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From Unconscious Incompetence...?

A personal journey to understanding spiritual development.

Georgia Prescott

The requirement that all education contributes to children's and young people's spiritual development, as well as RE's particular role in this, continues to fascinate. In this article, Georgia Prescott tells of her own journey to understanding what the notion of spiritual development is all about.

Introduction

Over the course of my career, I have found myself increasingly aware of, and involved with, spiritual development in schools. My present job, working with students in Initial Teacher Training, now includes trying to raise the awareness and understanding of others in this area. I thought it would be interesting to track my own journey from 'unconscious incompetence' (a phrase used by Maslow), and use this to challenge us to consider how we might help others make this transition.

Unconscious Incompetence

I hope I do not misrepresent those teacher educators who taught me on my intense and busy PGCE year, when I say that I have no memory of spiritual development being covered specifically. I am not even sure that we covered RE in any depth. To put it in context, this was just prior to the 1988 Education Reform Act. We were still operating under the 1944 Education Act which had outlined the importance of the development of the whole child in school, including his/her spiritual development, but I certainly don't remember being challenged to consider what that meant. I began my teaching career, then, blissfully unaware of my own lack of understanding of this crucial area of a child's development. This state of unconscious incompetence was to continue throughout my time teaching in London and into my move back to the North-West.

Conscious Incompetence

Several years after I moved to teach in Barrow-in-Furness, we had an Ofsted inspection in school. I had been teaching for about ten years by this time and had begun to develop my own competence as an RE 'co-ordinator' in school. One of the inspectors asked a teaching assistant what we did in school to provide opportunities for children's spiritual development. I clearly remember being horrified and utterly relieved that I hadn't been asked! I couldn't imagine how I would have responded to the question. Luckily for us, the teaching assistant was able to answer the question competently. I now realise that we *did* offer plenty of opportunity for spiritual development in that school, but I would have struggled to articulate how.

This single incident served to make me very conscious that I did not understand what spiritual development was, as I had never been challenged to consider it. My state of

conscious incompetence was to continue for several more years into the next phase of my career.

As I began my work in Initial Teacher Training (ITT) at St Martin's College (now the University of Cumbria), I taught RE which included some input on spiritual development. I worked under the skilled direction of my colleagues, and began to increase my understanding. However, I was still very aware that this was quite limited.

Developing Conscious Competence

My period of intense learning about and questioning of spiritual development came a few years later when we began to offer a twenty-hour elective module in Spiritual Development, thus giving some students the opportunity to explore the concept in greater depth. Initially I felt a sense of panic, (my conscious incompetence making itself felt), thinking that I didn't know enough, and would need to work hard to develop my knowledge and understanding. I wasn't sure how we would possibly fill twenty hours and, to be honest, I wasn't really looking forward to doing it.

What followed, however, were many happy years teaching this module, until recently when the elective modules were sadly removed from our degree courses. The module offered us a chance to be creative and to have fun, whilst challenging initially myself and subsequently my students to think about and develop their own understanding of how we provide for spiritual development in school.

Key Learning

During this period of developing conscious competence, I had to do plenty of research into spiritual development in order to be confident to present it to others. Among others, I read work by: Hay and Nye (2006); EAUDE (2008); Adams, Hyde and Woolley (2008); and my colleague and friend, Sally Elton-Chalcraft (2002). I also listened to a range of head teachers talk to my students about spiritual development in their establishments (a challenge initially for them too!), and got students to create displays which provided opportunities for spiritual development. The students then presented these in a school setting to evaluate how children would interact with them (G Prescott, 2012).

I asked students to try to define their understanding of spiritual development before looking at the definitions of others, including that of Ofsted (2004). This helped them to realise how complex and difficult to define it is. To supplement this, I used a framework, which I found helpful and that looked at four 'dimensions' of spirituality. These dimensions, as defined by Elton-Chalcraft (2002), Hay and Nye (2006) and Ruth White of the Wessex Synod, I have amalgamated as follows:

- **The Inner Dimension** – *Looking Inwards* to your self – our feelings / experiences / what is important to us.
- **The Social / Moral Dimension** – *Looking Outwards* to others – the way we interact with others and our important relationships.
- **The Environmental Dimension** – *Looking Downwards* to the Earth. Appreciating what is amazing about the world and how that fits into our world view.
- **The Transcendental Dimension** – *Looking Upwards* towards God / the divine / a sense of the 'other'.

What is useful about these 'dimensions' is that they can help us to consider different aspects of spiritual development, and how we can provide opportunities for them across a range of contexts in school. They could also help us to recognise where we might inadvertently pay more attention to one area at the cost of another. However, it can be misleading to try and separate them out completely, as many things that we do in school cross over a number of dimensions.

Reflecting Back

As a result of developing my own knowledge and understanding of spiritual development, I was able to reflect back over my time as a teacher and lecturer, considering now how I might answer the question of an Ofsted inspector more confidently.

A recurring theme from all the head teachers was the value of collective experiences, notably trips out of the classroom and school residential trips. These exemplify the cross-over of different dimensions of spirituality. As the parent of a Year 6 child who has experienced an outdoor and an urban residential, I now have experience of this both as a teacher and a parent.

The bonding that takes place during a residential or on a day trip out of school is both strong and subtle. Children learn different things about each other that they may not have learnt in the classroom. Hidden strengths and talents as well as sometimes humbling challenges alter set preconceptions of what someone is like. I distinctly remember the dramatically increased respect for a quiet, timid girl who shinned fearlessly up a climbing wall as well as the way a more confident boy was humbled when he realised that it was not as easy as she had made it look. He was supported by his peers through a personal struggle to conquer his fears that day. These experiences usually include the first two dimensions – inner, social and moral, and often can also include environmental and transcendental dimensions, depending on the context and nature of the trip.

Within the transcendental dimension, awe and wonder can be experienced in all kinds of contexts. The first sight of a city for a child from a rural area (and vice-versa) can be awe-inspiring, as can the impact of a cathedral or a mosque, even for a non-believer. I will never forget the resounding cheer of excitement and astonishment that echoed around the coach of Year 2 children from North London as they saw the first green fields on the motorway on their way to Whipsnade Zoo. It is my belief that the more experiences we expose children to, the more likely it is that many of them will experience awe and wonder (transcendental dimension), or learn things about themselves and others (inner and social /moral dimensions) that they were unaware of before.

RE and Philosophy for Children (P4C) offer wonderful opportunities for spiritual development by offering children the opportunity to explore ideas about the transcendental and other philosophical questions stimulated by exposure to stimuli such as religious stories, beliefs and practices. These opportunities can allow children to develop different aspects of their spirituality by exploring concepts and ideas in depth, even at a young age. P4C is very inclusive, so children can experience a sense of achievement in philosophical enquiry that may often elude them in other areas of school. The pride at having your question selected by the class as one they would like to discuss can be moving and affirming for any child. Because it is not always predictable which children will excel, it can alter children's perceptions of each other. It helps to develop a sense of community, as children are working and thinking together, and learning to respect the views and ideas of others whilst challenging stereotypes and prejudices (social and moral dimension). It can also be a platform upon which children's 'spiritual voices' can be heard rather than silenced. (Adams Hyde & Woolley, 2008)

‘Not just kittens and sunsets’

When, in November 2011, I attended the Westhill Trust Seminar on Spirituality and RE in Leeds, Pauline Lovelock talked very movingly about her work with children at the Julian Shrine in Norwich which provided amazing opportunities for inner and, at times, transcendental spiritual development. She gave a timely reminder that spiritual development encompasses not just the ‘wonder-ful’ aspects of spirituality (the ‘kittens and sunsets’ as she put it) – the ‘wows’ – but also the difficult aspects of our experiences which come through experiences such as grief, illness or personal struggle. It is important to consider how we provide children with the space, tools and frameworks to deal with these ‘ows’, as well as the opportunities for experiencing ‘wow’ moments: by taking them to a Buddhist temple, perhaps, or to an inspiring or breath-taking natural environment.

Igniting a Spark?

A headteacher friend of mine had a saying on the wall in her office which read, ‘*Every child has a spark; it is our job to ignite it*’. This is a powerful statement which encapsulates what being a teacher is about and also what spiritual development consists of. If we get to know our children and encourage them to develop by supporting them through challenges and giving them a wide range of experiences and opportunities, we are helping to nurture their inner being at the deepest level. A good school is one where children seem to be ‘alight’ with their enthusiasm for life and learning. We can almost feel the sparks in the air.

In the same way, I try to ignite a spark in my trainee teachers when introducing them to the power and importance of spiritual development in school and helping them to think about how they do or might provide opportunities for promoting this aspect of development in their classrooms. I feel this important area should be studied in some depth by all ITT students. In this way, maybe they can begin their own personal journey. The value of this was certainly felt by some of them as this comment, written in the module evaluation by a former student, now an NQT, reveals:

The value we got from doing this display and indeed SMSC in general was invaluable. Whilst planning, we were striving to provide opportunities that children often lack in school. This led us to consider in more depth what children really need over and above their academic needs. It has impacted my teaching because SMSC should be evident in all aspects of school life ... a fact that is often neglected.

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Georgia Prescott is a part-time senior lecturer in Primary Religious Education at the University of Cumbria. Her email address is georgia.prescott@cumbria.ac.uk