

# THINK PIECE NO. SIX

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### GETTING A FIX ON 'SPIRITUALITY' AND EDUCATION

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BILL GENT

*'Strive for simplicity, but learn to mistrust it.'*

*Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947)*

*This CoED Think Piece is not intended to give a comprehensive view of the concept of 'spirituality' (many people have written a doctoral thesis on this ... and still run out of space!) Instead, it sets out one approach through which the inner dynamic of spirituality in education might be both understood and approached.*

#### Background<sup>i</sup>

Within the world of English education and schooling, the terms 'spirituality' and 'education' have been linked from at least half way through the twentieth century. In official-speak, for instance, the linkage of the two terms lies buried within the wording of the 1944 Education Act – in that section, for example, where the broad aims of a school are outlined. But it was the creation of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) exactly 50 years later that really brought the association of these two terms into daylight and in such a way that schools and educators had to take notice.

And it happened like this: Ofsted was created in 1992 ... regular school inspections were proposed ... Ofsted began to produce detailed documentation setting out the criteria against which schools would be judged ... this included the criteria against which pupils in a school could have their spiritual, moral, social and cultural (SMSC) development judged. (In later years, this was quite sensibly changed to the extent to which a school promoted SMSC development.) Fine, but how can the notion of 'spiritual development' in a school setting be understood? In its guidance to schools and the inspection framework for its inspectors, Ofsted has continued to offer and refine guidance on such matters as this.

But why, then, in spite of all this, has the use of the terms 'spirituality' or 'spiritual' in relation to education caused so much perplexity, puzzlement and sometimes consternation on the part of teachers, governors and others over the last quarter century? To begin to understand this, let's look at the word 'spirituality' itself.

#### No simple or single definition

It has often been said that the meaning of the most significant words are the hardest to grasp or to put into straightforward language. (Take the words 'love' and 'truth', for instance.) In the case of the concept of 'spirituality' this is certainly the case for the very obvious reason that it has no simple nor single definition so that any attempt to explain its 'meaning' soon develops into a formidable list of bullet points which, by definition, are hard to 'take in', to get a 'fix' on. Add to this, how easily the word 'spirituality' can be taken down blind alleys through unfortunate use of language (as happened at a conference on the spiritual in education during which a head teacher told the delegates that his school was rich in 'spiritualism') and by

leaving inherited assumptions unchallenged (like the idea that 'spirituality' is essentially about religion - an assumption which, incidentally, Ofsted, through its published guidance, has continued to challenge and refute).

And yet, step back from the frustration (or even annoyance) of being told that there is no simple or single definition of spirituality and we can see that spirituality-type language is, in fact, deeply embedded within our educational thinking and, indeed, pervades the everyday life of schools, teachers and pupils.

### Spirituality and the family of words to which it belongs

As a local authority adviser some years ago, I was being shown round a primary school by its very switched-on head teacher. One of the features of the building was that many of its corridors were very long with as many as seven or eight classrooms leading directly from them. The left-hand side of the corridor was taken up with serried ranks of coat hooks from most of which children's coats were hanging. Some way ahead, a young girl was walking towards us and, seeing a coat lying on the floor, she picked it up and hooked it on an empty peg. My head teacher guide stopped and called out to the girl, 'Well done! That's the spirit!'

A simple incident in a typical busy school-day ... or, on reflection, perhaps far more subtle and meaning-laden, particularly for our purpose, than it seems at face value. For, to begin with, the head teacher, noticing something in her school that she felt was note-worthy or special, instinctively resorted to using one of that family of words which incorporates the concept of 'spirit'. 'That's the spirit!' she called out to the girl in an affirmatory (rather than derogatory) tone. But why? Surely, because she saw something in that youngster's seemingly simple action – deciding, rather than walking by on other side, to pick up a coat that was not her own and to hang it up – which demonstrated and distilled the 'spirit' which she wanted to pervade the school. Indeed, something that she would want all members of the school to aspire to. But, notice, how once again, we have drawn on another word in the word family to which 'spirituality' and 'spirit' belong – 'aspire'. And how often, to continue this line of thinking, do we say of both our students and staff that success is profoundly connected to their aspirations? And to take this analogy one stage further: how often do we use the word inspiration in our everyday educational language? Good teachers are those who inspire their pupils and students. In a local primary school that I know well, indeed, it would be said that some pupils inspire other pupils through acting as role-models.

But what is it about this group of words – spirituality, spirit, aspiration and inspiration – that make them so easily attach to education? I would suggest that it is because, no matter how much we focus on tangible things related to school life – timetables, knowledge and assessment, for example – many involved in education are driven by a deep sense or intuition that that good (or 'rounded') education consists of significantly more than this.<sup>ii</sup>

### But of what does this 'more than' consist?

This 'more than' consist of all those elements of personal and group life which enable individuals and groups to 'flourish' (a concept that has proved useful when exploring the notion of spirituality and spiritual development in education). At the individual level, it consists of those qualities and characteristics that help the individual to engage with life, their own and that of others – or 'lean into life' - in a meaningful and constructive way. It is in trying to systematise this that many schools have sought to identify the 'values' that underlie school life – values such as 'compassion', 'honesty', 'truthfulness', 'concern', and 'curiosity' - so that they can be named, reflected upon, displayed, and knowingly developed. Indeed, I once heard of a school which, in compiling its list of pupils who were gifted and talented, included those pupils with gifts and talents in the realm of spiritual development: those pupils, for example, who seemed to be exceptional in their capacity to listen to, and to identify with the needs of, other youngsters.

There is no one defined list of ways in which schools promote, or seek to better provide for, the spiritual development of its members, but some examples would include: making sure that learning encourages the capacity to wonder (in both senses), including a time of silent or guided reflection in school assembly/act of collective worship (reminding us of a phrase that was once commonly used in reference to school

assembly - 'the pause before the plunge'), setting aside a quiet space to which people might go when they want to be quiet, alone or reflective, experimenting with certain approaches to learning (like 'P4C' – 'philosophy for children'), having a 'wall of wonder' in classrooms (where arresting thoughts, including those of the pupils, sayings & stunning pictures can be mounted for people to ponder), involvement in the national Poetry by Heart competition (many have found the recitation of poetry that has been learned by heart to be a very stirring and uplifting individual and group experience), designing lessons on 'happiness' and 'compassion'.<sup>iii</sup>

## Barriers to spiritual development

It is sometimes easier to highlight the positives by contrasting them with the negatives. As such, the following might be deemed barriers to spiritual development within a school: an atmosphere of fear or suspicion, lack of opportunity for children and young people to become involved in evaluation and decision-making, inadequate support for those who feel they are being bullied or 'got at', little provision for character-development, over-emphasis on measurable indicators of success (the 'exam factory' syndrome), poor relationships being modelled by staff, teaching and learning that lacks creativity and the capacity to exercise the imagination, a poor and uninspiring physical environment.

From a wider perspective, in his book on Children and Spirituality, Brendan Hyde identifies two major factors that seem to inhibit children's expression of their spirituality: material pursuit (a preference to relate to the material so that the purpose of life is seen in terms of exploiting consumer possibilities) and trivialising (masking inner feeling, exhibiting complacency and making light of any attempt to 'explore' ultimate values).

## The image of breath and fresh air

It might be a little over-poetic to suggest that in a school – or, indeed, any institution (including the family) – in which people are enabled to flourish, the air feels purer and that visiting it can be like a 'breath of fresh air', as the saying goes. If so, then this imagery might not be accidental in that in many languages, such as Greek and Hebrew, the word for 'spirit' is the same as that for 'wind'.

## Finding space

I was once told of a primary school in which a great deal of effort had been put into the promotion of a positive atmosphere, environment and attitudes. The visiting Ofsted inspectors soon identified this as a major strength of the school and asked the head teacher why and how she had managed to develop such a strong spirit in the school. Her response was both simple and memorable: with so much pressure on schools to increase pace these days, she said, she was keen to create space ... and the 's' that was added to transform 'pace' stood for 'spirituality'.

## For further reading and information

Maurice Irfan Coles (ed) (2015) *Towards the Compassionate School: from Golden Thread to Golden Rule* (London: IOE Press).

Brendan Hyde (2008) *Children and Spirituality: Searching for Meaning and Connectedness* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

David Hay with Rebecca Nye (2006) *The Spirit of the Child* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers).

Anthony Seldon (2015) *Beyond Happiness* (London: Yellow Kite).

Values-Based Education [info@valuesbasededucation.com](mailto:info@valuesbasededucation.com)



## DR BILL GENT

After teaching in Birmingham schools for 15 years, Bill spent 20 years as a local authority school improvement adviser & senior inspector. He worked in secondary, primary & special schools and was an accredited Ofsted inspector. In 1997, with his wife, he wrote the two primary-age books for RE in the Scholastic Curriculum Bank series. He was editor of *Professional REflection*, the journal of the National Association of Teachers of RE (NATRE) from 2006-2016 for which he was awarded the prestigious Shap Award in 2012 for its contribution to religion and education. Having gained a doctorate from Warwick University in 2006, he has continued with his research into aspects of Muslim education, particularly memorisation and Qur'anic recitation, having a number of articles and book chapters published. A member of the International Seminar on Religious Education and Values, he is currently working with a group of European scholars on researching the relationship between Muslim young people's experience of secular state education and Muslim supplementary classes. He is an associate fellow of the Warwick Religions and Education Research Unit (WRERU) at Warwick University and, in 2012, chaired the expert panel as part of the RE Council's national review of RE. He has been an adviser and trustee of the CoED Foundation since its inception in 2012.

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### Notes

<sup>i</sup> In addition, see the chapter on 'Compassion through spiritual development' in CoED's foundation book, *Towards the Compassionate School: From Golden rule to golden thread* (2015) which offers an updated version of what spiritual development might look like in a world in which Ofsted inspected compassion as a routine matter. See also Bruce Gill's excellent Think Piece No. Five, 'Compassion-based educational transformation' (<http://www.coedfoundation.org.uk/pdfs/ThinkPiece5-Future-Ofsted.pdf>) which provides a thought-provoking vision of how a school Ofsted report might look in the future.

<sup>ii</sup> The German word *Bildung* which is used to describe the outcome of the educational process would also seem to serve this purpose. In traditional Muslim thinking, one of the key goals of education is said to be *tarbiyyah*, sometimes translated as 'the education of the whole being & development of human character'.

<sup>iii</sup> Sir Anthony Seldon, the former head teacher of Wellington College, made national headlines some years ago when he introduced lessons on 'happiness/well-being' on to the school timetable. See his book *Beyond Happiness*. In collaboration with others, he was responsible for setting up the Action for Happiness organisation in 2011 ([www.actionforhappiness.org/](http://www.actionforhappiness.org/)).