to take into the next stage of the day.

2. Music (1 hour)

The first creative session is Music. For example with younger children, the bible story is retold in sound using classroom percussion. With older children, emotions can be explored through sound, digital music used and vocal sounds/ body percussion investigated in order to respond to the story in a number of ways. Within a loose framework and the expectation of co-operation and discipline, the children are given the opportunity to provide ideas and work together to create a response in sound.

The session ends again with discussion around the activity: what was learnt? what was new? what you found out about yourself, the world around you, others and God. A good amount of time is given to discussion as it is important for the children to reflect and respond.

3. World focus (1 hour)

This session aims to place the bible story in the context of the wider world. A range of ideas can be used through drama, creative writing, using newspapers, singing, drumming, DVD or video, debate etc. The children are encouraged to consider their own importance in the world and the difference they can make. They are also encouraged to think beyond themselves to a broken and hurting world and to reflect on this in the light of the bible story and their own experience. For example: 'Water' -reflecting on the everyday use of water – playing with water - watching a DVD from Tear Fund about Water in Africa – writing a class list of

ways to save water – thinking of an idea for ways to raise money to buy a well for a village in Africa – writing a poem about clean and dirty water – act out scenes which depict our overuse of water compared with the lack of clean water in other countries – internet research into NGOs that are working to provide clean water for developing countries etc.

4. Art (1 hour)

This session is the same kind of activity as Music. Providing the materials and high expectations for behaviour, the children are invited to contribute ways in which they can respond to the bible story through art and design.

Past examples have included clay models, water explored through marbling and bubbling, collage, paint on canvass, work with pastels and charcoals and using the Paint' programme on the computer.

5. Plenary (20 minutes)

As at the start of the day, the children sit comfortably in a circle. Quiet, ambient music plays and a candle is lit which sits in the centre of the circle. The children are encouraged to keep silence and think back over the day and the things they have done. They are also led through a series of questions which ask what they might have learnt about themselves, the world around, others and God. They consider these questions in their own minds in the silence. Finally, in turn each child is given the opportunity to respond. This is not obligatory but each is valued and given the chance to speak. Again, significant comments are written down as a record of the day and an indication of how the child has responded to the spiritual.

▶ Reflection

Each day has been shaped by the children who have taken part. Whole classes can engage in a 'Spirituality day' but it might be easier at first to take a small group or half class, and recruit extra adult help where appropriate.

As the world becomes busier, noisier and more stressed, school provides the ideal opportunity for children to have some space, quiet, time with their own thought, with God and in the developing of good relationships with others. Nurturing spirituality is not evangelism per se. However, I believe that time spent allowing children to consider God and what he says through the bible, could be the time when they might first open themselves up to him in a new and real way, allowing the Holy Spirit to continue his work in their lives.

Ruth Wills November 2007.

▶ References

📖 Books

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