

SPIRITUALITY AND THE SECONDARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM

by Bernard Stuart

What follows is not a definitive account of all that is needed to foster the development of pupils' spirituality within the Catholic high school. A school has an overall ethos to which all areas within a school contribute, so as to provide the overall pattern of practice for whole school community. My special interest is in the way in which classroom studies can be made relevant and contribute to spirituality and spiritual development. Any attempt made by the school to encourage its pupils to make a contribution to the discussion concerned with spiritual development, and to recognise the enriching contribution made by the pupils' cultural backgrounds to the quality of the school's shared life and ethos will depend on the quality of teacher/pupil relationships. The development of appropriate attitudes and responses is a lengthy and on-going process which calls for skilled understanding as teachers help pupils to make sense of the situations they encounter. This reinforces strongly the point that the school has to pay attention to the world in which pupils live, all the elements of which contribute to spiritual development. We shall first take a closer look at this context.

While a variety of questions can fairly be raised about the appropriateness of the school taking an interest in the spiritual development of its pupils, and its fitness to do so, neglect of this area of pupil development is undoubtedly damaging. There is much that can be done to provide an appropriate context for the possibility of spiritual growth, without presuming to manage the direction of pupils' development. We can do so by concentrating mainly on the development of spirituality as awareness and encouraging, but leaving open for personal decision, the mastering of spirituality as response, both in terms of whether it will be made and also, in what form.

As a way of life, spirituality is a fundamental choice which no individual can presume to make on behalf of any other. The same is true of the responses which young people make, or withhold, to their own awareness. As for the awareness itself, it is not in the control of either teacher or pupil. But, certainly, this is an aspect of spirituality with which the school can appropriately attempt to help its pupils. It is important to stress the idea that much, if not most, of what can be achieved in the area of spiritual development education will happen outside of the ordinary school day. Extra-curricular activities, retreats and ad hoc meetings are only some of the opportune times when much may happen.

So what are the implications which can be drawn for the educational contribution to the spiritual development of young people in schools? In both a whole school curricular approach and the classroom practice which are designed to promote spiritual development, I think it is essential to provide for personal learning through reflection and study. In the classroom, as in the whole school environment, there is greatest scope for personal learning by reflecting on experience and how to get the most from experience.

I would be in favour of an approach that:

- acknowledges both the complexity of personal learning, and its natural limits;
- contains concrete ideas about affective learning which cannot be turned on and off like a switch at the discretion of the teachers in a school;
- makes use of methods, including interpersonal processes and discussion, when considering personal learning.

In the light of these ideas I wish to present three classroom approaches to be considered by those responsible in the Catholic high school when deciding on a policy relating to whole school ethos which enhances pupils' spiritual awareness, and the planning of a curriculum that includes the aim of promoting spiritual development.

1. Direct study of personal/spiritual subject matter

There is a need for a "learning areas" (subjects) that look directly and specifically at questions of human meaning, purpose and value:- Religious Education, Philosophy, Personal Development, Ethics. Such studies should have a philosophical centrality in the curriculum. They also give pupils the opportunity to evaluate their education, to put it into some perspective, to see how it relates to the rest of their lives.

2. Indirect study of personal/social issues

It would be artificial and inappropriate to try to limit the study of personal/social issues to the particular "learning areas" listed above. The issues need to be examined as and when they arise in the curriculum. They need to be addressed in ways that are informative and empowering for pupils without subverting the standard aims for the host subject. If these issues are ignored at the time, there could be a subtle suggestion that the curriculum is not sufficiently concerned with young people's spiritual development.

3. A personal/spiritual dimension to all curriculum learning areas

All learning areas should be able to help pupils learn general skills that will contribute in some way to their personal growth; for example, skills of analysis, evaluation, interpretation, appraisal of arguments etc. In addition, each learning area should be able to articulate a distinctive contribution that it can make to the personal integration of pupils' school learning. All subjects can make a distinctive contribution to the spiritual development of pupils. Each could articulate for pupils how it can be valuable for them in the larger context of their own lives, trying to alert them to the meaning of their learning. This approach has two aspects:-

- showing how the subject contributes to the general skills for spiritual development.
- showing how learning from this subject contributes in a distinctive way to pupils' understanding of life.

Any learning has a spiritual or 'purpose' dimension in the way it adds to the range of an individual's access to physical and cultural inheritance. It has some ultimate value and meaning in equipping pupils to respond to life: e.g. religious studies can contribute an understanding of the ways religious beliefs influence behaviour and how people interpret the dilemmas of human existence such as life, joy, pain and death.

The ideas are not new. There already are subjects like this in place in schools : personal development, PSE and living skills. However, no matter how prominent they appear in the school's prospectus or Mission Statement, they are more like 'fringe dwellers' than central subjects in the curriculum. Questions are often raised about their effectiveness and their poor image in the eyes of pupils, parents and school staff. The experience of those who teach them suggests that their educational potential is often subverted by school structures and by what may be termed the 'psychology of the learning environment'.

There are subjects (e.g. English and Mathematics) seen by pupils as having a high importance in the curriculum. Even if they do not like studying them, most pupils will pay some attention to what is being taught, and in general try to understand the basics just on the off chance that 'it may come in handy for a job'. To a great extent, pupil attitudes towards the study of other subjects at school mirror society's attitudes. For example, the study of religion in church schools is not regarded by some as a necessary or valuable pursuit and certainly not one that could make a difference, or a major contribution to their quality of life. Interestingly, however, pupils will say that religion as such is important - the sort of nominal religion that is better to have than not to have, just in case!

The possibility of an indirect study of personal and social issues is usually threatening to teachers, at least initially. They may feel that "value education" is trying to take over their subject. What is needed is flexibility to acknowledge and explore briefly the spiritual issues that arise naturally within the subject in question without compromising the integrity of the subject matter.

If school structures and community opinion are not supportive of the purposes and value of personal subjects, then their value will be subverted. To make them a valuable and effective part of the school curriculum, it is important to have well defined and highly visible support structures in order that their value may be clearly seen by pupils. To do this is to acknowledge the realities within schools and the community. Both have the potential to undermine any programme that does not keep these issues in mind and does not at-

tempt to address them. That a school sees it as important for all curriculum areas to give some attention to relevant spiritual issues says something about its fundamental understanding of the nature and purposes of education. This would be a key aspect to a holistic curriculum.

The following is a summary list of relevant principles in education for spiritual development:

- ❑ The school should provide a context for the education of pupils relating to the possibilities for development, accepting that it is not appropriate or realistic to think that the teaching itself brings about such development.
- ❑ Teaching can make a limited but valued contribution to the complex process of development which is effected by pupils themselves who are influenced by many other factors besides their formal teaching.
- ❑ The school, in the main through classroom teaching, can provide learning experiences that enable pupils to become more informed about spiritual issues. They may reflect and comment on their own personal views if they wish, but there should be no expectation that this is required.
- ❑ Teachers may hope that through such experience pupils are favourably disposed towards the development of attitudes, values and beliefs. However, they need to recognise that authentic personal development will be free and will come from within the individual; and that it should be part of their wider life lived on a much larger stage than the classroom, or the school.

Spiritual development relates to that aspect of inner life through which pupils acquire insights into their personal existence which are of enduring worth. It is characterised by reflection, the attribution of meaning to experience, valuing a non-material dimension to life and intimations of an enduring reality. This is recognised in the Framework for Inspection (1993), and it has important implications for the process of education for spirituality in a Catholic high school.

Teaching methods will include open inquiry, where the provision of up-to-date information extends pupils' horizons, challenging them to identify, analyse and evaluate evidence and arguments. Use of appropriate pupils' materials gives pupils access to the same information as the teacher; an emphasis on teacher talk as the primary means of presenting information should be avoided, giving priority to objectivity and encouraging pupils to learn how to find and sift information for themselves.

Discussion is an integral part of the learning process; discussions should be conducted along the lines of informed debate, trying to avoid the problems where it is little more than an exchange of uninformed opinions. The privacy and freedom of pupils needs to be respected. This could be achieved by use of a programme or process which focuses on intellectual inquiry, without necessarily expecting or demanding personal responses from pupils.

Controversial issues should be approached in a way that looks at authoritative and conflicting views. The potential emotional reaction of pupils needs to be assessed prior to the use of any experience, process or pupil materials. Any excessively emotional or manipulative process is inappropriate.

The values that the school upholds need to be stated, made clear in practice and not presumed. It is inappropriate to try to impose them. Teachers should follow a clear, written code of ethics for interaction that is impartial and allows the teacher to make reference to his/her own beliefs, values and commitments, when this is judged likely to make a valuable educational contribution to the lesson.

Appropriate use may be made of values clarification and values analysis. A critical appraisal of these approaches is needed if they are to be used effectively with coherence and harmony, at appropriate stages of pupil development, without manipulation, and with some appreciation of their possibilities and limitations. The above observations are based on the principle which argues that teaching and learning in the school is primarily concerned with helping pupils learn how to think and to be informed. This overarching cognitive emphasis can provide the most appropriate environment for giving attention to personal matters.

The role of the school is not so much to provide emotional experiences but to help pupils identify and think about them; to work towards some understanding of the spiritual dimension in their own lives and in human experience generally. It is important to note that this perspective should not be interpreted as narrowly cognitive, limiting the place for the affective and personal dimension, but as the most appropriate way of structuring learning to make the handling of experience, emotions, attitudes, values and beliefs more respectful of pupils as free autonomous human persons.

The idea of educating the whole person is not a new one. It is behind the growing concern to expand the school curriculum to include areas for study that have previously existed on the margins of life in some schools, even though they are said to be of vital importance for young people. In theory this should not be the case in Catholic schools but, in practice, it may be so. In determining how it addresses the aim of fostering the spirituality of young people, the school must filter the demands made on it by the community, selecting what can be covered appropriately and realistically within its educational framework