



# Exploring Spirituality in the Primary School

David Holmes



**‘David Holmes is dedicated to the development of children’s spirituality and committed to the creation of peaceful schools. His thoughtful and practical advice comes from many years in education. He informs, encourages and guides us with grace and humour.’**

**Anna Lubelska, Founder of the Peaceful Schools Movement. April 2021**

### About the Author

David Holmes is the inspirational and wise author of guidance for schools on different aspects related to the creation of Peaceful Schools. He is passionate about improving children’s health and wellbeing and has a wealth of experience, having worked for over thirty years as teacher, head teacher and education advisor.

As a Healthy Schools Advisor, David was responsible for supporting schools across Derbyshire with different aspects of health and social education including drug education and action planning. He led a number of key initiatives including

the development of a primary PSHCEE framework, active and democratic learning, a totally new approach to pupil representation (that involved having pupil Ministers and a Cabinet) and a popular Healthy Lifestyle Award. David was a senior national trainer with School Councils UK and also worked with schools in Uganda and Romania. He is particularly interested in creating a culture for partnership and participation in primary schools. Since taking early retirement, David has enjoyed working with, and supporting a range of groups both locally and further afield.

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# Exploring Spirituality in the Primary School

## Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Why explore spirituality?	2
3. What is spirituality?	4
4. Health and wellbeing	8
5. The place of spirituality in the primary school	10
6. Lots of ideas for you	15
7. Spirituality in the world	32
8. Spirituality in relationships	36
9. Spirituality within	42
10. Exploring spirituality in the curriculum	53
11. Closing thoughts	55





# 1. Introduction

Welcome to 'Exploring Spirituality in the Primary School' and a shared voyage of exploration and discovery as we venture into the largely hidden but wonderful world of young people and spirituality. What you will find as we go on our journey will depend on your perception. I suggest that you hold on to these words:

"The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes." Marcel Proust

Although the focus of what follows will be on exploring children's spirituality and spiritual development, it also includes a consideration of our own spiritual journey and the possibility of discovering new aspects of ourselves that we either hadn't expected or are not used to encountering as part of our 'professional' lives. When or if that happens, do not (as it has been said) try 'to steer the river'. Instead go with it and let yourself experience the joy, awe and wonder of spirituality in your life in the way that we are hoping our young people will discover for their lives with our help.

## The journey starts with you

I believe that the journey starts with you. You need to own the journey. It needs to be something that YOU have decided to embark upon. The journey has to be yours which is why this is an exploration not 'a way'. As the famous psychologist Carl Jung said. 'The shoe that fits one person pinches another; there is no recipe for living that suits all cases'.

All schools and their communities are different. Embrace that uniqueness through the way in which you share in the journey of exploring and developing the spirituality not just of your young people, but all who are part of the learning/educational community called 'the school'.



## 2. Why explore spirituality?

**Do you remember a famous climber being asked why he risked his life to be the first to climb a particular mountain. His answer was very simple – ‘Because it is there!’ A beautifully simple and yet deeply motivational philosophy that I believe is all that we need to answer the question, ‘Why explore spirituality in primary schools?’ We explore spirituality in primary schools because it is there, though we may not always realise this.**

In many aspects of life ‘because it is there’ would be enough. However, the world of education needs us to have professional reasons to justify and explain why we are prepared to give time and energy to what we are doing. So here are three reasons:

- Spirituality is fundamental to our being. We may experience and express our spirituality in different ways, but we are all spiritual in some way – though we may not recognise or acknowledge this. As those responsible for children’s education, we have a duty of care to do all we can to help children develop their spirituality.
- Schools are required to develop children’s spirituality as part of the curriculum requirements in all parts of the UK and therefore as it is written into what we are required to do we cannot ignore it. The good news is that taking onboard spiritual development can make a positive contribution to our individual wellbeing and the wellbeing of the whole school community.
- Exploring spirituality offers a unique opportunity to step back and reflect on why we do what we do in our schools, and also how we do it. It can help us be more intuitive and sensitive. It can connect us more deeply to nature and our precious planet. It can make us more aware of the things we have in common with others despite our differences.

*Exploring and questioning is vital to learning and understanding*





### Times of trauma

Spirituality can have a huge impact on the ways in which we manage events in life. This is particularly so in times of challenge and change when it is hard to understand what is happening and why. Early in my teaching career I had an experience that thankfully never repeated itself. During the school year, three children in my Year 4 class had the trauma of a parent dying. For two of them it was the result of an accident, for the third, an inoperable illness. Looking back on it, I realise now how much we all instinctively drew on our spirituality to help us get through this difficult and sad time, without realising that we had done so. I am sure that a better understanding would have helped me to help the bereaved children so much more.

### Moments of awe and wonder

It was a cold, crisp autumn morning as the children were gathering in the playground ready to start school. I got called to 'sort out' one of the children who had been spotted crying in a corner of the school garden. Being a typical teacher I assumed there must be a problem so duly went out muttering under my breath about it being a good start to the day. It turned out that her tears were the result of being overcome by a dew-covered spider's web, strung across a bush. A lesson for me, and a reminder to all of us about why we need to think more about spirituality. I have to say, it was beautiful and a privilege to be able to share that unexpected moment with her.

### Reflections for you

- How would you rate your knowledge of spirituality and children's spiritual development compared to other areas of the curriculum?
- How much ongoing professional development time and energy has focused on it?
- If you had to choose between 'need' or 'should' in relation to exploring spirituality in the primary school – which one would you choose and why?

**"There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle. "**

**Albert Einstein**

### 3. What is spirituality?

**Spirituality is one of those subjects that generates both passion and deep intellectual reflection. It has been the subject of philosophical and theological debate for centuries, and will, without a doubt, go on being so for centuries to come. If you begin to explore spirituality, you can soon find yourself pretty confused!**

#### **All faiths and cultures**

The concept of spirituality can be found in all faiths and cultures. To many it is the essence of life that lies within all people. For others it is a fundamental divine power woven into the values and beliefs of their faith. To some it is a focus on ourselves and the world in which we live.

#### **It is a way of giving meaning to life**

It can seem at times as if there are as many ways to define spirituality as there are people seeking its definition. At the heart of just about all definitions of spirituality is an understanding that 'there is more to life than this'. It is a way of seeing, connecting with and giving meaning to life that goes beyond the immediate and the superficial. It affects the way in which we think about, understand and respond to what we experience. It encompasses emotions, physicality, our senses, faith and peace. For many it is a personal and developmental journey.

#### **There are many aspects**

Spirituality has many different faces each of which has its own characteristics. In exploring what they are, we must always hold fast to the whole.

#### **Responding from the soul**

One of spirituality's most important characteristics is the way in which we experience and connect with the here and now and the reality of where we are (in all ways). Spirituality causes us to understand and respond to it not in terms of 'worldly' knowledge but from a totally different perspective – the perspective of what some have described as 'the soul'.

#### **Spirituality and values**

Spirituality is about values. Those core principles or standards of behaviour, and our judgement of what is important in life. At the heart of them must be peace and harmony for they weave through all understanding of spirituality. Spiritual people value peace and harmony. They value many other things as well that emanate from them. What these values are, is for you to decide, for values belong to us both as individuals and a group or community. We absorb them into ourselves and we own them.

**"The world is full of magic things patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharp."**



## Spirituality and philosophy

Above all, spirituality is not just the sum of all the different parts. It is more than that, for it is a philosophy on life, for life. Spirituality may be about making connections and searching for purpose and meaning. It will be expressed in different ways. It may have different special moments – be they awe and wonder moments or just special parts of the everyday. We might not always be able to express what we are feeling. But above all, it is about how we see life. It is about how we live life.

## A motivational force

Spirituality is a motivational energy that directs all of the above within us. To quote Maya Angelou, 'Spirit is an invisible force made visible in all life.' Spirituality can take us out of this world at times, but it also gives meaning to it, as Henri Nouwen said, 'The spiritual life does not remove us from the world but leads us deeper into it.'

## Movement and change

Whether we see spiritual development as a journey or as a way of being, there are two essential features to understanding what spirituality is about – movement and change. Spirituality is not static, it has a dynamism within us. As we go on the journey of spirituality or it grows within us, we change. How we connect with others, the world, and ourselves, the things we seek, the questions we ask, the purpose we have in life, they all take on a new form and spiritual meaning that is in us, seen in us and shown by us.

## Children's spirituality needs nurturing

Whilst spirituality is a fundamental part of all children's being, as already indicated, it can lie dormant or be crushed. There are many reasons for this, not least our inability as adults to understand what it is. This can result in us either ignoring its existence or damaging it through inappropriate teaching or the way in which we approached it. We need to support and help children's spirituality unfurl and blossom.

**Rabbi Zalman said that spiritual growth is not like fast food. Can slow-cooked spirituality survive in a fast-food educational culture?**



## Two stories about primary school children – Katie and Edward

Two stories from when I was teaching demonstrate how children respond to things around them in a soulful way...

I was taking a group of 8 year olds round the Crooked Spire church in Chesterfield. We had climbed to the top of the tower and the children were marvelling at the intricate spider's web of timbers that formed the inside of the twisted steeple. As she gazed up, Katie noticed an old wooden ladder curving its way into the darkness. She stood in silence staring up at it for what seemed to be an age before touching my arm and whispering, 'Mr Holmes, do you think the angels use that ladder to climb up and down to heaven?'

On another occasion I was at Chatsworth House with a group of 11 year olds. We were making our way to the Elizabeth hunting tower that sits high on a wooden ridge overlooking the park. Quite a lot of the children had walked on ahead. One of them, Edward, came running back to me. Edward wasn't always the easiest of children to engage with – he had a difficult home situation and found life quite challenging at times. He was also well practised challenging those he came into contact with. Anyway, a breathless Edward grabbed my hand and dragged me as fast as he could towards the tower. As I dropped panting onto the stone steps, he took hold of my head, twisted it from side to side and at the top of his voice said, 'Mr Holmes, look at that f..... view!'

Katie and Edward were moved by what they were seeing and had been taken away from seeing the superficial and the immediate. They connected with, and responded to, what they saw in a way that was sublimely spiritual and that evoked emotions in their inner being.

*Awe and wonder*





## Special ways of connecting

Connecting with our world in that special way that Katie and Edward did are at the heart of spirituality. The ways in which we see, experience and connect with the world around us and with other people can be very spiritual.

## Empathy

The words 'I hear what you are saying and I feel that I can also understand what you really mean', come to mind in thinking about this. We look into someone's eyes and we see what lies behind them. More than that, we feel for them and connect with their inner emotions and thinking at that moment. There is an empathy and connection with them that generates strong feelings of understanding and emotion in us. It is a special connection and one that is often only one-way. Children might not always appreciate that they are making that connection, but they do.

I once had the delight of an Ofsted inspector coming to tell me that she had just been well and truly put in her place by one of the pupils. She had been talking to them about behaviour and had been pushing them to talk about the behaviour of a pupil who sometimes struggled with his peers for a whole raft of reasons. It turns out that one of the pupils (Luke) had given the inspector a long hard look in the eye and had said 'Chris is Chris and he is our Chris'. The inspector told me about this moment and said, 'It was a profound moment in my Inspection career that I treasure. Luke had taken me to a deeper place and reminded me about the beauty of human relationships!'

Such connections that take us behind and beyond the surface and the immediate might not always be what some would interpret as spiritual but they are the kernel, the seed of spirituality and need to be recognised as such - ready to be nurtured into something more.

## Reflections for you

- Have you ever been able to share Katie and Edward moments with the children you teach?
- Have you ever thought that people's eyes are 'the window to the soul?'
- Do we need to have experienced spiritual connection ourselves in order to see and understand it in others?

"Carl Jung the famous 20th century spiritual psychiatrist believed that those who look outside dream whilst those that look inside awaken. Now that's a profound thought for you to mull over! "

## 4. Health and wellbeing

**Nowadays, the promotion of health and wellbeing should be embedded into school life and learning for all children and young people. Although for many years the emphasis was on the physical aspects of healthy living with high profile campaigns around healthy eating and exercise, we now have a growing awareness of the equally important role played by mental wellbeing in the lives of children of all ages. Spirituality forms a part of that.**

It is now recognised by many professionals that spirituality can make a significant positive contribution not only to our mental health but also to our physical health and wellbeing. Good mental health enables us to learn, feel, express and manage a range of positive and negative emotions; to form and maintain good relationships with others (and ourselves) to cope with and manage change and uncertainty and to develop resilience.

Clearly there are many factors that can affect and influence an individual's mental health and wellbeing. Spirituality offers an 'alternative' way of seeing, understanding and connecting that can help us and the children in our care to find ways of approaching all of those things and so find mental and emotional peace and harmony.

A study by the Royal College of Psychiatrists has established that spirituality can have a positive impact on our mental wellbeing by helping people to gain better self-control, self-esteem and confidence; to have faster and easier recovery; better relationships – with self, others and with God/creation/nature and a new sense of meaning, hope and peace of mind. The latter has enabled them to accept and live with continuing problems or to make changes where possible.

Spiritual health and wellbeing will not guarantee positive mental health but it can make a difference. We must be prepared not just to embrace it but to actively promote spirituality's inclusion in any and all mental health promotion practices and procedures.

The links between physical health and spirituality are not always as clear as those between mental wellbeing and spirituality but they are there, not least because of what has already been noted in that what goes on in the body affects the head and what goes on in the head affects the body.

**"What is going on in our head affects what is going on in the rest of our body and vice-versa because mind and body are connected. We must not see people as wellbeing or health issues, but as a whole." David Holmes**



## Spiritual practices

Spiritual practices such as meditation, yoga, Tai Chi and reflection can offer a particular way of meeting those things that challenge us physically. The key thing is the acceptance that spirituality and spiritual practices can support our management of both our ill-health and wellness. Spiritual practices can contribute to people being more creative, patient, persistent, honest, kind, compassionate, wise, calm, hopeful, and joyful.

## Spiritual skills

All of the above will have a positive impact on our mental health and wellbeing something that is supported by the following spiritual skills that they have identified:

- Being honest and able to see yourself as others see you.
- Being able to stay focused in the present, to be alert, unhurried and attentive.
- Being able to rest, relax and create a still, peaceful state of mind.
- Developing a deeper sense of empathy for others.
- Finding a capacity for forgiveness.
- Being able to be with someone who is suffering while still being hopeful.
- Learning when it's OK to speak or act and when it's better to remain silent or do nothing.
- Learning how to give without feeling drained.
- Being able to grieve and let go.

## Spiritual health

Spiritual health is about spirituality being a natural and fundamental part of who we are. It means that the characteristics within us that enable us to see, connect with and give meaning to life are able to grow and express themselves in harmony with other aspects of those things that make us who we are.

### *Reflection points for you*

- Do we tend to think of spiritual health as the preserve of faiths and religions?
- How do we manage diverse and sometimes conflicting cultural understandings of mental health and wellbeing?
- Do we feel cautious about talking about spirituality and mental health in the school setting?

“Spiritual practices can contribute to people being more creative, patient, persistent, honest, kind, compassionate, wise, calm, hopeful, and joyful.” **David Holmes**

## 5. The place of spirituality in primary schools


**All schools have a responsibility to support their pupils' spiritual development because the four Governments of the United Kingdom have each built this into their curriculum requirements and expectations. The wording and emphasis may vary across the countries of the UK but it is well established both explicitly and implicitly as part of what all schools must be doing.**

In England, the National Curriculum is probably the most specific in that it every state school must offer a curriculum that is balanced and broadly based and which promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils and prepares pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life. This is expanded in the assessment criteria used by Ofsted: 'The spiritual development of pupils is shown by their ability to be reflective about their own beliefs (religious or otherwise) and perspective on life; knowledge of, 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 and willingness to reflect on their experiences.' This is then supported by assessment criteria for spiritual, moral, social and cultural development (SMSC).

The Welsh national curriculum is equally clear in its expectations about spirituality: 'All our children and young people will be enterprising, creative contributors, ambitious, capable learners, ethical, informed citizens and healthy, confident individuals who (amongst other things) have secure values and are establishing their spirituality and ethical beliefs. Inspections of Welsh schools should consider: the extent to which the school provides effective opportunities for pupils to develop secure values and to establish their spiritual and ethical beliefs, as well as how well the school develops pupils' ability to reflect on religious and non-religious responses to fundamental questions and to reflect on their own beliefs and values.







In Scotland, the approach is very similar in that the 'Curriculum for Excellence' has four capabilities: successful learners, confident individuals, effective contributors and responsible citizens – with young people's spirituality being developed through the guidance and expectations for confident individuals and the requirements for Religious Observance.

In Northern Ireland the National Curriculum is not as specific about spirituality as those for England and Wales. Spirituality is more implicit than explicit in that the curriculum aims to empower young people to develop their potential and to make informed and responsible choices and decisions throughout their lives.

### **Spiritual development is the right of all young people**

All people have the right to explore and express their spirituality. Where children are concerned, this is established through the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. As is often the case, spirituality is not mentioned directly, but is embedded in it ie young people being respected, safe and being able to be who they are. Articles such as:

- Article 14 – Children have the right to think and believe what they want, and to practise their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Parents should guide children on these matters.
- Article 16 – Children have the right to privacy. The law should protect them from attacks against their way of life, their good name, their families and their home.
- Article 29 – Education should develop each child's personality and talents to the full. It should encourage children to respect their parents, and their own and other cultures.

To help us to get a flavour of how the convention expresses children's rights, we need to hold onto the whole rather than specifics. All children have the right to grow and develop as a 'full' person in every aspect of who they are. It is the responsibility of all adults, not just those in whose care they are, to enable them to do so. Schools are key players in that and promoting spiritual development is not our gift – something we can or cannot choose to do.

### *Reflection points for you*

- Does the curriculum that we have to work to, merely pay lip-service to spirituality?
- Should the UNCRC have a much higher profile in schools?

## Where do we put spirituality?

The spiritual development of our young people sits in, but is not restricted to, RE, SMCS, PSHE or PSHCE (depending on what you call it) and to collective worship.

Spirituality and its development crosses all borders. It is part of each of the above but it goes way beyond them and inhabits all aspects of learning and school life. It is all too easy to find ourselves directed or falling into the trap of compartmentalising it. This doesn't really help in the long run because it can take us away from the wonderful wholeness of spirituality. Having said that, some aspects of the curriculum lend themselves to spiritual exploration more than others.

**“Spirituality and spiritual development have a place in schools because we are required to have them there, because it is our children’s right, because they are integral to the purpose of education and because they can make a positive contribution to good practice.” David Holmes**

Although there is still a strong functional emphasis to education and it being about equipping young people for adult life in terms of what they can contribute to society, particularly economically, primary schools are still leading the way in maintaining a holistic belief in education that reflects the importance of the individual as a person.

One of the great strengths of our primary education across the board is that it seeks to help children understand themselves, equipping them to learn and enabling them to connect positively with themselves and the world not just in readiness for the future but for their present. The purpose of education cannot just be about preparation for the next stage but about the here and now. Spirituality is here and now for all of us.

### *Reflection points for you*

- Could RE include more about spirituality in its religious and non religious aspects?
- Do we tend to see the primary school curriculum too narrowly as just the ‘national curriculum’ when in fact the school curriculum should comprise all of the learning and other experiences that the school plans for its pupils?
- How do you define good education practice?
- Should a school community be a reflection of society?



## Commitment and time

As with all things, exploring and developing spirituality within the school setting needs both time and commitment. This is particularly important with something that might be both new and alien to people's way of thinking and working. There needs to be a commitment to three key things:

- Belief in and valuing spirituality as part of school life and education in its widest sense.
- Giving quality time to spiritual development.
- Going on a journey of exploration that will take time because it is not a 'quick-fix' curriculum add-on.

Developing spirituality in the school setting will only have long-term success and sustainability if it is set in the context of, and fully integrated into, the bigger picture of planned school development priorities and processes. I believe it also needs a commitment to challenging the all too common culture of 'everything must work straight away'. Education is no different to the rest of life – some things take time to grow. Changing a culture – which developing spirituality can be about, takes time so do stick with it!

## What is our role?

Developing our young people's spirituality in primary schools is not just for teachers. It is a shared responsibility between everyone involved in the school as a learning community. Everyone has a role to play and that includes all staff, governors and outside agencies regularly connected with the life of the school.

The question is, how do we see that role? Do we see it in terms of 'teaching' children about spirituality or how to be spiritual or alternatively one of 'being' with them, seeking to unlock or open up what is within them already by nurturing who they are? Hopefully it will not be an either/or choice because the two roles are not mutually exclusive, indeed both are needed. We are both enabler and encourager. As we enable and encourage, we help our young people to unlock the doors of their spirituality, and enter into that fantastic world of self-discovery.

The role of teacher is one we are probably used to. But are we as comfortable at being an encourager and one who enables and empowers? How well does the thought of being a spiritual role model sit with you? Probably something that we have never really thought about. Being such a role model is a challenge for it means that we have to take a step back from a role that we are so used to having and perhaps move out of our comfort zone. It can require a change of perception not just of how we see our role but for others and how they see our role. It might actually be more so for others as we move away from the commonly held view (not necessarily amongst teachers and others in school) that as adults 'we know'. As a spiritually developing role model, we have to be able to move confidently into the world of 'as an adult I don't know'.



## Parents and carers

As we explore how and why we seek to develop children's spirituality in the primary school it is well worth giving thought to our connection, not just with parents and carers but with the wider social, faith and cultural context in which we are placed. They will all have an impact on the development of the children's spirituality – not only in terms of how it might grow and be expressed but also in terms of how it is perceived and understood.

We have a responsibility to ensure that we have as good an understanding as possible as to where parents, carers, different people and groups within our community are in relation to this. It would be easy to find ourselves having negative connections with each other because we are coming from different perspectives or don't appreciate what is important to each other. It is also very easy to be out of kilter with others because we have both made assumptions about what the other believes or is aiming to achieve.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How would you define your role in relation to spirituality in the primary school?
- Should a school's approach to spirituality reflect the dominant local or national culture?
- What happens when values conflict?
- 

**“Spirituality needs gentle and positive nurturing and encouragement if it is to grow within us and within our schools.” David Holmes**

## 6. Lots of ideas for you

**The ideas that follow can make a positive contribution to the development of spirituality in your primary school. Choose those that are right for you. They have not been presented in order of importance. Some will work well, some won't.**

From time to time you will find an example of something done in a school. I won't call it good practice – that is for you to decide. What I can say is that they have all been found helpful, positive, manageable and sustainable by those who used them. As they say – 'Adopt, Adapt, Improve, Ignore' as you feel inspired.

### **Start with stepping back...**

This can be applied in two ways – it can be a process of personal reflection or it can have a school focus. As you think about ways in which children's spiritual development can be promoted, take a step back and examine your own. Where are you coming from in relation to spirituality? What do you think about it in both the context of your own life and in your professional capacity?

It is well worth reflecting on your thoughts and experiences of 'spirituality' given that where you are coming from will inevitably influence where you go with spirituality in school. There is also the whole issue of role-modelling and the ever-present question as to whether we should expect our young people to go where we are not prepared to go ourselves.

Exploring spirituality as a school offers an opportunity to step back together and ask one rather important question: 'What are we about?' Or to put it another way: 'Why do we do what we do – what matters to us?' It's good to answer in terms of what we teach and how, in the context of the ethos and culture of the school. One of the sad aspects of modern school life is that such questions get pushed onto the back burner due to the pressures of having to deal with so many other demands on staff meeting time.







## Getting back to basics

Looking at the place of spirituality in your school and how it can be developed offers a great opportunity to get back to the basics of what makes the school what it is. It is a chance to redefine your identity not in order to produce a new corporate identity statement, useful as they might be, but to re-establish the foundations on which it is built – the beliefs, values, ethics and culture that determine, drive and steer what you are as a school community.

Be brave, be bold and put your own spirituality into the mortar of these foundations. You might not feel able to say that you are a school built on spirituality but it could be the mortar that binds your foundation stones together. Such a reflection is a challenge not just because of other time pressures and the fact that the school is a changing and evolving community but because it can open up many issues that will need to be dealt with in the process.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What matters to me/what matters to us?
- How do we define ourselves as a school community?
- Does spirituality have a place in our ethos?
- Why do we do what we do?

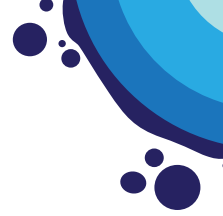
## Policies and mottos

I have to confess that there is a school near me that I mutter about every time I drive past. Some would say I do a lot of muttering about things, which probably says a lot about my spiritual state at times, but in this case it is because of what their school sign says to me. It proudly proclaims that they are 'Putting Pupils First'. To me it says that the staff are under valued! Of course that might not be true and my perspective as a former Headteachers colours my judgement.

- What might your motto or vision statement say to the outside world about you?
- Is there any mention of spirituality in your school values and aims?
- Would you be able to find any mention of spirituality in any of your policies?

If you are like me, the thought of yet another policy fills me with a sinking feeling that is far from spiritual. As a teacher friend whose school was in special measures said to yet another local authority advisor as he arrived in her classroom brandishing papers, 'If that is a policy you had better leave now!' They can be overwhelming if we don't see their purpose. However, to be fair....policies can be useful if they are working documents that help us to stay focused on what we are doing. Which is why I dare to suggest the consideration of a spirituality policy or statement (content and commitment being more important than length) if it helps us to keep it in the loop of everyday teaching and classroom life – for everyone, not just the pupils.

It's a challenge – be brave and bold and state your school aims and philosophy to the world in simple words, starting with 'WE BELIEVE'...



## Take a good look

Take a good look at what you are doing around spirituality. Get some big sheets of paper and fill them with all the things that you identify as promoting spirituality and/or the spiritual development of your young people. I think you will be pleasantly surprised at how much you already do. As those involved in leading children's education we are very good at not seeing how much we do – something not helped by a culture of 'you are not doing' that can seep into education provision if we aren't careful.

Identify what you are doing, highlight what you believe you are doing well and then build on your strengths not your weaknesses. Looking at how what we are doing in relation to spirituality can be supported by taking the time to establish a much broader picture of what is what in the school and this process can involve the whole school community.

Auditing or establishing a realistic information base to work from is always the starting point for much of what we do in terms of school development. Many of the ideas that follow-on from here will lead you down the path of information-gathering as your starting point. It might make the process longer but it is worth it. Having a clear picture and information to work from means that we can at least start by having the same 'song sheet' in front of us – whether we all sing from it is another matter!


## Pupil audit

Get a group of pupils to do a school audit. I did it from a health and safety perspective. I supported a school council auditing pinch points and smile times in their school day.

## Creating a peaceful school culture

When I worked in the Derbyshire Healthy Schools team, one of the great things about it, apart from being able to drive round the wonderful Peak District, was the opportunity to visit schools. For the most part they were rewarding experiences as I had the opportunity to celebrate and share in what they were doing. Sometimes it was more of a challenge. On thinking why I would sometimes come away from a visit feeling unsettled, I realised it was usually because what they said they did, didn't match up with what I felt they were actually doing, and by 'felt' I mean a feeling inside me – not just my opinion.

I remember going to one school to assess them for an award in relation to work they had been doing around bullying as part of a bigger mental health project. They ticked all the boxes but something was missing – the positive relationships weren't there. Even on a short visit I could sense that there was quite a confrontational and over-assertive culture in the way people related to each other.



In stark contrast to that, I had been asked to go to a small school in a very deprived area and talk about PSHCE because their recent inspection had noted that they didn't have an up-to-date policy. If ever there was a school that embodied PSHCE, that was it. It was an oasis of peace, calm, wellbeing and positivity in a community. The policy might not be there but they lived and breathed PSHCE. It was at the heart of their school culture. I also found it a very spiritual place in many ways.

Creating a culture of peace, kindness and harmony has to be at the heart of all we do. It is the core of successful spiritual development, underpinning and fuelling all the other things we do. It is the living out, as a school community, of what we say we are, what we believe, what we value, how we do things and why. Can we do it? As Bob the Builder might say: YES WE CAN!

Of course it takes time and commitment – don't look for a quick fix. Go for evolution not revolution. Nurturing a school culture of peace, kindness and harmony has to come from the top. It needs a leadership that inspires and takes people on the journey because they believe in it.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What might a culture of peace, kindness and harmony feel like?
- How might you create your route to it?
- Can the time be found to develop such a culture?


### **Experiences**

Possibly one of the most important things we can do is to explore the experiences that we provide our young people with and the way in which we follow them up. This is a big job because it not just about lessons and includes:

- teaching times,
- lunch and break times,
- special events,
- the whole of the school day,
- the experiences that children bring to school,
- the unexpected.

Exploring experiences doesn't necessarily have to be about doing more, although there is always plenty of scope for that, but building on the good practice that is already in place, widening it and looking at things with new eyes – the eyes of the spirit for: opportunities, recognition, reinforcement, encouragement and celebration.

Primary schools excel at creating positive teaching and learning experiences, exploring and developing new and different ways of learning as a matter of course.



Go on looking for opportunities for your learners to: open out their thinking, make connections, be creative, become active learners, learn in different settings and make decisions. Look at them from a spiritual support perspective. See the experiences as not just in terms of national curriculum content or skills to be acquired and applied but how they can open gateways to the paths of spirituality. Have the courage, and it can take courage with the pressures to 'achieve' that schools can be under, to light the blue touch paper and take a big step back.

As a teacher said on one occasion, 'I could see their experiment wasn't working so I put them right. I wish I hadn't because they would have had a more lasting learning experience if I had let them go wrong and then help them to sort out why, The only problem was we only had one week to cover that bit in Science.' For me, another of the great joys of primary teaching, is that things don't always go as planned. I dare say that others might not see that but I have been privileged to share in some fantastic learning and spiritual experiences because the lesson ended up going off at a tangent.

One of the main activities we used to do in an active and democratic learning course that I used to help lead was getting the teachers (in the place of pupils) to create characters, their relationships and situations for an improvised drama. It was a short piece of drama because of time, but could equally apply to a writing activity. The teachers lead where the characters and their relationships went. We acted as facilitators and didn't ask them to do a drama about anything specific.

On the surface neither of these two examples would probably hit you as being about spiritual development. In their way though they are – because they are about making connections, creative thinking, moving away from the immediate. We don't have to have a direct line between the activity and spirituality. What we can have, though, is an understanding of, and commitment to, the ways in which all planned teaching, learning and experiences can promote, enhance and underpin the skills and ways of seeing the world around them that are 'spirituality'. Don't try and force things though. It is perfectly OK for a square peg to be a square peg. Celebrate its squareness – some things are not meant to fit into round holes.

One of the many strengths of primary schools is also, I believe, their commitment and ability to providing 'different' experiences for the children that are outside the normal routine and practices. These provide wonderful opportunities that we can build on, we just need to approach them in a different way. I had the privilege of coming across a primary school trip when visiting a National Trust Garden a little while ago. It was an absolute joy because first of all I went round a corner to find a group making up a story about a caterpillar they had spotted followed by some others watching the fish in the small lake playing hide and seek in the water. The best of all was when I found the whole group lying on the grass, adults included. It turned out that they had been listening to the trees and bushes sing to each other in the slight breeze. Talk about connecting with spirituality!



### *Reflection points for you*

- Can you recall any experiences that you would now define as being spiritual in some way?
- How can we show a child that we have recognised spirituality in an experience that they are sharing with us?
- What can we do to open up or enhance the range of experiences we are able to create for our young people?
- How might we go about removing the boundaries to our expectations of 'experiences'?


### **Asking questions**

A fundamental part of spirituality is the questioning of life, purpose and the meaning of things. We need to find ways of helping children to ask such philosophical questions as they may ask. Philosophical questions, just like questions about values, are topics that children of any age can engage with. All they need is age-appropriate support, encouragement and opportunities.

The more opportunities they have to ask such questions, the way in which those questions are responded to, and the positive reinforcement given by us as adults when such questions are asked, will extend and enhance children's questioning of their world and thus promote their spiritual growth and journeying. A principle I would always adopt when doing potentially sensitive work such as drugs and sex education was the 'no personal questions' rule.

In thinking about how we might explore philosophical questioning with our young people, we must think about how we answer those questions. This can present us with a bit of a challenge given the way in which we are all too often expected to know the right answers! But the one thing we must try not do in relation to philosophical exploration is to give 'the answer'. Such an approach may close down the pupil's thinking journey and spiritual development. Our aim should be to nurture their answering skills. Our role must be that of a facilitator opening up answering pathways, trying to avoid the trap of guiding them onto the path we want them to be going along, unless of course, that pathway is taking them into dangerous personal and socially dangerous thinking that could harm their spirituality, together with their mental (and in some cases physical) health and wellbeing.





In finding ways in which to nurture our young people's philosophical questioning and thinking it is important that we:

- believe in our children's ability to explore philosophical questions and show that belief in them,
- create secure questioning environments,
- encourage a positive questioning culture,
- establish a pattern of exploring philosophical questions together,
- are not afraid to seize the moment,
- respect questions,
- encourage pupils to explore answers to their own questions,
- model good practice,
- help pupils to explore answers to each others' questions,
- introduce them to different types of questioning skills,
- provide positive feedback on their use and application of those skills,
- accept that at times their questions might overstep the mark and so redirect them sensitively,
- acknowledge and celebrate that they might challenge our thoughts and values,
- help them to discover that there aren't always simple answers or right/wrong answers,
- use understandable language and vocabulary.
- discuss don't debate – discussions open up conversation and changing thoughts, debates close them down,
- build a positive culture around changing your mind – being prepared to change your mind can be a strength not a weakness as is so often portrayed in the media today.

Philosophical questioning with young people can be a joyous experience as long as we have the personal and professional safety to immerse ourselves in it with them. It can call on us to have the strength to let go of our thoughts and answers, putting our beliefs and values to the side in some ways, without compromising what we believe in order to facilitate their thinking.



## Answers

As we think about questions, we inevitably find ourselves doing the same with answers. The way in which we answer children's questions can have a huge impact on them. It can be all too easy to find ourselves closing down their willingness to explore and offer answers.

Children need to be able learn safely and it is up to us to provide that security. There has to be a teacher/adult and learner/child relationship of trust whereby they share their thinking without being made to look foolish, backed into a corner etc.

Strategies such as ground rules can often be very useful. I am sure you have all come across them. They can be phrased in many ways but central to most of them are mutual respect and sticking to the subject being discussed rather than getting personal. Respect the right of others to answer and give their thoughts and have others respect that in you.

## Thoughts

One of the things that can play an important role in developing young people's spirituality is giving them an opportunity to explore their thoughts and opinions. Understandably, a lot of what is involved in teaching and learning focuses around answers to questions. Young people are also natural questioners who are looking for answers. One of the challenges we face is that both we and the children become conditioned into answers being 'right' and there actually having to be an answer.

We also need to take on board the bigger issue of children not being used to sharing thoughts and opinions because doing so is either just not what they do or alien to the family group and culture to which they belong and are growing up in. It is vital that we understand where they are coming from and that we are sensitive to both, otherwise we can put children in a conflicted situation.

Think about the opportunities the school day provides for children to give their thoughts and opinions, to have their experiences widened and deepened so that they can begin to appreciate and understand that not everything has to have an answer, that sometimes there are only more questions and that very often when it comes down to it, it is a case of what we believe in and value.

Questions, answers and sharing thoughts will always benefit from a planned approach that reflects a whole school policy and practices. One of the great strengths of primary schools is that we can bring different experiences and ways to what we do with our children as long as there is a core set of expectations and practices shared by everyone. If we don't have those it is not fair on the children.

### Activity – ‘Where do I stand?’

This is best done in a space where the children can physical move. At one end of the space there would be STRONGLY AGREE and at the other STRONGLY DISAGREE. Share a thought or idea, give thinking time before asking them to go to a place on the line depending on the extent to which they agreed or disagreed. After that, the children can be invited to share their thoughts as to why they are standing in the place in the line that they have chosen. There could then be another bit of reflection time before inviting them to move if they want to change their mind. A variation on this is to have ‘stations’ round the space. This allows for ‘NOT SURE’ or ‘NEED MORE INFORMATION’ to be included. about questions, we inevitably find ourselves doing the same with answers. The way in which we answer children’s questions can have a huge impact on them. It can be all too easy to find ourselves closing down their willingness to explore and offer answers.

#### *Reflection points for you*

- How often do the children get a chance to explore thoughts?
- Where do you put ‘thinking time’ in the curriculum?
- Can we justify non-subject based thinking time against other learning targets?
- What happens when we don’t like or agree with what the children are thinking?

### Listening

It is important that we make time to listen to our children and also give them opportunities to listen. Being able to listen and actually hear what is being said is a key part of spiritual connection. The old phrase, ‘I heard what you said but I knew what you meant’, is still very pertinent in this context. What we say and what is heard can be two very different things and take us into the world of spiritual connection between people. Listening also takes us into that great big world of body language and an understanding of how so much meaning is dependent not so much on what we say but how it is said. A ‘how’ that goes way beyond words. School days are usually far too full and busy but if you can, then do have a look at the day, the curriculum and lessons to see if they can be finetuned in order to generate opportunities for the children to experience just listening.

### Activity – ‘Sound Effects’

The children sit with their eyes closed and listen to sound effects being played. They have to guess what they are. This is a great activity for opening up their senses, and imaginations as the teacher can pick up on off-the-wall ideas and use them for a mind journey.

### Activity – ‘What do they mean?’

This works well with small numbers of children. Share a saying with them and then explore the words and what they really mean, for example: ‘People in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.’



### *Reflection points for you*

- What ways are there to adapt what is already being done in order to enhance and deepen the children's listening, hearing and talking skills and understanding?
- How would you describe the school/classroom listening culture and why?
- Do you ever just listen to the world around you?
- How can we show young people that we truly recognise, respect and value their thoughts, opinions and feelings and take them seriously?
- Do you do anything about the non-verbal listening language with the children?

### **The school environment**

Both adults and children spend a significant amount of time each day in school and the physical environment has the potential to make both a positive and negative impact on our experiences whilst in it. Have you ever taken a walk round your school buildings and the outside area? Most of us would say yes, several times a day. And yet...how often do we actually look at what we see? What eyes do we use as we look?

Would you describe your buildings and grounds as being conducive to the promotion of a spiritual atmosphere? Changing the physical environment won't necessarily make it a more spiritual place for everyone but it can help. It can certainly contribute to it being a more peaceful place for all concerned.

Whilst there is often a lot that we cannot do with our buildings, there are also things that we can explore.

### **Activity – 'Theme Walks'**

Go on a 'feely walk' with some children. Don't look at things in the school, just feel them. Other themes for walks could be 'listening' or 'colours' – for example get the children looking for the red colour.

### **Activity – 'Different places'**

Invite the School Council to help redesign the play area in order to create spaces for different sorts of activities, including a quiet sensory space.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What is the purpose of displays and can they contribute to spiritual understanding?
- Is there anywhere in the school where adults and children can go to be quiet?
- Are the grounds seen as places for adventure, learning and connecting with nature?
- How sensory is your school?

## The School Day

It is a small village school in the heart of Derbyshire. I have been asked to do a staff meeting. On arriving I am told that the meeting has to end by 5pm in order to give everyone time to go before the cows come through the village otherwise it is a case of waiting until about 5.45pm or going on a long detour. Yes, these things do still happen! The school day is a busy day. Too busy at times and because of that, not always helpful in the creation of a spiritual ambience. We might not be able to change much in the school day but you might want to put your spiritual glasses on and take a look at the opportunities it offers for: quiet and reflection, thinking time, working alone and with others, sharing things that are important to the children, exploring, relaxation and finding meaning

Remember that the school day applies to staff as well as pupils and their parents/carers. How does the school day impact on our staff's work-life balance and how does that balance impact on our spirituality? Making changes to the school day doesn't have to be about making more time, it can be about quality time for spiritual experience nurturing and making the most effective use of what is available.

### Activity – 'Silent Reading'

Uninterrupted sustained private reading every day for 10 minutes brings calm to the whole school. Everyone reads anything they want to read silently.

## Peaceful Schools

Peace is at the core of spirituality. Would you describe your school as having peace at its core? Is it peaceful? Much of what you might want to explore in relation to spirituality will help to generate a culture of peace. There are 4 areas of peace identified by the Peaceful Schools Movement:

- Inner peace
- Peaceful relationships
- A peaceful school community
- A peaceful world

These are key components of our spiritual being as individuals, groups and communities and can act as useful areas on which to focus.

Building a peaceful atmosphere can make a strong and positive contribution to the way in which children can work, learn and achieve as the staff at one Infants School once pointed out to me. Every Monday morning there was Tai Chi for the whole school, (kitchen staff included at their request) led by a local group. The benefits only really became apparent when they had to change the morning. As one senior member of staff noted, the children often had chaotic weekends and the Tai Chi calmed them ready for learning. The school later went on to introduce a short period of that or simple yoga at the start of each morning, general feedback being that it was well worth the time.



### Reflection points for you

- How do we resolve conflict? Could we do it in a more peaceful way?
- Do the children get time to be quiet? Where do they go?
- Do our values and policies reflect peacefulness?
- What is the role of peace studies or peace education in primary schools?

### Expectations

Joe was a lovely if troubled young man. His regular visits to see me usually came at the end of lunchtime more often than not grudgingly, accompanied by an unhappy senior midday supervisor. On this particular occasion I was dashing around and was in no mood for yet another spat between them, so launched in with something like, 'Not again Joe. I am getting fed up with this, what is it this time Mrs Goodwin? Another fight that wasn't his fault?' It turned out that she had come to ask if he could have one of my special awards because he had gone 'above and beyond' as it were, in looking after one of the other children who was really upset because her rabbit had died. I learned my lesson!

What are our expectations of others both children and adults in terms of behaviour? (The school community is filled with adults who have behavioural expectations of each other as well.) What we expect of people and the ways in which we respond to behaviour can have a big impact on us individually and on school values and relationships. You could say that we are created out of the expectations that are placed upon us.

Can we adapt our expectations to better support the creation of a culture of peace in the school? I believe we can. Once again it doesn't necessarily mean wholesale changes but taking time to look at the opportunities that positive behaviour expectations give us for generating positive experiences.

Striving to emphasise the positive does not mean that we ignore or play down the negative. A fundamental part of spirituality is being able to believe that some things are wrong and being able to respond to that because it has affected us. The key lies in how we respond and why. Anger can be a good thing if it is channelled positively and peacefully. I never worried if children got angry about things that they saw as being wrong or hurtful. In fact I rejoiced that it had impacted on them in that way. The challenge lies in how we respond and how we reduce conflict and increase peaceful resolution of conflict through things like restorative practices.

"You could say that we are created out of the expectations that are placed on us."

David Holmes



### *Reflection points for you*

- How do we resolve conflict? Could we do it in a more peaceful way?
- Do the children get time to be quiet? Where do they go?
- Do our values and policies reflect peacefulness?
- What is the role of peace studies or peace education in primary schools?

### **School councils**


School councils are well established in our schools. Some work well, some take a lot of leading, some, like a secondary school I know, wonder why they bother after being asked to choose the charities that the school were going to support and then being told by the senior management team that they didn't like their choice so they had made the decision for them. Some schools have taken the bold step of becoming a school cabinet with ministers being elected rather than having representatives for each year group. Each minister has a specific area of responsibility and brings together groups to work on developing things connected with that area. It is an approach that can work well as more children can get involved with projects and are more likely to be active because they can take part in things that interest them. They also work well across the ages, as Mrs Smith, head of an infant school said to me, 'My 6 year old Minister for Education keeps me on my toes. Her latest campaign is 'Care For Your Books' because she thinks some children don't look after them properly.' Think where a Minister for Peace could take you! The school council could always become the peace council.

### *Reflection points for you*

- Why do you have a school council?
- How might the school council contribute to the creation of a culture of spirituality in the school?
- Are school councils a force for change and peace?
- Should the school council be consigned to the past and replaced by a new way of engaging children in making decisions about things that affect them in school?

### **A sense of belonging**

Being able to develop a sense of belonging can make a huge contribution towards understanding ourselves in relation to others, location and time. These are things that we should have opportunities to explore and develop on our spiritual journey through life. Feeling that we belong somewhere is so important. It helps us to understand so much and can help to bring the peace and security that we all need – children and adults. An example – Justin was in his last year with us. Sadly there had been family issues that meant that he and his mother moved out of the village. Getting Justin to school from their new home was proving difficult and so both parents came to talk to me about moving him to another school until he transferred to secondary school. Having talked with them, they asked Justin to join our discussion. This was his opportunity to state his views. His response to their proposal was clear and articulate – he hadn't got them into this problem, so why should he be made to get them out of it.



Justin was determined to stay at our school because it was the only place that he now felt he belonged and where he was happy and secure. Needless to say, he stayed. He was able to put his thoughts into words, but many children find that difficult. Justin's story demonstrates something very important in relation to spiritual development. If we don't feel safe, secure and comfortable then we go into survival mode and that impacts negatively on how we see and connect with the world, ourselves and others.

As school leaders (and everyone who works in a school is a leader in some way), we have a responsibility to do all we can to provide the children in our care with a sense of belonging to the school community. The school is a corporate living entity and when children and adults feel they belong to it, then they can reap the spiritual, social and personal benefits of being able to identify themselves as a valued part of the school. So do please reflect on how you help to shape the school community. Of course, this will depend on who you are and how you want to be as a school leader. Please take the opportunity to be proactive in doing so.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How often do you come together as a school and why?
- To what extent are the children involved in shaping the school's identity?
- Is individuality compatible with group identity and is belonging compatible with diversity?
- What happens when different ways of belonging bring us into conflict with each other or creates differences?

### **Collective Worship**

One of the joys of my teaching career was doing class assemblies for the rest of the school. Actually to be honest this wasn't always the case. Sometimes I dreaded them, particularly in one place I worked in because of the unspoken rivalry between staff. This rivalry resulted in the class assembly we had to do each term becoming something of a mini-production that took a totally disproportionate amount of time, was far too long and which no one paid any attention to other than to think how they could do it better when it came to their turn!

All pupils are required to have a daily act of collective worship unless they are withdrawn from it by their parents. In the 1994 guidance its purpose was stated as being (along with RE) the promotion of the pupils' cultural, moral and spiritual education. Regulations aside, coming together either as a class or whole school for the daily corporate act of worship offers a special opportunity to spend time together in a way that can take us out of the everyday. It can give us a break from the practicalities and pressures of the day. There is the potential for it to be a spiritual time. What we do might only impact on a few, but it won't always be the same few. What works for one child or adult doesn't necessarily work for another. So there's nothing wrong with not connecting with everyone on each occasion. What is wrong, it could be argued, is failing to use collective worship time as a time to foster spiritual reflection and experience.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What does your collective act of worship/assembly time look like?
- What is your school's purpose in coming together like this?
- Is there time for stillness, quiet and reflection?

### **Achievement**

How do you measure achievement? What does it include? How do you recognise and share pupils' development and learning? These are important questions to ask ourselves if we are to think of our schools as being places that can foster spiritual development. Unfortunately we usually have to answer them in terms of external targets and assessments. Even I had to do that as Head of a school with a strong commitment to the social development of its children. Here's a depressing example of that. I once met an upset and angry Headteacher who had been criticised by an outside agency for failing a pupil. The reason being that the pupil hadn't reached level 4 or above by the time he left Year 6. The inspector took no account of the fact that the pupil had been asked to leave five schools before coming to this particular school and could only manage to attend one day a week in the school when he first arrived. By the end of Year 6 he was a full time attender, was looking forward to going to secondary school and had been elected to the school council. It still saddens and irritates me to remember how that Headteacher was treated!

Whilst we cannot do a lot to change the way in which school and pupil achievement is formally assessed, but we can be prepared to stand our ground over what matters to us. We can raise the profile of spirituality in the assessment process through such things as:

- Demonstrating the way in which we value spirituality and spiritual development through policies and procedures.
- Identifying its place in the school curriculum – with 'curriculum' being defined in its true and broadest sense.
- Highlighting its place in development plans and reports of things done.
- Making reference to how we see spirituality being promoted through some of the activities and opportunities we put in place for the children.
- Showing how spirituality has impacted on the school environment.
- Demonstrating how spiritual development is included in pupil assessment, recording and reporting.

The first five can be done through fine-tuning of what we say about ourselves as a school. We just have to be prepared to say it because it is important to our values and identity and how our successes and failings should be measured. The last one is perhaps a bit more of a challenge, especially in a world and culture that is so focused on being able to measure things, and measure them using myopic, blinkered criteria or numbers. How often do we find ourselves immersed in tick boxes designed to make for ease of comparison and data collection rather than giving real information about ourselves and others?



## Assessment

Spirituality and spiritual development don't fit neatly into a box. Well thank goodness for that. So don't try to force them into one. That doesn't mean that we can't assess, record and report on it. If we are giving time, energy and commitment to spiritual development in both pupils and school. We have to be able to justify what we are doing and assess its impact on what we are hoping to achieve. I offer these thoughts to guide your thinking:

- be aware of your personal values, attitudes, opinions, spirituality and social expectations when making assessments of those things in others, as our own 'stuff' can colour what we see;
- take a long term perspective;
- hold fast to the fact that spiritual development and growth is not a neat straight line of progress;
- look for, and record examples of spirituality and expression – build up a picture;
- avoid the development of a spiritual expression tick list;
- look for patterns in people, groups and the school;
- make a note of the opportunities and experiences you have tried to create that could have an impact on spiritual development;
- remember that what works for one, won't for another – reflect on that when assessing 'success';
- consider the role pupils' own personal profiles might play, reflecting such things as special moments, things that are/were important, what makes them feel good etc.
- think about how you could use such things as the Peaceful School Awards, as part of your evidence base;
- if you took time each year as staff and pupils to reflect on the state of the school as a community what would it say to you, and how do you know?

There is a real temptation to produce a list of characteristics or a simple model to help assist in our assessment of children's spirituality (and the school's). They can be useful but please keep them in the context of the whole. Value each for what it is, not as a goal or stepping stone to something more. They can be thought of as separate pictures that combine to create a picture. You might include:

- times when they have shown that they are seeking and looking for meaning, beyond the surface connecting with themselves, others, and the world around them,
- emotional responses to experiences and issues,
- displays of caring,
- expression of their values,
- empathy with others,
- inner peace and peaceful approaches to life,
- special moments,
- expressions of awe and wonder.

You decide what snapshots constitute the picture of the person you are building up.

### Activity – ‘The Me Box’

Each child has their own personal box into which they put work and things that were important to them. It can include a ‘Magic Moments’ folder in which they kept a personal recollection of special times to them. Members of staff are allowed to look at what is in the box and suggest what might go in it, but the children should have the final say.

#### *Reflection points for you*

- How holistic are your records of achievement?
- Is it possible/appropriate to recognise spirituality publicly?
- Do records of achievement and rewards reflect the school’s priorities and values?
- How connected are staff assessments of achievements and pupils’ self-assessment of what they have achieved?

“Spirituality and spiritual development don’t fit neatly into a box. Well thank goodness for that. So don’t try to force them into one.” **David Holmes**



## 7. Spirituality in the world

How can we nurture children's spirituality in relation to connecting with the world around them? Do their learning experiences provide opportunities for them to connect with what they encounter in ways that can take them beyond the surface – beyond the here and now? The following ideas are just a few thoughts or starting points. As with so much of what is done in primary schools, it is not a case of 'reinventing the wheel' but being able to realign the focus of some of our work as necessary.


### **Nature and nurture**

There are many opportunities for us to link what we are doing with the annual cycle of the seasons and nature. Exploring how we can use some of those natural links will help our children to engage with what is around them and strengthen their spiritual connection with their world. How often do we give our children the opportunity to look, feel and absorb the natural world around them and the ways in which it changes over the year? Does their learning focus too much on learning facts at the expense of an emotional experience and connection?

What of the urban environment and the city year? The urban environment can have many natural spaces and if it is the environment that our children are growing up in, then we have a duty to open them up to the spiritual potential their home can offer.

Forest schools have proved a valuable way of helping young people to engage with nature and the changing seasons. Forest schools offer a special way of connecting with the world around them – a way that might otherwise be unknown. If you are able to access them, they offer opportunities to be active in nature. Connecting with a forest school or becoming a forest school might not always be a viable option for you, but they are not the only way in which we can provide children with experiences of connecting with the natural year.





School vegetable patches and gardens are great for children to enjoy the experience of seeing what they have planted grow. They have the added benefit of helping children to understanding the importance of nurture.

Although a key part of spirituality and spiritual development is to focus on the positive aspects of the way in which we connect with the world around us, we mustn't forget the impact that negative things can have on children. The effects can be both powerful and lasting. We might get angry about such things as pollution and the destruction of rain forests for farming, but do we hurt inside when we see such things? Do we see the natural world as hurting? How do we feel when we see elephants grieving for one of their herd killed for its ivory?

The journey of spirituality is not and cannot be comfortable all the time. Enabling children to realise and experience the different things in the natural world can be an important part of what we are able to do. We have a responsibility to help our children start the process of understanding that there can be complex reasons as to why some things are as they are. We also have a responsibility to help them connect emotionally and spiritually with what they see. Open the gates to the spiritual pathways that will enable them to weave together their knowledge and emotions. Pathways that can take them from the rainforests of Borneo to their local park, from their local park to the school grounds, and from the schools grounds to their own garden, remembering as we do, that some might feel sad that a garden is as far away from their reality as that rain forest in Borneo.

### **Activity – 'Garden in a Pot'**

An urban school with no real green space grew things in pots. Organised by parents, the children were responsible for planting and caring for their pot. Each year group had a planting challenge, for example Year 6 had to plant for shape, Year 4 had to go for seasonal colour and Year 1 for scent.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How is your teaching connected to the seasons and the annual cycle of nature?
- 'Stop. Look. Listen.' was the Green Cross Code, can it be our natural spiritual learning code?
- Is it possible to bring the awe and wonder of the outside, inside?
- Do we put the natural world into, or take it out of subject-oriented boxes?

### **Urban Environments**

One of the problems with spirituality is that we can get caught up with images of tranquil places, beautiful scenery and nature. Hold onto such places but remember that the urban landscape can also be a very beautiful and spiritual place. What matters is what the things we see do to us inside. Our role has to be one of breaking down preconceived ideas about spiritual places and to enable children to experience awe and wonder in all sorts of places. For many of our children, the urban environment is their world so try and make the best use of what is there – especially the parks and school grounds.



Buildings can also be wonderful sources of spirituality as the crooked spire in Chesterfield proved. One of my pastimes is to serve as a volunteer room guide in a local National Trust property. As some enter the Long Gallery it is just another room. Others go into the same space with a gasp – a reaction that always makes me go ‘yes!’ inside. It is always great to see the house full of people, it is even better when you are alone in a room at the end of an autumn day when the light is beginning to fade. Same room, different experiences – seize the moment.

As with the natural environment, our urban surroundings can also be one of spiritual hurting because of the way people treat it. How often have we been upset, not just by such things as vandalism, but areas around us that are derelict and unloved? Spirituality is not just about connecting with the positive around us, it can be as much about anger and frustration and outrage – emotions generated by the way in which we are connecting with them.

As with so many other aspects of learning, primary schools excel in giving their young people opportunities to explore and get to know their local urban environment. Find ways of harnessing those activities to the cause of spirituality. Explore with a purpose, but try and take them out to experience it with different eyes as well – eyes that are filled with tears as well as smiles of awe and wonder.

### **Activity – ‘Same place – different view’**

One of the teachers I have worked with would give the children contrasting pictures of the same place and invite them to comment on what they saw, and what they thought of each picture. Her aim was to develop their understanding of how the same place can have a different impact on us at different times depending on the situation.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How blinkered are we to the awe and wonder of the urban environment?
- Should we add ‘touch’ to stop, look and listen?
- Do we see people and traffic in the potential spirituality of an urban environment?

“The journey of spirituality is not and cannot be comfortable all the time.”

David Holmes



## Machinery

This might seem to be a bit of an odd one to some but I think that it is also well worth exploring the beauty, awe and wonder that machinery can have in relation to spirituality. I have no great connection with the practicalities of machinery, buying a new car fills me with fear and trembling, partly because of the inherent sexism that enfolds it – as a man I am supposed to be interested in and understand how car engines work, and partly because I just don't understand and don't want to. I do however find machinery has both beauty and spirituality. How often have we heard people talking of machines they run and care for as having a personality?

## Smells

I have put this one with machines simply because it was triggered by the above reflection on machines. Some years ago I took my class round a local iron foundry. The minute we walked in I was taken away inside my head and back to my childhood and my Dad's iron foundry. I didn't just see it in my head – I was there. It was the smell that did it.

Developing spirituality needs us to close as well as open our eyes if we are to fully embrace our connection with the world around us. Are we better with touching than smelling? Are there any particular smells that you connect with and which connect you with things beyond the here and now? Boiled cabbage takes me back to school days and being made to eat it by a particular teacher. I still struggle with cabbage and I can't necessarily say that such a smelling journey is a happy one. Thankfully connecting with my spirituality now enables me to go down that path with a lot less pain.

## Activity – 'Special Places'

Ask the children to think about their special places. You can encourage conversations to generate ideas whilst avoiding children having to talk about their very own personal spaces. Rather than asking them to write about them you could do a guided reflection. This is a quiet time during which the children are encouraged to imagine the place in their heads. The aim is to empower the children to have special places that they can connect with spiritually and which remain private.

## Activity – 'Urban Walks'

You can take the idea of themed walks around the school and take it out into the local environment, exploring it in terms of texture, sounds and colour etc.

## Reflection points for you

- How good are we at opening the experience box?
- Is there a danger that we can take our children along our own spiritual experience paths in relation to connecting with different things?
- Can spirituality translate negative experiences of the world around us into positive connections?

## 8. Spirituality in relationships

Exploring opportunities to be spiritual through connecting with others is a wonderful part of what we can do to enhance and develop our young people's spirituality. People come in all shapes and sizes. There are those we know, those we have heard about, those we can get to know. People are fundamental to so much of what we do, so how can they help us in our spiritual journeys?

### Role Models

Different areas of the curriculum already encourage identifying people who we see as role models or our 'heroes/heroines'. How often do identify them as being spiritual ones? When looking at the lives of famous people go beyond the surface to see what lies behind what they did. Look at what makes them special in relation to those qualities we might identify as being spiritual in some way. Children are perfectly able to connect with such things if we give them the opportunity.

Do you model spirituality in your relationship with the children in your school? The way we are has a direct impact on the behaviours and attitudes that the children will absorb. What might the children see in you? We cannot expect the children to model and grow spiritually if their experiences of the influential adults in their lives don't provide a role model of 'good practice'.

How can we encourage young people to see themselves as spiritual role models? It is important to accept that they can be that and to appreciate the fact that they are. Secondly we have to be able to discern spirituality in what they say and do, and share it with them on an individual basis. Opening the door to self-connection by helping them to go within, to an awareness of deeper meanings. Thirdly we need to reflect on how we can effectively share that spirituality with others and model the traits that we want to nurture. This could well take you down the path of reviewing the school's behaviour, rewards and sanctions policies and procedures.



## Activity – ‘Model Cubes’

The class are encouraged to come up with qualities that might make someone a role model. Each child chooses the 6 they want and then write one on each face of a cube they have made. Working in groups they use the cubes as dice and try and think of people who have the quality rolled. Names can be written on the faces of the cube

### *Reflection points for you*

- What makes someone a spiritual role model?
- Do we get/give much time to reflecting on what motivated the individuals that made a difference to other people’s lives?
- How can we develop school-based role models?

## Local communities

Think about the ways in which you connect with the local community in terms of its people. Anything we can do to widen children’s experiences of other people can only ever be a good learning experience. Help them to develop their awareness and understanding of diversity in terms of appearance, cultures, religions, interests, abilities and explore ways to nurture such connections.

Remember that diversity is about many different things. Provide children with opportunities to explore the positive benefits of being different as well as all that cohesion and sameness can bring. Give them the opportunity and help them to develop the skills and understanding needed to go beyond ‘what’ and ask ‘why’, why are people as they are? As with the environment, don’t be afraid to explore what some might identify as negativity in people.

Local community projects and groups can be used effectively in different ways. Here are two examples. First – school children have been actively involved in working on projects with people outside school to improve community facilities in some way. Second – there are interesting projects where the children have to design a community. Whilst both projects focused on practicalities, both provide an opportunity to reflect on what makes a ‘community’.

## Activity – ‘Visitors’

You can work with parents/members of the local community to plan and organise a walk round the area for the children. You can prime the residents to take them to places that are special or that they are connected with in ways beyond the day to day.

“Anything we can do to widen children’s experiences of other people can only ever be a good learning experience.” **David Holmes**





### *Reflection points for you*

- Are you and your community groups proactive in seeking ways to connect with each other?
- Can a spiritual perspective contribute to developing positive connections where such connections might not already exist?
- Is there a balance between seeing who is there in the local community and trying to understand them?
- How do different people in your community understand spirituality and is there a danger of stereotyping, if we 'teach' it?

### **The global community**

There are many ways in which schools seek to develop children's knowledge and understanding of the world. This offers opportunities to foster spiritual development by taking the children out of their immediate communities and connecting them with people and communities around the world. Such explorations can be used to generate a deeper understanding and appreciation of the spiritual connections between people around the world. It's great to find ways of connecting with other schools and children.

### **Activity - 'Connection Webs'**


Working in groups of 6 – 8 and standing in a circle. You will need a ball of wool. Everyone in the circle role plays a different identity, for example: a farmer in Wales, a doctor in the Caribbean, a lorry driver in France, the lady working in the local shop. The first person holds one end of the wool and throws the ball to someone else and says how they are connected to who they are role playing in that moment. That person holds the wool and throws the ball to someone else, making a connection with them and so on. The aim is to show ways in which global connections can be made.

### **Activity - 'In the News'**

This provides an opportunity to reflect on global issues with the children and can be particularly effective when dealing with issues that give them the chance to explore their feelings.

### **The UNCRC**

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a major commitment by the countries of the world to establish the fundamental rights of all children regardless of their race, creed, beliefs or age. Although the UNCRC is about children it is not always for children. By this I mean that the ways in which it is presented to children can be either over-laden with information or can use adult-based language – often both. Whilst it is important that pupils know of it and appreciate how it should impact on them and others, it might be more effective, certainly with regards to spiritual development to move away from the detail and simply focus on the following 10 'principles' that are at its heart.



**All children have the right to a voice, to have their needs met, to be respected, to be the person they are, to be treated equally, to learn, to be part of a family and to be safe.**

There are many ways in which we can link the UNCRC into what we already do. Something that you might want to reflect on is how we introduce children to the concept of a 'right'. With rights, of course, go responsibilities. Both support ways in which we can connect with both others and ourselves. Exploring how the principles shown above can impact on people offers an opportunity to open up a spiritual journey of values. The UNCRC can be built into many aspects of PSHCE and developing understanding and empathy, particularly in relation to needs that go beyond the physical.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How often do we explore how we might feel empathy/hurt for the hurting of people we don't know around the world?
- Is there a danger of media overload around people suffering/problems in the world creating emotional numbness?
- Do we spend enough time exploring the spiritual elements of global inter-dependence and connections?

## **Charity**

Schools are fantastic role models for all the efforts they make in supporting good causes. You might want to think about whether you can do more to use the fundraising activities to explore issues like the values that lie behind charitable-giving, how we relate to those on the receiving end of giving and how giving can impact on us as individuals.

### *Reflection points for you*

- Who decides what charities the school will support?
- How do you sustain connection with the charity?
- If you support charities, why do you do so and do the children understand that?
- How much is charity support about raising money and/or giving of ourselves?



## Relationships

Understanding relationships and developing social skills are at the heart of all PSHCE schemes of work and primary schools lead the way in preparing our young people for life not just for the future, but for the here and now, in so many brilliant ways

### *Reflection points for you*

- What opportunities are there for the children to put into practice what they are learning?
- In what way do the school's values impact on relationships and expectations in terms of what they should be like?
- Could you define your relationships education as having a spiritual core?
- How do we use spirituality to repair damaged relationships?

## Citizenship / British Values

All schools are expected to teach their young people about both Citizenship and British Values. They are usually built into programmes of study and schemes of work for PSHCE as this is where they both belong and sit naturally. A challenge for you would be to turn your thinking round and instead approach them in terms of how they can support spiritual development. Look at them as the vehicles for spirituality and peace that they can be.


### *Reflection points for you*

- Can British Values be approached as being about peaceful relationships?
- Which values can underpin how we connect with others?
- Is it possible to show that we are actually teaching British Values if we teach values that people share and are connected through?

## A shared identity

Back in 2012, I had the good fortune to be at the opening of the London Paralympics. The atmosphere in the stadium was electric. It still makes me tingle when I look back at it. There was something very special happening in Stratford that night. Thousands of strangers were suddenly bonded 'as one' for the few hours that we were together. It felt like an intensely spiritual moment as we shouted, stamped, clapped, hugged and laughed happily together. Group identity has the potential to nurture elements of spirituality because being part of a group automatically requires us to go beyond ourselves, thinking and acting in ways that go outside of 'me'.

Group work is standard practice in all schools but we could give more thought to the ways in which we structure group sessions, the sort of activities undertaken and the use of plenary time to reflect on the experience and how it has impacted on the children in ways that underpin spiritual connections.



Giving children opportunities to explore ways in which they have a shared identity with others both locally and globally can have the added benefit of promoting spiritual grounding through the way it promotes awareness of diversity. Having a shared identity does not mean the loss of individual identity and most young people are well able to appreciate and understand how groups can be stronger, more sustainable, creative and dynamic when they are built on individual strengths, skills and personalities.

### **Activity – ‘This is Us’**

Ask the children to choose a name for their class at the start of each year following a theme chosen by the school council. Each class can create a display with the title ‘This Is Us’. The aim is to share with others ways in which they identify themselves as a group.

#### *Reflection points for you*

- What can we do for the person who doesn’t feel the same way as others?
- Do the children get many opportunities to share with us what is special to them about being part of a group and do we build on what they tell us?
- How can spirituality help people manage feelings of exclusion?

“The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” Marcel Proust

## 9. Spirituality within

### Personal values

We need to provide opportunities for our children to develop the values and beliefs that will help to direct their spiritual health and wellbeing and its expression in different situations. They need to have time to reflect and assess what is important to them and then be equipped and empowered to hold fast to those values.


It is not about telling the children what to believe or imposing (be it knowingly or unwittingly) our personal values on them, but sharing, fostering and introducing them to ways and ideas that the school, faith groups, others, society and families might hold as their bedrock. In exploring values with the children in our care we need to think around how we:

- provide them with the skills they will need to hold onto them,
- help them to respect ideas different to their own,
- enable them to resolve conflict over and around different values,
- have self-belief and worth,
- show them some of the positive and negative impacts that holding fast to beliefs and values can have.

There are many ways in which to develop children's values. The key things we need to hold on to are:

- a holistic approach that encompasses all aspects of school life,
- age-appropriate language,
- consistency,
- reinforcement,
- opportunity to put theory into practice,
- local cultural, community and religious values.





There is no age barrier to the exploration and adoption of personal values. Even the youngest of our children should be included as long as they are introduced to them in age-appropriate ways. Values can be developed, reinforced and be given the time to mature across all aspects of the school day and within the life of the school. Ideas can include:

- thinking about what we celebrate – how and why,
- investigating different faiths,
- discussing incidents and issues,
- exploring what triggers emotions,
- role models,
- developing personal and group codes of conduct,
- identifying what is valuable to them,
- the PSHE/PSHCE curriculum,
- exploring topical events.

### **Activity – ‘Diamond Nine’**

Working in groups, give the children 9 cards with a different value written on each. They have to arrange them in a diamond shape with the one they think is the most important at the top. Two cards then go side by side under that, three below them, then two then one. The most important part of this activity is not the shape – allow for it not finishing up as a diamond – but their connection with the values and the group discussion. The children could do it as individuals first, then the class could come up with the values.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How do we connect personal values with spirituality?
- Do we give enough time, support and space for children to explore and internalise personal values?
- Are young people actually able to have their own set of values?



## Reflection time in school

On busy days when we already feel there's not enough time for everything we have to get done, making time for reflection can be a real challenge. We have to try. The children's spiritual health and wellbeing needs them to have both the time and space to stop, pause and reflect on things. Perhaps the fact that we struggle to make time for this, demonstrates how much it is needed. If young people have never had the opportunity to reflect they might well find it an unrewarding experience at first. Please don't give up. We need to be patient and persevere.

Reflection needs to start with us. We need to value it as an important part of everyone's learning and growth. It has to be respected and given the status of a valid and justifiable part of the school day, from senior management outwards. It needs, as well, to avoid the 'this is the right way to reflect and this is what you should do', approach.


As adults we will probably need to be honest with ourselves and each other in acknowledging that we need to take the time to develop and enhance our own understanding of the reflective process and approaches, as many of us will be sharing the same journey as the children will be taking. We need to model and be open about reflecting not just on what we have been doing, as can often be the case in school, but on wider issues and the way such reflection might impact on us. In doing so we must also remember and respect that reflection is essentially a personal and private process, not a means of assessment.

We also need to move away from some of the reflective practices that we can find ourselves trapped in. Whilst there is a place for thinking about the day, what went well and what we could have done better or differently, real reflection is much bigger than that and needs our help in breaking free from those constraints.

Although it is good to be committed to finding organised time for periods of reflection we need to ask ourselves what we are doing, why we are doing it and what are our expectations of it. Such times might be best spent in focusing on strategies the children can adopt to help them with the reflective process in order to promote the effectiveness of what they do and nurture reflection as a normal part of their being, not just 'something they do at school'.

In my early teaching days, creative writing had to be done on a Monday morning. As their teacher, I had to inspire them to be creative and produce an interesting story every 10 am on every Monday morning. It is not always easy to be creative to order, as I am sure we have all found. The time might not be right, we might not be in the right place in our heads and the topic might be as dull as ditch water to us, and yet all too often we expect children to rise to the occasion and 'produce' to order. Reflection is just the same. If we are not in the right place in our heads or the time isn't right for us then it is just time wasted.





This doesn't mean that it isn't worth trying, it is. Don't just look at classroom time, but the whole school day, indeed the whole school week and with it all parts of the school environment in order to identify ways and means of creating time and place for our children to be able to reflect on life and questions as well as what they have been doing.

I know this is a tall order given the time pressures we are all under in education nowadays, but the children's spiritual education needs it. Some of the things you might want to consider are:

- location and environment – creating spaces that all know and respect as places for reflection,
- consistency and commitment,
- time and space,
- reflection skills and strategies,
- opportunities for children to feedback their thoughts if they want to,
- aids to reflection such as candles, toys, music,
- adults modelling good practice – reflect alongside your children,
- outside support.

### **Activity – 'Faces'**


At the start of the week each child and the teacher pick an emoticon out of a bag. Every day ends with a short period of quiet before they leave. If something happened to cause them to pick the face they had, they write it on the back (no names are to be mentioned) and post it in a 'face box'. When they have done one face they have the option of picking another if they wanted to. The teacher can use their reflections as part of prayer or thought time during the class collective worship time the following Monday

### *Reflection points for you*

- Can we justify giving time over to reflecting on life during the school day?
- Should we expect children to feedback their reflective thoughts?
- What do we do when reflection produces negative self-connection or broken connections with others?

### **Relaxation Time**

School days are busy, too busy at times. I sometimes think there can be a culture whereby we just have to keep pouring more and more into the pot, as it were, without ever giving the contents time to settle. A glass of champagne comes to mind. If you just keep pouring it into the glass it soon seems to be filling and overflowing. Pause and you will soon find that what looked like a full glass is reduced to half that once the bubbles have gone. Perhaps we need to be brave enough to give our young people time to just stop in the classroom and connect with themselves again – something that can be quite different to the usual breaks they get.



It doesn't have to be long because quality is better than quantity. I am not suggesting that we go back to the times when reception children had a sleep each afternoon, but they may well benefit from some guided time out using a stimulus that is not connected with what they have been doing. This is not a replacement for reflection time, but a way of transitioning thoughtfully and peacefully from one part of the day to another.

I well remember going to a church where they adopted such an approach. Before the service started we all sat quietly with a psalm being read out loud, but quietly as a way of enabling us to take ourselves from the outside world to the inside world of the service. There were then pauses during the service with quietly spoken guided thoughts, designed to help us take ourselves from what we had just been doing to where we were going next with the worship. I have to say it was very effective.

This yet another way of supporting spiritual development, because it can show us something about life and learning, by demonstrating the benefit of taking a bit of 'time out'. This is essential for physical and mental health and wellbeing as well as for effective learning. Life doesn't have to be all about doing, doing, doing! We can often do better by taking a small step back so that we can take the next step forward with more certainty and a better footing.

#### *Reflection points for you*

- How would you justify relaxation or reconnection time?
- Is there ever silence and stillness across the school?
- Can you be doing something during relaxation time?
- Where could you put a short period of self-reconnecting time into your classroom day?

**"Life doesn't have to be all about doing, doing, doing! ." David Holmes**



## Mindfulness

I have heard this described as 'mine-fieldness' and given the many definitions, you will probably find when you start to explore it you can perhaps understand why. Defining mindfulness has included:

- it being a trait, a state and a practice,
- a way of paying attention that originated in Eastern meditation practices,
- paying attention in a particular way, or purpose in the present moment and non-judgementally,
- bringing one's complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis.
- A kind of non-elaborative, non-judgemental present-centred awareness in which each thought, feeling or sensation that arises in the attentional field is acknowledged and accepted as it is. (Bishop et alia)
- A person is mindful when they have a mindful awareness and defines that as to be when 'concentration power, sensory clarity, and equanimity are working together'. (Shinzen Young).
- The practice of being aware of your body, mind and feelings in the present moment, thought to create a feeling of calm. Cambridge University Press Dictionary)

Given the huge amount of work that is already out there, I am not going into detail about mindfulness. However I would recommend that you explore how it might be a helpful tool and practice in your school. Mindfulness can contribute to our children finding ways of connecting with themselves, especially those who might be struggling with life, and it is well worth giving some thought as to how it might be used and integrated into what you do.

### Activity – 'Guided Mind Walk'

This happened every few weeks at a school where I saw it. Straight after lunch, there would be a quiet time during which the teacher would take the children on a guided story walk. Every so often they would stop and 'look at the view'. This was when the teacher described something and gave the children guided thinking time about how they reacted to it.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What are your experiences of mindfulness telling you?
- Would connecting with the 'here and now' boost spirituality?
- Is mindfulness too closely connected with behavioural issues in schools to link it to spiritual development?
- Is calmness an essential ingredient of spirituality?



## Self-awareness

Personal, Social, Health and Citizenship Education is a fundamental part of the primary curriculum. What pupils must learn in relation to that is well established by the different governments in the UK. All these areas are strong on relationships, physical health and safety. Are they as strong on self-awareness? How many opportunities do we give our young people to explore and understand who they are as a person?

Self-awareness permeates all aspects of spirituality. How we understand and connect with ourselves relates to our spirituality.

Connecting with all the things that make me what I am, is an evolutionary journey of life. What can we do to provide safe and secure opportunities for children to go on that voyage of discovery and how well do we equip them for it?

There is a famous song from the musical *La Cages Aux Folles* that begins: 'I am what I am, I am my own unique creation.' How well do we enable, empower and provide opportunities for our young people to be able to say that?

What about, the 'Billy Elliot' children in our schools? You may have seen the film or the musical. The young boy from the North East of England mining community who is at odds with his community culture because he is a dancer. A spirituality expressed through being the dancer he was, and yet was not supposed to be. How much of everyone's spirit gets repressed and even lost because it is at odds with the world in which we live and yet our spirit/spirituality to a huge extent gives us our life and meaning. How do we deal with that conflict?

### Activity – 'Activity Passport'

This is a DfE initiative based on setting children a range of challenges. Designed to be adapted to suit your needs it could be used to help children explore who they are in different ways. You will find it on the DfE website

### *Reflection points for you*

- When do the children get a chance to think about who they are?
- How do stereotyping and cultural expectations/pressures affect self-awareness?
- What place does spirituality have in your development of children's self-awareness?
- How can spirituality help to challenge negative self-image?



## Wholeness of being

The place of spirituality in health and wellbeing has already been looked at but how do we go about creating a holistic approach to, and understanding of, health and wellbeing? Because of the way in which curriculum requirements are presented, and the need to be able to be clear about what we are doing in relation to them, we can end up with a fragmented approach to health and wellbeing education when we really should be exploring our own health and wellbeing within us, how different aspects impact on each other and our wholeness of being.

A friend of mine recently wanted to see her GP about the pain that she was having in her right knee and hip. She was told firmly by the receptionist that she would have to make two appointments as the hip and knee weren't connected! Of course they are and there was probably something not working too well in that connection. Although we are getting better at making the connection between mental and physical health and wellbeing, are we still tending to miss the spiritual aspect? Wellbeing and health are not a collection of parts, they are a strongly interconnected whole that still gives plenty of scope and opportunity for exploration and understanding by us as adults and pupils.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What part does spiritual health and wellbeing play in the school's health education programme of study?
- How would you define and explain spiritual health?
- How well do we connect the different aspects of health and wellbeing?
- Does our definition of a healthy lifestyle include spirituality?

## Challenge and Change

Spirituality can make a significant contribution to supporting children in times of challenge and change by offering a different perspective on what is happening, why and the ways in which it might be met in a positive way. Spiritual reflection and experiences can calm situations and stimulate inner peace. They can help mend broken connections and restore harmony to relationships. Being able to take a step away and out of ourselves, can start the rebuilding process for broken communities – communities that might range from the school to beyond, from the class to the group they are in at playtime. The curriculum already offers children the opportunity to acquire and develop many different skills to positively manage challenge and change in their lives. Let's give them the opportunity to add inner spiritual connection to them.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How can spirituality help them to understand and manage change?
- What support strategies do you have in place for children who suffer major trauma such as bereavement in their lives?
- Is there a spiritual element to your anti-bullying procedures?
- How could you use spiritual experiences to help children manage challenges they find



## Disconnection

Spirituality is very much about connection so how can it help those children in our care who find themselves disconnected?

We can all become disconnected with ourselves, with others, with 'the world and 'life'. How often have we been in that position? As with change and challenge, spirituality can help us to make the journey of reconnection. My way of handling such times is to go to those places I find spiritual. I say those places because I have more than one, depending on how I am feeling. They can range from just going to sit in the beautiful silence of the Chesterfield Crooked Spire Church to my special place in the Peak District. Sometimes I love to listen to a special piece of music that instantly takes me back to a faraway place and happy memories. In each case it is a time of spiritual connection that enables me to move out of my present and connect with something intangible and which in turn enables me to reconnect with the here and now.

Children and young people have just those same times of disconnection and the same need to reconnect as we do. They, like us, might not always be able to express what the disconnection is, it is just something inside.

Disconnection in its many forms will impact negatively on us in many different ways, from our self-image and self-esteem, to our social connections and our ability to learn. We must not underestimate how much helping children to connect with their spirituality, at whatever point they might be on that journey, can help the disconnected to reconnect.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How good are we at recognising and responding to children who are disconnected?
- Are children able to take time out, or go somewhere to get their heads round things?
- Do we create opportunities for children to learn about and experience ways of understanding disconnection and strategies they can draw on, including those that could be described as spiritual?



## Dreams and aspirations

We all have our dreams and aspirations and children are no different to the rest of us in that. Dreams and aspirations can inspire and energise us. They can also deflate. They can help us to connect with those around us but they can also leave us isolated and disconnected when they don't come true.

Dreams, aspirations and hopes can take many different forms and time spans. As schools I dare say we often find ourselves following the New Year Resolutions pattern, focusing on them at times of change, such as the end of the school year and transferring to 'big school'. Could we make more effective use of their potential for personal development and connection if we explore them more often and seek to bring a spiritual element into how we both identify and manage them?

Spirituality has the potential to play a powerful and lasting role in both the way our dreams might be formulated and how we manage them. Hopes and aspirations don't have to be about tangible things. Through the school's values, ethos and culture we are able to provide children with opportunities to see that they can come in many different ways, some that maybe regarded as being 'outside the box', challenging to the prevailing culture or just plain 'not understandable'.

Through the curriculum and learning opportunities, we can enable them to share in experiences that they can draw on to manage the fulfilment of their hopes, the challenging of their aspirations and the dashing of their dreams.

### Activity – 'My Hopes'

This was done with older children. On Monday morning they wrote down 3 things they hoped for in the coming week in their 'Hope Book'. Their teacher gradually helped them to move their hopes towards things that were away from their immediate and self-centredness to the more intangible. At the end of the week they had chance to reflect on what they had written – sometimes alone and sometimes sharing their thoughts with the class.

### *Reflection points for you*

- What might it mean to dream the impossible dream?
- How can we help children to dream outside the box?
- Can spirituality help children realise that reaching for the stars and only being able to touch the top of the tree is a beautiful achievement?
- Should learning goals be replaced by hopes, dreams and aspirations?





## Awe and wonder

I once took a group of Year 4 children to the Micrarium in Buxton. Described as 'a magnified world at your fingertips', it was a magical living world of larger than life insects, crystals and plants. We soon filled it with squeals and shouts of disbelief, awe, wonder and excitement much to the annoyance of a gentleman not connected with us who told me that my children's behaviour was a disgrace and they should be quiet in such places. I have to admit that giving a spiritual, let alone peace-filled answer, was not the first thing that came into my mind. It was wonderful to see thirty children filled with such excitement – the excitement of awe and wonder.

### *Reflection points for you*

- How do we record or remember such moments and why?
- Do we have too many preconceived ideas as to how awe and wonder should be expressed?
- How do we help our young people to connect what they are experiencing to spirituality?  
Should we?
- Do we spend too much time looking for words and reasons?

**"Awe and wonder – any time, any place, anywhere" David Holmes**

## 10. Spirituality in the curriculum


This is specifically about the national curriculum. My aim is to share some thoughts as to ways in which the journey of educational spiritual development might be explored through different areas of the curriculum without detracting from or compromising the integrity of either. Rather than trying to focus in on details, I offer some thoughts to help you think about where you might want to go, leaving the detail to you so that you might retain your school's integrity of interpretation and individuality.

**Classroom culture** – you need to build a classroom and learning culture where you and your pupils feel it is natural to find yourself being taken along a spiritual path. A path that is accepted and respected. That has to come from you. It needs to be sustained across the day, across the school and across all lessons.

**Outside the box** – every part of the curriculum has the potential for spiritual exploration and experiences so please don't restrict your vision to the more obvious areas such as RE, PSHCE and the Arts. Spiritual connections can be found and experienced through the wonders of Science, in the world of Mathematics and numbers, and in the ways in which the human body can move during PE. The written and spoken word can be a cornucopia of emotional and spiritual expression and connection.

**Keep it natural** – when I started teaching back in the late 1970s, everything had to be worked around a theme or topic, and by that I mean everything. From PE to Maths, RE to Science, if the topic was 'The Circus' then all lessons had to be tied in to that. It could be a touch tedious for both teacher and pupils and it was also very challenging. Not everything fits with everything else. We don't have to contrive spiritual development opportunities in everything. If we try too hard, connections become false, and as I said at the start of this section, we run the risk of compromising the integrity of both subject and spirituality. Look, take hold and nurture spiritual connections and experiences if they are there, but don't force them. Stay balanced.





**Go with the flow** – don't think that you have to stick rigidly to the learning objective plan you have set for each session. Sometimes we need to go with the flow and take a detour. Easy to say, not always easy to do given the time pressures you are probably under. Such a detour doesn't have to be a major change of plan or affect the whole class. Here's my example: I had used the Phantom of the Opera as the stimulus for some work on pulleys. At the end of Act One a chandelier comes crashing down from the roof of the auditorium to the feet of the actress playing Christine. Needless to say it is all done in a very controlled way, hence our exploration of how to use pulleys to do it. A lively discussion took hold about how the actress and orchestra conductor must have felt given that it went just above his head and stopped right in front of her. I went with the fear. It threw my pulley planning right out but what came from it turned out to be a lot more valuable at that point and some of their ways of dealing with fear turned out to be incredibly spiritual.

**At the end of the lesson** – why not finish a science lesson about animals with a poem about a horse, or a maths lesson with a picture of an unusual solid shape, or PE with a piece of music? It doesn't have to be long, we don't need to follow it up in detail, use it to open a door in their minds. Numbers can be poetry!

**Take away** – giving pupils an opportunity to say what they have learned at the end of a lesson gives them an opportunity to reflect on just that and can provide us as their teachers with useful information about how they perceive their learning. How often do we get the chance to go into depth with that and compare how well our perceptions match? Understandably thinking about what they have learned is usually focused on the learning objectives for that lesson. Does it have to be? Could there be more mileage in asking them to reflect on what they are taking away from the lesson?

**Sow the seeds** – this really applies to all the things we do, not just the formal curriculum. Our role is to sow the seeds of spirituality and do what we can to prepare the ground for them to grow. We won't be doing that alone, but we have our professional part to play. We might not always get to see any growth but that is no reason for us not to sow, remembering, of course, that the seeds come from within the children themselves. If we do see the buds of spirituality, then we nurture them. In the meantime we sow and we do all we can to make the school and learning environment as fertile as we can. That means across the curriculum both in this context and its wider meaning. As I have already said, all aspects of the 'formal' curriculum have the potential for spiritual connections and experiences. We might not be able to plan them but there are things that we can do alongside keeping our eyes open, that can help to sow the seeds.

## 11. And here are my closing thoughts

**We cannot create spiritual children (because I would argue that they are already spiritual beings when they come to school) but we can nurture their spirituality. Neither can we guarantee that we can create a spiritual community, but we can try.**

We can be part of an education that actively seeks to nurture and stimulate the growth and flowering of children as the spiritual beings they are. School and the learning that takes place through the curriculum opportunities and experiences can provide the right nutrients for personal spiritual growth. The school culture creates the environment needed to support that nurturing.


Children's spirituality is a delicate flower that all too often struggles to survive. It both deserves and needs the special tender loving care that we are in a position to offer. It might not be for us to see the fruits of our labours but that is the nature of life-long learning and education. We must value children's spirituality for where it is now, as we share their world. We must also look to the future, for unless the roots are strong, there will be nothing for those who take over the responsibility from us to go on nurturing them. It brings to mind a young man who was about to leave Year 6 and go up to the secondary school. His mother had no worries about his future, for as she told me, 'I know you've done your best with Andrew, and he will blossom when he gets to proper school.'

Getting those first shoots of spirituality can be hard work – not always appreciated, and often never seen. Nevertheless, it is what we do, not because we are required to, but because we value it as an essential part of the person and the education of their wholeness.

David Hockney said of artists, 'What an artist is trying to do for people is bring them closer to something'. We are those artists.







As I said at the outset, the journey of exploration that I have tried to share with you in these pages is not a definitive approach or ‘the answer’ to spirituality in our schools. It can’t be because there is no such thing. I have tried to take you on is a journey of exploration and reflection about commonly shared thoughts, understanding and ideas that can:

- create opportunities
- provide experiences
- open eyes
- offer ways to travel
- sow the seeds and nurture
- inspire, stimulate and challenge

I cannot guarantee that any of these ideas will work, but as they say, if you don’t try you will never know. Feel free to take these ideas, use them but above all do please make them your own. May your journey be one of opportunities taken, rewarding experiences and spiritual lives strengthened.