

A Sense of Belonging: Spiritual Development in Christian-Ethos Secondary Schools

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INTRODUCTION

Faith schools ‘seek to keep alive and renew the culture of the sacred in a profane and secular world’ (Grace 2002, p.5), which is a controversial and problematic role. Yet little is known about the contribution of faith schools to the spiritual development of pupils in their care.

This chapter draws on the findings of the Ten Leading Schools (TLS) research project (Canterbury 2017) which investigated the ways in which Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales contribute to students’ spiritual development. A framework, with four categories—self, community, knowledge and God—developed from the research, aids an exploration of young people’s understanding of what it means to develop spiritually in Christian-ethos schools. The second half of the chapter highlights one of these categories—a sense of community—and explores its connection to the spiritual development of young people in one Church of England school. The chapter concludes with a brief consideration of the implications of the TLS research project for a critical understanding of the process of spiritual development in faith schools.

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WHAT IS MEANT BY ‘SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT’?

Spiritual development is a vague term open to a variety of interpretations (Davies 1998, p.123; Francis and Robbins 2005, p.29). Meehan points out that the terms ‘spiritual development’ and ‘developing spirituality’ are often confused both in academic literature and in schools. The latter term is primarily relevant in the context of faith; the former is ‘educational in intent, relevant for all’ (Meehan 2002, p.291). Indeed, it is a legal requirement of all UK schools that they attend to the spiritual development of their pupils. This is defined by The Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills (Ofsted) as follows:

Pupils’ spiritual development is shown by their ability: to be reflective about their own beliefs, religious or otherwise, that inform their perspective on life and their interest in 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 2016, p.35)

Ofsted’s secular non-religious understanding of spiritual development reflects the emphasis of much of the research in this field on spiritual development in terms of health and mental well-being and/or the development of the child (Birkinshaw 2015). This chapter considers spiritual development in an educational setting, as relevant for all, but views it through a Christian lens.

It makes the assumption that spiritual development is an essential element of being human. It has its roots in the Christian belief that all are made in God’s image (Genesis 1:26), and that the role of education is to enable all to reach their God-given potential and live life in all its fullness (John 10:10). This includes enabling and encouraging all young people to develop or deepen an awareness of the spiritual dimension of life.

SCHOOLS WITH A CHRISTIAN FOUNDATION

The focus in this chapter is on spiritual development in schools with a Christian foundation, with the example considered being a Church of England secondary school. The Church of England is the largest provider of schools and academies in England, with 4700 schools educating 1 million pupils (Church of England 2016). The terms ‘faith school’ and ‘church school’ are often used interchangeably in academic literature and

in the media; and ‘faith school’ is often employed to mean a school with pupils of one particular faith. This interpretation of ‘faith school’ is not generally applicable to Church of England schools, where it cannot be assumed that all the students share the faith of the Christian foundation. Many of the school leaders in the TLS research project preferred the term ‘church school’ to that of ‘faith school’.

Since the nineteenth century, the Church of England has been involved in the education of young people, and their schools traditionally have held in balance a ‘domestic’ function of education of children from Christian homes, and a ‘general’ function of service to all in the community (Francis 1993, p.54). This century, the Church of England has focussed on ensuring that ‘all Church schools must be distinctively and recognisably Christian’ (Church Schools Review Group 2001, p.14). More recently the Church of England has developed ‘a model of education that is both thoroughly Christian in its foundation and highly attractive to most others in education because of the quality of its outcomes for children and young people’ (Church of England Education Office 2016, p.1). *The Church of England’s Vision for Education: deeply Christian, serving the Common Good* emphasises the Christian roots of education and sets out a vision for education based on the basic elements of wisdom, hope, community, and dignity and respect.

THE TEN LEADING SCHOOLS PROJECT

The research findings that underpin the discussion in this chapter are drawn from the TLS project, which investigated the ways that ten secondary schools with a Christian foundation, in England and Wales, influence the spiritual development of pupils. The project was an initiative set up by the National Institute for Christian Education Research (NICER) at Canterbury Christ Church University, working in association with Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) at the University of Warwick. The research employed both quantitative (WRERU) and qualitative methods (NICER).

The ten participating Christian secondary schools¹ were selected through an application process, and all share a commitment to making a positive contribution to the spiritual development of their students. The strength of this project has been to listen to the views of staff and students on what they perceive to influence their spiritual development in the context of their school. When the responses were examined through the lens

of a professional researcher, common themes emerged that illuminated the influences on young people's spiritual development in these schools and in the wider context of Christian education.

The data generated by the TLS research project highlighted the rich diversity of approaches within these ten secondary schools, influenced by factors such as location, student population and the spiritual leadership. The findings revealed a wide variety of features that contribute to positive spiritual development, such as models of chaplaincy; character education; collective worship; a sense of community (Christian and inclusive); the creative arts; a 'Christian' curriculum; the school environment; extra-curricular activities; pastoral care; prayer, Religious Education (RE); teachers as role models; and Christian vision, values and virtues.²

FOUR CATEGORIES OF STUDENT RESPONSE

One outcome of the TLS research has been the development of a framework that emerged from the students' responses, which provides an aid to the exploration of young people's understanding of spiritual development. The student focus groups in all ten schools thoroughly enjoyed discussing this issue, actively seeking to articulate and explain their understanding of spiritual development. Their responses provide an interesting insight into young people's awareness of what it means to be spiritual. They fall into four distinct categories:

- (a) The development of self: 'what you should be, what else you could be and how you need to respond to the world';
- (b) A sense of community: a connection with other people, 'the person's own sense of who they are in their connection to each other, and in being there for others';
- (c) A quest for meaning: a deepening of knowledge and understanding, being able to articulate an informed reasoned opinion on matters of faith and religion; and
- (d) A relationship with God: this is often spoken of in terms of getting closer to God and/or making a connection with God.

These categories of responses are inter-related although, at different times, one or another of them may be prioritised by individuals and schools. These categories resonate with the four categories identified by Hay and Nye: child-God, child-people, child-world and child-self (Hay

and Nye 2006). Deakin Crick and Jelfs (2011, p.199) highlighted the Scottish Churches Council's definition that includes developing a sensitivity to self, others, non-human creation and God. Of interest is the one obvious difference between these frameworks for studying spiritual development and the categories that emerged from the TLS students. In these students' responses, there was a lack of reference to the 'child-world' or natural world perspective. Instead the TLS students emphasised the sense of seeking meaning, deepening knowledge and understanding the 'weaving the threads of meaning and spiritual questing' (Hyde 2008, p.4).

The development of self, a deepening of an awareness of self, what you are and what you can become, was identified as a key factor in Hay and Nye's research. The Christian-ethos schools in the TLS research project sought to prioritise this aspect of spiritual development with a focus on: raising students' aspirations; ensuring that pastoral care in school was about removing the barriers to living life to the full; embedding character education in all aspects of school life; and providing time and space for reflection in the school day.

An over-emphasis on this aspect could raise a concern that spiritual development may be seen as being only about the individual, encouraging growth 'in which the inner me takes precedence' (Thatcher 1991, cited in Davies 2007, p.311). A necessary counter-balance to this is the Christian belief that one's own spiritual development 'cannot be separated from that of other people or from the flourishing of families, groups, communities, institutions, nations, and the whole of creation, so that hope and aspiration are social as well as individual' (Church of England Education Office 2016, p.15). The focus of the second half of this chapter will be to explore further the interconnection between spiritual development and the sense of community but, before we consider this in detail, a brief consideration of the two other categories highlighted by the students in the TLS research.

In the ten Christian-ethos secondary schools, the development of self was underpinned with an understanding of the importance of quest for meaning, Young people are searching 'for authentic ways of being in the world' (Hyde 2008, p.162). For many young people, spiritual development was about gaining a greater knowledge and understanding to enable them to develop an informed opinion about the spiritual dimension of life and develop 'their' spiritual identity. In the TLS research, students drew attention to Collective Worship³ and RE lessons, as these were seen to provide the time and space for students to question, discuss and form

opinions around the big questions of life, or complex theological concepts. However, it is interesting to note that, in the minds of some staff, there was a perception of a conflict between a teaching and learning focus on academic excellence and a focus on the spiritual development of the individual. However, many RE teachers in these Christian ethos schools argued that they were inextricably linked. The leadership in all ten schools had taken a comprehensive approach to spiritual development, embedding it within the curriculum, thereby addressing a concern that, within many Church of England schools, spiritual development is more often related to religious practices than ‘a consistent and generic approach to spiritual development within teaching and learning’ (Deakin Crick and Jelfs 2011, p. 198).

The final category in this framework is that understood elsewhere as an awareness of a transcendent other. It is an awareness of a sense of awe and wonder, but within the context of these Christian-ethos schools it was most usually identified as an awareness of a connection to God. For many students in the schools in the research, a key aspect of spiritual development was the choice of whether or not to develop a relationship with God. Worship time in school and the presence of a prayerful culture were key influences in this regard.

WORSHIP IN A SAFE SANCTUARY

The value of the framework and the complexity of the issue of spiritual development is perhaps best demonstrated by consideration of a concrete example. It leads to further exploration of the connection between a sense of community and spiritual development. This example draws on data generated by the qualitative research in a large comprehensive Church of England school in England. Observations and interviews⁴ were undertaken in three-week-long visits to the school in 2014–2016.

A snapshot view of one morning worship offers an insight into the influences on the spiritual development of students in this school. In this school, morning worship took place each day in a student’s form class, or in a year group assembly or for a small number of students in a section of the school where small group interventions took place. (Interventions provided additional support with, for example, English as an additional language, extra literacy and numeracy, critical thinking, speech and language and social skills.) This space for these small intervention classes, was a ‘safe sanctuary’: the SENCo (Special Educational Needs Coordinator)

explained that a core group of ‘anxious’ learners came in every morning ‘for safety, security, and peace of mind’. In fact, it was the SENCo who first drew my attention to the practice of morning worship with these learners because for him it summed up what this Church of England school was all about.

On the day of the research visit, the teaching assistant was supporting a small group of year 10 students with extra English. It was a mixed group including Christians, students of other faiths and from non-religious backgrounds. The majority were ‘regulars’; they had been meeting together in this place since year 7. The worship was led by a student Ed (pseudonym), using resources prepared by the chaplain. It followed a set format: welcome, engage, respond and reflect. Ed had prepared discussion points and interpreted his role as making sure that all took part and listened ‘respectfully’. Following the worship, the students spent the next 20 minutes developing English literacy skills using words and concepts inspired by the morning’s theme.

For Ed, who attended Christian worship at the weekend with his grandmother, morning worship in school is important. He said

It is about having an out of and in school connection to God obviously, for others who don’t believe in God or Christianity, they still get some sort of message out of it, because it still projects out goodness into them.

For the students, this morning worship was ‘basically private’, with a group of their peers whom they knew well and trusted, where they had an opportunity to explore a ‘connection to God’. One student explained that the security of being in a safe place meant there was ‘more faith ... between each other’. It was a moment in the day when they could develop the spiritual awareness, develop a realisation that, as one student explained, ‘God sort of is there to help you along with your learning’.

[Worship] brings you close to God in the morning so that you know that God is throughout ... He’s with you throughout the whole day, and that if you’re stuck in any work you know that you can just pray and God will be there to help you. (Student)

The staff explained that because ‘our learners sometimes aren’t as articulate [as other students, and] don’t have the social skills, ... the small group [worship] really allows them to have a voice’. The routine of regular

morning reinforced a sense of togetherness and provided a space to question and time to reflect. This style of worship was common throughout the school; many students identified it as an important contributor to their spiritual development; it was where they talked about spiritual matters. The centrality of reflection in worship time was deliberately planned. The School Principal said that there was time for ‘periods of real reflection [time] to develop those deeper feelings, how God might be speaking to you, that’s thrown out as a very open challenge with a variety of responses’.

Morning worship within intervention classes was deliberately decided upon by the school leadership stemming from a focus on establishing an inclusive Christian ethos. Morning worship time was prioritised and protected throughout the school so, in all morning intervention classes, worship was incorporated and, where possible, the worship theme was employed to deliver the intervention. For these students who may not find their voice elsewhere, within this small group worship they had established a worshipping community.

A SENSE OF BELONGING

Looking at this short example through the lens of the researcher, a theme that had emerged in other interviews and observations in this Church of England secondary school came into focus: a sense of belonging to a Christian community, where you could worship together, share faith and develop spiritual awareness.

This place gives you a sense of belonging. This place is a community; I take it for granted until I talk about it actually. This place is an absolute community that I’m very lucky to be in and a lot of people’s professional lives will never feel that. (Staff member)

The TLS research in this school showed that it is often the less visible, the less quantifiable, that students and staff identify as positively supporting their spiritual development. It is the sense of belonging expressed in such things as the ‘hello’ in the corridor, the Principal ‘knowing your name’, the hospitality in the kindness of the catering staff both when you were suffering and when you were celebrating, the space and time for quiet reflection, the prayers shared with others daily, the conversations at break or lunchtime with friends when you could talk about your faith and continue discussions started in morning worship.

It's in the way that people look after each other and care for each other, it's in the way that this school has done things for its community, ... the moral encouragement, and the decisions that we make. The way that we behave and the way we treat other people. (Student)

A sense of community can be based on subjective feelings, sentiments and traditions, which bind people together (Driscoll 1995, p.219). Nevertheless, a desire to feel part of a community has its roots in the human need for a 'sense of belongingness' (Osterman 2000, p.6).

How does this sense of community contribute to spiritual development? Two key ways could be identified in the example from this Church of England secondary school: the relationships of openness and trust that support and encourage spiritual development, and a sense of belonging to a community that shares one's beliefs and values.

A sense of belonging to a community that shared one's values and beliefs is important. Staff and students stressed that this Church of England school is a Christian community; it is a school community with 'a connection to God' (student) where 'spirituality is everywhere' (staff). A school community that believes itself 'quite different...because we're very inclusive, God's at the heart of our community' (Principal). From its beginning the school had prioritised:

laying those firm foundations [of a Christian community] ... knowing that if you get that right everything else is going to follow, but you've got to get that right, [and] protect it fiercely. (Principal)

Deliberate decisions were taken by the school leadership to ensure that the community was intrinsically Christian, sustained by Christian values and practices. For example, daily morning worship was prioritised and protected as highlighted in the earlier example. Another approach taken was to actively support a culture of hospitality within the professional community of the school. A sense of a welcoming inclusive community was strengthened by 'seemingly small things' such as encouraging all staff to come together once a week for tea and cakes at break. For staff to model the virtue of hospitality, inclusivity and nurture of each other influences attitudes within the student community. This emphasises that the school community is not simply the student cohort, but all staff and students are part of one community, learning and spiritually developing together.

The school was not a community of Christians. Indeed, the senior leadership team had deliberately taken decisions to establish admissions criteria, which ensure a ‘mix of family backgrounds’ including students from all faiths and non-religious backgrounds, identifying this as highly beneficial to a Christian school community that seeks to be inclusive.

There needs to be a core of Christian families, you have to, in order to make the whole thing work ... but you definitely don’t have to draw from exclusively Christian families. (Principal)

These school admissions criteria inevitably influence the nature of the school community. It provides both the challenge and the opportunity to create a positive environment which is both ‘very inclusive’ and ‘intrinsically Christian’ in which all can develop spiritually. A senior leader characterised the sense of community as a sense of togetherness in a school community. He described it as a community where ‘all individuals being completely different to each other have the commonality of sharing this one place where we can all get along, which results in a togetherness’. This concept of ‘togetherness’ encompasses a sense of inclusion, it emphasises diversity, and stresses that individuality is not ‘merely’ tolerated, but celebrated.

Meeting with students of faith and non-religious backgrounds emphasised this sense of togetherness, and highlighted the diversity of faith beliefs among young people. There was the young Hindu student who appreciated the stillness of Anglican daily worship as reassuring of God’s presence in his school day, the young Jewish student who ‘basically knows more about Christianity than Judaism’ because she has always been to a Christian school, and the many ‘Christian atheists’, who self-identified as ‘non-religious’, but held together an eclectic mix of Christian beliefs and practices. This diversity of beliefs and practices demonstrated that there is no simple answer to the question often raised as to what extent non-Christians have a sense of belonging to a church school. For many students and staff interviewed, a sense of belonging to the school community was not tied to their understanding of their spiritual identity.

Within this school, sustaining a sense of belonging to a Christian community contributed to a climate where relationships of openness and trust could develop. Spiritual development is relational; Hay and Nye (2006, p.111) speak of ‘relational consciousness’. It is about developing positive

relationships with others and being supported by others to develop spiritually. It is an understanding of these relationships as Martin Buber's I-Thou, characterised by a depth of encounter and engagement, rather than I-It relationships (Hay 1998, p.15).

One consequence of the development of open, trusting relationships within a school community is the openness to faith conversations.

There are ... opportunities to talk to people about Christ and they're quite open to it. Often having a school friend who shows you what its really like to be a Christian ... helps a lot ... Outside the classroom, sometimes a break and lunch ... it sounds really boring, but we start talking about faith.
(Student)

An openness to talking about faith with one's peers was mentioned by many students. A Hindu student maintained that he could express his faith openly 'because my friends are actually listening and find it interesting to find out about different cultures and the different festivals and things'. Talking about faith was viewed as important for spiritual development, it was seen as essential to have 'people you can talk to and share... [in a place where] we can say what we think, and explore those ideas' (staff member). Staff said that they themselves were 'open to talk about religion [this] encourages students to think about what they believe themselves' (staff member). It is in these conversations about faith, in the classroom or outside, that students explored, questioned, challenged and reflected on the spiritual dimension to life.

The students described a school community where talking about faith was the accepted norm, and where believing in God was 'the norm'. Bert Roebben (2009) speaks of the development of a narthical learning space within RE. For Roebben, this narthical learning space, drawing on the concept of a church narthex,⁵ is not a stepping stone into the Christian faith, but it offers a space 'to look at [life] from a completely different perspective' and invites the learner into 'productive otherness' (2009, p.17). It is a safe space to encounter, explore and reflect on the spiritual dimension of life. The establishment of a sense of belonging to a Christian community, characterised by relationships of openness and trust, meant that the whole school could be functioning as a narthical learning space, a positive environment in which spiritual development of all may flourish.

REFLECTING ON RESEARCH FINDINGS

This example demonstrated how a sense of belonging to an inclusive Christian school community makes a positive contribution to students' spiritual development. It is of value to consider further the implications of these findings. The strength of a sense of community and the Christian-ethos of the school echoes previous research findings (Bryk et al. 1993; Revell 2008).

The value of community and the ethos of the school as a community was an ideal that teachers repeatedly emphasized. In the private schools, spirituality was firmly linked with the idea of religious community. ... the principals and teachers at the schools we visited believed that their schools were examples of the spirituality characterized by their particular religion. (Revell 2008, p.110)

However, it must be recognised that the Christian ethos of these schools is created by an interaction of all participants, all members of the school community. This is a rejection of the traditional view of ethos that it was something imposed from on high, something determined by those in authority and transmitted to all participants (Donnelly 1999). A key strength of the TLS research project was giving a voice to the students within these schools. These young people are active agents, they make an essential contribution to the nature of the ethos. This shows that the Christian ethos of a school cannot be imposed: it is dependent on the contribution of all members of the school community.

However, this research has also drawn attention to the value of nurturing a sense of community and making explicit to all the Christian nature of that community. Within schools, spiritual development 'requires strategies that create the space and time, embodied knowing and relationships which are crucial to this endeavour' (Deakin Crick and Jelfs 2011, p.200).

The TLS research findings have highlighted the influence of a sense of community on spiritual development. A sense of belonging to a community which shares one's values enables students to weave 'the threads of meaning' (Hyde 2008, p.4). Such a community is a place where 'young people can encounter the guidance and scaffolding of experience, opportunities for silence, stillness and reflection' (Deakin Crick and Jelfs 2011, p.200).

To view this example through the lens of social capital, it could be seen that these Christian-ethos schools were generating strong 'bonding

capital' (Putnam 2000) within the context of a Christian community. The strength of this bonding capital enables the growth of spiritual capital, defined by Gerald Grace (2002, p.236) as 'resources of faith and values derived from commitment to a religious tradition'.⁶ This resource of spiritual capital provides a rich environment in which young people can develop spiritually.

There are many implications of these findings from the TLS research project for faith schools that wish to prioritise spiritual development. Key implications to emerge from this exploration include the importance of having confidence in being a faith community, in this case a Christian community, by making explicit the Christian nature of the community in the school vision, in the rules and rhythm of life, in daily practices and in spiritual leadership. Another implication is the importance of realising that spiritual development is not a by-product of the school ethos, it does not 'just happen', but needs to be nurtured by prioritising strategies that support it, such as protecting time for daily worship and making deliberate decisions to enhance a sense of community within school. The research findings have also demonstrated the value of listening to the voice of young people, and recognising them as active agents in their spiritual development. The value of this cannot be underestimated.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has offered an insight into the findings of the TLS research project. It has provided a glimpse into the experience of morning worship with a small group of students, and explored why a sense of belonging may encourage spiritual development by creating a safe space where faith conversations happen and meaningful worship could occur.

It has highlighted the potential influence on students' spiritual development of sustaining a strong sense of belonging, and the benefit of developing a school community recognised as Christian and inclusive, where students and staff perceive that spiritual development can develop and flourish.

There is an obvious need for further research in this area. The TLS research project was limited to ten Christian-ethos secondary schools. Further research is needed to explore the value of the framework developed from the TLS research, and to investigate the ways in which a wider variety of schools contribute to pupils' spiritual development.

NOTES

1. The schools were asked to provide evidence that they were a 'leading' school in the area of spiritual development. Applications were scrutinised by the TLS steering group and ten schools were selected from across England and Wales. Eight of the schools are Church of England schools, one is joint Anglican-Catholic and the other an Oasis academy. Oasis Community Learning has 47 academies in England. Their vision is to provide exceptional education at the heart of the community, 'where everyone is included, making a contribution and reaching their God-given potential' (<http://www.oasiscommunitylearning.org/Vision-and-Values> [accessed 5 April 2017]).
2. The stories of the ten Christian-ethos secondary schools are being published in Casson et al. (2017).
3. In England, collective worship is a statutory requirement of all schools, church and community. In a Church of England school, it should reflect the Anglican tradition. The format, time and content vary; the term includes year or house group assemblies, and worship in form class groups.
4. In total 34 interviews were carried out, involving 36 students and 16 staff. The staff interviews were mostly individual and the students were interviewed in a focus group. Some were interviewed more than once.
5. A narthex is the exterior porch of a church.
6. A more detailed definition is available in his later work (Grace 2016, p.48–49).

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