



## Spirituality for The second city

Alison Young, who teaches at King Edward VI High School for Girls in Birmingham, grapples again with the slippery language of spirituality, and finds that pupils can make sense of it.

### The problem of definition

Spirituality in the curriculum has been likened to the acne on a teenager's chin: 'the more you pick at it, the worse it gets'. This goes to the heart of a perennial problem: what exactly do we mean by 'spirituality' and how can we effectively nurture reflective skills in our classroom?

There is certainly no shortage of definitions for the term 'spirituality' but a universally accepted one remains elusive. RE teachers remain undaunted: we are used to dealing with slippery words! Long before the 1988 Education Reform Act required teachers of all subjects to attend to the spiritual development of students in their care, RE teachers were inviting their students to consider the 'BIG' questions of life and encouraging the kind of deep reflection upon which any kind of spiritual awareness seems to depend.

In a survey of some 275 of my students (research sponsored by The Farmington Institute, Harris Manchester College, Mansfield Road, Oxford, OX1 3TD ([www.farmington.ac.uk](http://www.farmington.ac.uk)) and available from them) respondents were asked to define spirituality. Definitions clustered around 'exploring the deeper part of the individual', 'exploring the 'essence', 'soul' and 'spirit within', 'discovering or seeking to discover the person inside', or 'finding the inner voice'. Several students commented that this was very definitely an activity of 'the heart rather than the head'.

*Spirituality means the deep thoughts, what makes us whole, what defines us.* Heather, aged 11, Christian.

*Spirituality is getting to know your inner self.* Karishma, aged 12, Hindu

*Spirituality is a gentleness within.* Maureen, aged 12, Christian (RC)

*The spiritual is the inner, the deeper, the essence...it is you.* Nicola, aged 12, Agnostic.

Those surveyed could not imagine RE without this dimension. They endorsed reflective classroom practice unreservedly, linking it directly to self-awareness and expression.

Susannah (14, Christian, C of E) linked the exploration of spirituality with 'a strong sense of purpose in life'

Hazel (14, Atheist) felt that spiritual awareness enabled people 'to be true to themselves and in so doing to appreciate the world and all that is in it'.

Again, as RE teachers we are never surprised when our students offer us the most incisive insights into complex subjects. As the saying goes, 'keep away from wisdom which does not cry and philosophy which does not laugh and the greatness which does not bow before children'.

### What to do in the classroom

What kind of classroom practice might effectively steer students towards spiritual development? Selecting the theme of 'Spirituality for the Second City' for our recent open evening, we engaged students in a range of activities: Poetry such as R S Thomas' 'The Presence' was used as a stimulus for writing on the numinous.

### The Presence

I feel the power  
that invisible, catches me  
by the sleeve...  
I know its ways with me,

how it enters my life,  
is present rather  
before I perceive it, sunlight  
quivering  
on a bare wall.....  
Sixth-form groups also reflected on Rudolph Otto's notion of 'The Holy'  
Based on John Hull's contention that spirituality is 'the extent to which we live for others', simple

diagrams were used to promote reflection of the connection between the inner lives of individuals and a sense of responsibility for others in the wider world.

Natural objects such as flowers, plants, shells and driftwood were used to stimulate discussion of nature mysticism and the role that the natural world can play in awakening and sustaining spiritual awareness. Lines from Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey' encouraged students to share their own special experiences of the natural world and its inherent spirituality. Even those who rejected specifically 'religious' notions of spirituality contributed enthusiastically to such discussions.

### Tintern Abbey

And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of seeing suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man;  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

A 'graffiti' wall was created where students could write their own thoughts and definitions on the subject of spirituality. In practical terms this is best done by students producing their own thought of speech bubbles which are later added to the wall. The beauty of this exercise is that it gives students a voice and free reign to express their thoughts which may, if they wish, remain anonymous.

Groups of 14 year-olds were each given the specific task of preparing a 'corner of spiritual reflection'. Some chose to focus

on a specific faith community: for example, a Hindu corner of spiritual reflection was bedecked with images of Hindu deities, flowers, fruits and aromatic incense. Some corners were based on the spirituality engendered within families and included intensely personal items such as the belongings of loved ones who had died. One corner of spiritual reflection included a huge mosquito net – a symbol of the way we all need private space for deep thought, or perhaps prayer or meditation. Some corners took on a minimalist slant, focusing on open space and the 'absences' rather than 'presences' (the apophatic path?).

Each group of students arranged their corner for display and offered a short class presentation on how they arrived at its content and how it has enabled them to express their spirituality. The results were simply breathtaking. One group has spent hours fashioning tiny keepsakes (mainly pincushions) to give away, 'because spirituality is about sharing and reaching out to others'. One 'corner of spiritual reflection' contains cayenne pepper because 'we must never forget that life is made up of the contribution of every single person as represented by the individual grains in the pepper. The spiciness of the pepper symbolises the spirit of each person and their contribution to the whole. No person should ever be ignored or disregarded. We feel privileged; our students have risked vulnerability and exposed some of their deeper reflections on life. Their work radiates the kind of insight and creativity which nurtures our spirits and theirs. In a largely results-and –assessment-led curriculum, I think we need to risk a few pimples on the chin...

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