

Encouraging global perspectives in the classroom – a theoretical reflection on ‘Spirituality days’ led in UK primary schools.

Abstract

Through 2008 and 2009, Ruth Wills developed a series of programmes for children of Primary age under the title ‘Spirituality days.’ These provide the opportunity for classes to take a break from the normal timetable and to experience something of the ‘spiritual.’ On a typical ‘Spirituality day’ the children take part in activities which relate to personal and global issues and are able to make personal responses as global citizens. Time for silence and reflection is provided and children connect imagination to creativity through music, art, drama and creative writing. Space is given for children to reflect on how the experiences affect their own personal lives and the day aims to be a transformative experience.

This paper provides a theoretical reflection on the value of ‘spirituality days’ for the growth of children to be global citizens and for school as the place where children’s spirituality is met and nurtured.

Introduction

As a regular visitor to schools, I believe that school is a place where spirituality enters every part of daily life. Building my work on the belief that all human beings are innately spiritual (Hay and Nye 2006; Hardy 1979) and that children are possibly the group of human beings that access the spiritual more readily, the starting point for developing spirituality in school life is not that of education, but of nurture.

During the past two years I have developed a series of programmes for schools that allows for elements of the spiritual to be fostered as part of the school day. I use the generic term ‘Spirituality days’ to describe these programmes yet every event is different. However each will include personal reflection, a sense of global awareness and a chance to respond to the experiences undertaken.

The main aspects of a spirituality day are: silence and meditation on a given theme and inspired by an initial stimulus, an activity session based on the theme, a music workshop, a drama workshop, and finally an art workshop before a closing time of reflection. These sessions also might be held within one week over a number of weeks as well as in one day. Nevertheless, the aim is to allow the children to think about their own lives and identity, beyond themselves, to the world to ‘God.’

I do hold the belief that spirituality pervades every aspect of school life and can be identified throughout the curriculum and through my own work, I train head teachers and student teachers in how to identify and nurture spirituality within the normal school day.

Nonetheless, ‘Spirituality days’ are special days for schools who value the spiritual lives of children already and for those who want to begin to do so.

Rationale

One spirituality day represents a journey, whereby the participants travel from their own personal experience of the world to a global experience then through creative methods and some theological reflection, back to their own experience with the opportunity for response. The intention is that this journey would be one of transformation leading to action on the part of the children as a group and as individuals.

Karen Steele (2004) examined the relationship between religious education and citizenship education then equated spiritual literacy with the development of a well developed worldview. Equally I believe that a well developed worldview also positively affects spiritual literacy therefore there appears to be a natural link between a healthy spirituality and a healthy worldview.

From a pedagogical perspective, a spirituality day or session might also come under the umbrella of '*cultural studies*' which traverses disciplinary boundaries to examine cultural institutions, icons, and activities, as well as beliefs, values, and products. Canella (2002, p. 5) suggests that such an approach is influenced by post structural and post modern discourses which allow for exploration and dialogue and personal interpretations of situations.

It also contributes to the '*creative curriculum*' aspect of contemporary teaching. 'Lifting the lid on the creative curriculum' (National College for school leadership, 2007) states: (This approach) 'emphasises hands-on, child-centred approaches and creativity is seen as integral to all aspects of learning and indeed being' (2007, p.7). Later citing the creativity of the Celts in the 6th century, one head teacher states: 'we are created to be creative (2007, p. 8).' From an academic point of view, David Hay's reflection results in his notion that spiritual education is the reverse of indoctrination - the task of nourishing spirituality is one of releasing children's understanding and imagination (2006. pp. 156-7).

But it can also be the locus of *political action*. Through education, individuals can develop awareness of structural cultural conditions and subsequently become agents of political transformation. Hay (2006. p. 149) suggests that teachers have four main responsibilities: to help children keep an open mind; explore ways of seeing; encourage personal awareness; become personally aware of the social and political dimensions of spirituality. This involves the individual in a journey of personal growth and on a micro level, the classroom can become a centre for social change.

Case study

Theoretical reflections on the value of 'Spirituality days' as transformational spiritual experiences are located within the context of a series of six sessions which took place in a Greater Manchester (UK) Primary school early in 2009. Each session was led by myself with a consistent group of children each week. There were 33 children in the class who joined me every Thursday morning for 6 weeks. The school is multi-cultural and largely represents

children from a Muslim background. The school is a 'good' school and those with whom I worked were very well behaved and mainly emotionally literate.

The overarching theme for the series of sessions was 'water' and each session focused on a discipline within the creative arts. Photographic evidence, children's verbal and written responses as well as observational evidence led me to analyse aspects of spirituality in terms of four layers which I will explain in more detail below.

1. Communal
2. Personal
3. Inspirational
4. Theological

Communal – the drama session

- *(Quote from a child) I have learned you can recycle, reuse and reduce things. You can even save water for later, just don't throw it down the sink.*

This session began with a mime activity where the children explored their own uses of water and identified how access to clean water instantly is something taken for granted. There was next a quiz followed by a story about a boy called Moses who, living in Uganda who walked miles for clean water every day.

This led to a time empathetic drama, where the children imaged they were 'Moses' and walked each day to collect water in a billy can. They worked in groups then individually before a time of discussion and reflection. Some children followed this up in empathetic writing where each imagined they were 'Moses' in a short piece written in the first person.

The session ended by the children again exploring through drama and mime, ways in which they would consider their use access to water differently and how they now might reduce the amount they use and waste.

Communal spirituality involves a sense of being spiritually connected to others at local, national and international levels and of sharing a responsibility for the well-being of others. Woolley (2008, p. 105) writes: 'They (children) need to consider the impact of their choices and use of resources. Achieving this is the challenge for the effective development of skills necessary to become global citizens: it enables children to consider their interrelatedness with other people and their environment.'

The drama and reflection activities enabled the children to do so. A number of spiritual attributes were identified through this session.

Empathy and concern. Tobin Hart (2003, p. 80) writes that children develop empathetic resonance which he describes as 'feeling into.' This is done through the system of flesh, chemicals and neurones mixed with the 'magic of consciousness.' Hart's philosophy is that children start out knowing through their bodies more than their heads and may have more sensitivity to bodily signals. Certainly the drama exercise drew on the emotions of the children and led to their 'tuning in' to or 'feeling into' the life of the African child.

Reflection and critical thinking. Spiritual education is a practical activity which provides the tools with which children can become reflective human beings. This attribute embraces the political aspect of spiritual education which in turn leads to existential questioning. Hay and Nye (2006.p.117) regard this as an important aspect of the child-self relationship which forms part of a holistic understanding of spirituality. At the end of the drama session, reflection time led the children into wondering: questions such as 'why there is an imbalance of wealth and health in the world?' This then led to action.

Responsibility and action – Woolley (2008, p113) writes: 'Developing a sense of interrelatedness with other people necessitates that we take on a sense of responsibility for their needs and the ways in which our interactions with them affect their experience of life'. Global and spiritual education should facilitate transformation in a child a consequence of which is a change in attitude and action.

This forms part an interesting debate in the area of R.E. teaching. Some scholars appreciate the transformative nature of this subject as opposed to the learning of knowledge and skills, yet some hold the reductionist view that religious education should remain in the domain of skills and knowledge. Astley (2007, p. 183) suggests that 'in studying transforming ideas one lays oneself open to the possibility of transformation. A deep understanding (of the issue or belief) will then evoke a passionate embrace and a release of spiritual power.' I believe that there is an ethical implication here and we need to be careful that as educators we are not using children's emotions to gain an intended response. Although spirituality days do not 'intend to evoke any religious commitment,' they do I believe open up the opportunity for transformation leading to action.

Personal – the activity session.

- *(Quote from a child) I am important, no matter what religion I am or what I believe.*

The subject of this session was 'Inclusion' and was took a different theme to the arts based sessions which took 'water' as the main subject matter. They considered the theme of inclusion by taking part in a number of activities: for example they made a model but without the use of eyes, ears or hands; they played a game which illustrated the unfair distribution of wealth in the world and learnt sound bite information about world situations where exclusion has led to conflict. The children were, at the end of the session,

invited to reflect on what they would take away with them and some expressed political opinions about fair and unfair trade laws, but most responses reflected the sentiment 'it's ok for to be me.' In turn they were encouraged to understand that this applies to all children and all human beings.

Spiritual attributes:

Identity - This type of activity is important for the development of personal identity within the global framework and positive relationships among human beings. Identity in a postmodern world is bound up in gaining cultural capital whether through possessions, belonging to a trademark group and the expression of personal preferences in lifestyle, clothing and behaviour. The development of a sense of identity beyond the material can have positive effects on self esteem, mental health and again behaviour.

Personal experience - Brenda Watson, cited in 'the Spiritual dimension of childhood' (2008, p.112) identifies four aspects of an emerging spirituality which coincide with those revealed through the activity session.

Inclusiveness: the children were able to experience how someone with physical limitations contributes to the creation of something unique

Assurance: the affirmation of self and others for who they are

Inspiration: to contribute to the passing on of goodness for the benefit of others (such as buying fair trade)

Acceptance of mystery: glimpsing a power beyond but also the sense of 'not knowing' or having the answers as an acceptable way of being. This links to the exploration of the theological in spiritual education which leads me into the next layer.

Response - Each child was also made aware of their own responses and responsibilities. 'Teaching Controversial issues' states: *Education for Global citizenship encourages children and young people to explore, develop and express their own values and opinions, whilst listening to, and respecting other people's points of view. This is an important step towards children and young people making informed choices as to how they exercise their own rights and their responsibilities towards others.* (Oxfam, 2006, p. 1). Woolley (2008, p.150) reflects that 'this is an enterprise of spiritual proportions and involves the development of personal convictions and principles to inform one's own life choices and relationships'.

Theological – the music session

- *God made everything. He made the waves separate when the flood came. God is kind and always will be. God is everywhere no matter if you are split up from others.*

In this session, the theological stimulus came from the reading of the story of Moses and the children of Israel crossing the Red Sea. This is found in both the Qur'an and Bible and was known already by at least half of the class.

The children composed sound effects to represent various parts of the story (e.g. the knocking of the building bricks, the intense heat, the long journey and finally the miraculous crossing of the sea). They were then given the opportunity to write down what they learnt from taking part in the activity.

Spiritual aspects of the music session reflect the first two layers as already addressed. For example it inspired the development of personal awareness e.g. they expressed what they discovered they could achieve. It also reflected something of the communal – in gaining an insight into what they could achieve TOGETHER. The relationship between the individual and others is an important spiritual issue to explore.

Some wrote about themselves, e.g. 'I learnt I can communicate with more children. If others share ideas you can make a good piece of music'. But in this session, through the story there was a consideration of 'God.' Rebecca Nye writes that spirituality in this context is reflected in their feelings and thoughts about God and in some cases a relationship with God (1998, p.113). For children in this class, the concept of 'God' means different things. For some God is Allah, for some God is inconsequential and for some God seemed a concept easy to talk about.

This lesson enabled the children to:

Reflect on the character, nature and activity of 'God'

The above quote represents most of the statements written by the children. When broken down and taken further, the child has considered the following theological features:

God made everything - creator
God is kind – deduced from the story - carer
God is omnipresent - everywhere
God is the force which joins all created things.

Reflect on how these affect one's personal life

A quote from another child states: 'God made water and he cares about everyone in the world.' In this sense God is a part of this child's life – in the acceptance of water as part of God's creation, and as the recipient of God's care. Further discussion with the children might uncover how this might influence their beliefs, actions and own personal prayer or faith life.

Reflect on the existence of God

There seemed from most children an acknowledgement of the existence of some kind of force that has been described as 'God' however inconsequential this seemed to some. This identification of a phenomenon called 'God' could

prove to be problematic as we are putting an adult definition on something that might not be defined or understood personally by the child – not even believed in. It has been argued controversially by Zohar and Marshall (2000) that there is a 'God spot' or module in all humans, in the area of the temporal lobes which accounts for spiritual experience. This does not necessarily prove the existence of God but does come some way to explaining the overwhelming acceptance of 'God' as a concept among this group of children.

Inspirational – the art sessions.

- *(Conversation between myself and a child) I love this lesson. I want it all the time coz it's fun. How is it fun? You make a mess. Just a mess? No we made a storm picture. I liked putting my hands in the paint and sand. What will your mum say when you go home with dirty hands? She won't mind. She likes me to have fun at school.*
- *Description of drawings) Two pictures of the world were drawn, one with the words 'Africa doesn't have clean water' written on the shape of the continent of Africa.*

The two art sessions were designed so that children would have the opportunity to 'explore.' Each activity provided was open-ended and allowed the children to use their imaginations as well as experiment with touch and texture.

In session one, listening to 'Reflects dans l'eau' by Debussy, the children made responses through acrylic on canvass, water colours on paper, chalks onto card and poster paints with sand (using their fingers, combs, toothbrushes and other media for effects) on big boards. Others searched through water images found from Google and created a PowerPoint presentation to express the moods of the music.

In the second session, the stimulus was 'La Mer' by Debussy. This time the whole class sat around a long strip of thick paper and were given chalks, pastels and coloured pencils. They were invited to create shapes, shades and tones using the media provided in order to represent the movement of the water as portrayed by the music.

They then were invited to individually make a drawing to represent some of the themes from the six sessions.

The outcome of these activities was spiritually inspirational.

The features of inspirational spirituality:

Creativity and involvement. The child in the quote above obviously benefitted from being allowed to experiment freely with the media. Kavalsky calls the benefit of this kind of activity 'the power of the pigment. He says about art: *'The dimension of reality gives way to something beyond consciousness and this is where one finds one's own truth and the beginning of one's creative spirit.* What was a mess was also a storm. The statement:

'my mum wants me to have fun at school' reinforces the need for creativity and exploration to be introduced into our classrooms. It was an act of liberation through which the child found fulfilment and joy.

Awe and wonder. The art sessions provided so many opportunities for children to engage in a sense of the awe of the created world. Hart argues that experiences of awe and wonder are the cornerstone of a child's spiritual life (2003, p. 48) while Hay and Nye (2006, p.72) indicate that such experiences become the foundation for the consideration of 'ultimate mystery.' It is through the sense of awe inspired by visual art and children's own creativity that they are opened up to the world beyond the immediate and are provoked into asking existential questions.

Flow. This is the act of 'being involved' with an activity to the point that the activity seems to manage itself. The concept of flow was introduced by the social psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1990) and has been reflected upon further by Hyde (2008, p.82). He discovered that children involved in his research, when totally immersed in an activity had an intensity and immediacy in the present moment. This is truly spiritual. The child's mind is at rest while bodily experiences provided a deep sense of spiritual awareness. The art activities allowed the opportunity for this to happen, resulting in very good behaviour and a calm atmosphere in the classroom. The children commented on how the final products were almost created 'by magic' – as if they had not been part of it. An experience of flow can have long lasting spiritual significance in that it is the basis for spiritual exercises, prayer and times of worship.

Meaning. In reflecting on the activities, the children mainly were able to summarise their responses in a simple way: '*Africa doesn't have clean water.*' Through a series of activity sessions with a global perspective, the children were able to evaluate their personal situation in relation to others and form a response.

Conclusion.

After analysis and reflection of the six sessions, I have identified four layers of engagement which in turn have indicated spiritual attributes emerging from the sessions. The classroom is full of spirituality and community life provides the opportunity for spiritual journeying, questing and nurture. The activities on which I have reflected also took the children on a personal journey within a global context where the outcome was transformational. I believe that given training and modelling, teachers should be able to identify the spiritual within their classrooms, provide physical and personal spaces for silence, reflection and meaning making for the well-being of children and their growth as global citizens.

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