Life, the universe and everything

Spirituality should be explored across the curriculum, not just in RE. Adi Bloom examines the whys and hows

Before they do anything else, teachers at the Academy of St Francis of Assisi consider what the point of it all is. In what is less a staff meeting and more a collective moment of existential angst, they ask themselves, "Why are we here? What is going on?"

"It’s really important to remember our mission: why we’re here, what that’s about, what our role is in the community," says Ian Kelly, vice-principal of the Liverpool secondary. "That can be hard when you’re busy in school every day. So we start our meetings with a moment of reflection on the way we’ve had. I think it’s important to try to remember, and focus on, what we are here for every single day."

For Kelly, such reflection is a vital part of ensuring that his school takes care of the spiritual, as well as the academic, needs of its pupils.

The need to nurture pupils’ spiritual development has been part of schools’ mandate since the 1844 Education Act. But in 1897 the Education Reform Act ruled for the first time that Ofsted would be inspecting schools’ inherent spirituality.

Specifically, inspectors would be looking for a curriculum that "Promotes the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society."

The wording of these criteria has changed little since then. Last year’s updated inspection guidelines called for schools to "Take account of the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils, and the extent to which the education provided enables every pupil to achieve his or her potential."

The problem, however, is that spirituality is essentially a manifestation of spirit. And one cannot pin down, test for or measure spirit.

Indeed, different people tend to have different ideas about what spirituality even means. "It’s an awkward thing to think about," says Dr Jacqueline Watson, acting director of the University of East Anglia’s Centre for Spirituality and Religion in Education. "One of the problems is that, if you try to define it, you almost lose it."

"For me, it’s anything that has to do with thinking around the meaning and purpose of life, and the different beliefs and values people have around the meaning of life."

Unah King, professor emerita at the University of Bristol, explains it slightly differently. "I’m against one-for-all definitions," she says, "but spiritual literacy leads to a different way of seeing and evaluating all of life and the environment. It’s about being an integral, integrated part of the web of life. What it means to be a full human being. To be fully alive."

Grappling with the big questions

These are questions that the greatest philosophers of the ancient and modern worlds spent their entire lives contemplating, and yet teachers are expected to fit it in between double maths and the lunchtime bell.

As a result, spirituality is often slotted off into a few well-intentioned minutes of assembly time, or those subjects in the curriculum where it fits most easily.

In many schools, therefore, spirituality has become the exclusive preserve of RE teachers. Religious education, after all, offers an obvious forum for reflection on life, death and the role of humanity in the universe.

"It’s tricky, because you could fall into the trap of thinking that spirituality is about religion," says Watson. "But it’s not synonymous with religion. It’s much wider than religion. It’s possible to think about the meaning and purpose of life not just as something religious."

The problem, of course, is that much of what is considered to be spiritual has, traditionally, been the preserve of the religious. And the hazy, existential nature of spirituality is more easily understood if it is attributed to beliefs in God and singing hymns.

"Young people, especially, associate religion with the Church and God, and it’s quite easy," says Kelly. "Spirituality is much more difficult, because it’s to do with how you relate to each other, how you relate to God and how you relate to creation."

But St Francis of Assisi is a faith school, which allows for a handy ambiguity over what is religious and what is spiritual. "Because it’s hard to define spirituality, we tend to refer to it as 'ethics' says Kelly. "We’re a joint Anglican and Catholic school, and we want to celebrate the ethos of each."

For example, Kelly recently invited Franciscan monks to address older pupils about the realities of a life of poverty, dastardliness and piety. "For a lot of the students, their lifestyle was a bit of a shock," says Kelly. "That idea of giving your possessions away – the students struggled to get their heads around that. The idea of giving everything up."

And the school has adopted a set of four values, written up and displayed prominently in every classroom. These are: creating a caring community; showing compassion to all; showing respect for all creation; and working for peace and reconciliation.

These values are then brought into all elements of school life. When two pupils fall out, teachers might ask them whether they are showing respect for one another by arguing. Similarly, the school chaplain is responsible for ensuring that the school achieved Fairtrade status, thus demonstrating respect for creation.

"We’re trying to get children on-message," says Kelly.
Kelly. “To buy into the ethos of what we’re trying to do, there are very few churchgoers who attend our school. But everything we do is based on the Augustinian and Catholic faith that underpins our school.”

More than just religion

Actually, such values are not the exclusive preserve of the religious. It is, after all, possible to respect other people and the environment, without believing that one is impelled to do so by an all-powerful deity.

“I think spirituality is very clearly related to morality,” says Watson, who is an atheist. “You address children’s spirituality in order to encourage morality. If children don’t feel a spiritual connection with other people or the environment, they’re not going to act morally. It’s not just about doing things because you’re told to, or because you expect to or God wants you to. It’s about doing them because you want to.”

Urnalis King agrees, though she talks of “values” rather than “morals”. “How do you develop values in people?” she says. “Compassion, a sense of justice, a sense of peace. Among young people, it’s very easy to just drop out, to be very self-interested – to become bored with life and with other human beings.

“Developing deeper awareness of how you discover life in conjunction with sharing with others, feeling connected to others.”

If spirituality is values, or morals, or values – to run through pupils’ lives, it should also run throughout the entire curriculum. Conflating morality to RE lessons does little to encourage pupils to see it as applicable to everyday life.

Some subjects allow space for spirituality more easily than others. In science, for example, discussion about the planets could allow for reflection on the enormity of the universe, and pupils’ own place within it. In geography, meanwhile, pupils could discuss issues around international poverty, while history allows for reflection on war and peace.

“Part of developing the sense of self,” says Watson, “is about how you and how you develop your place in the world. Your relationships with your friends and family, on a smaller scale, but also the wider environment and your place in it. It comes up in so many subjects such as English, maths, science, geography, and history. It’s supposed to be addressed in every subject in the curriculum. It doesn’t mean that you’re going to do it every week, or every month, even. But every subject is supposed to contribute.”

Maths is often cited as a subject not naturally conducive to spiritual reflection. But Watson refers to a maths teacher she knows who invited pupils to think about the mathematical patterns that are visible in nature: the Fibonacci sequence and Pythagoras’ theorem. “You can show children awe-inspiring examples of maths,” she says. “Stories into the universe – so much of that is based in maths.”

Dr David Brown, meanwhile, believes that PE offers natural and unforced opportunities for spiritual development. Brown, of Cardiff Metropolitan University, mentions Eastern practices such as yoga, tai chi, qigong and some martial arts. “Self-cultivation in these arts has been linked to spirituality,” he says. “The self as an embodied idea. To become spiritual, it’s a moving thing, a doing thing. Not a thinking thing. The idea that you can attain spirituality through movement is quite different from the Western tradition of thinking about these things.”

The idea, he says, is not to worry about stretching or destroying but simply to focus on the moment: “Part of the notion of spiritual self-cultivation is developing and understanding our awareness and how we’re reacting to others. Things going on around us.”

“Recognise the emotions and fears that are going on while you are doing it. Just experience it. Listen to your body. Become aware of your sense of self, who you are and how you respond to things.”

It is inevitably difficult to discuss spirituality and existing in the moment without straying slightly into the codified spiritual territory of a student gap year in India. Brown concedes that it is not unknown for teachers to confuse spirituality education with burning incense sticks and lighting tea lights.

“I think it’s very important that whoever is going to introduce spirituality in school is properly experienced in the practice to a reasonable degree,” he says. “Things like martial arts can be marketed in a certain way, which is quite stereotypical.”

Watson says: “I don’t think it’s about burning incense or chanting or whatever.” But, she adds, this should not be interpreted as a blind spot on incense. RE teachers might want to use it during a lesson on incitulation. And she has used candles for effect when delivering a lesson on the Holocaust.

Similarly, at St Francis of Assisi, a recent celebration of St Francis’ feast day included the school’s gospel choir singing hymns while surrounded by candles. “The setting is very important for these events,” says Ian Kelly. “It works much better in a setting that’s purpose built especially for that experience to happen. Atroposphere is very important.”

Time for reflection

The rationale is that one cannot generate spirituality on demand. Situations deemed by teachers to be spiritual may not be seen that way by pupils at all. “Things like singing a hymn,” says Kelly, “That’s spiritual. But whether our students would see it as spiritual is a different thing.”

And this is where both atmosphere and post-event reflection matter. The day after the candlelit gospel concert, Kelly made a point of talking about it with pupils. “On stage, students were nervous: were they going to get the notes right?” he says. “But the next day we were able to reflect on what they’d done.”

“Some said they’d felt uplifted afterwards. Some said things like, ‘The back of my neck was tingling.’” We showed them photographs and one of them said, ‘It looks like we’re in a cathedral.’”

It can be difficult for students to recognise that there’s a spiritual experience at the time. So we allow for discussion afterwards.

These discussions, obviously, rely on teachers being able to perceive the spirituality in an occasion more readily than their pupils. At St Francis of Assisi, therefore, efforts are made to ensure that spirituality is present not only in classrooms but in the staffroom as well.

“A lot of schools go for team-building days – rafting or whatever,” says Kelly, “We tend to go to cathedrals. There are two fantastic cathedrals in Liverpool. We go and think about what our role is. It’s really important to reaffirm what we do in the community. Our role is as a catalyst for change. But it’s not always easy to remember that when you’re in school every day.”

It is to remind themselves of this that school staff also begin daily meetings with a moment for prayer and reflection (though Kelly points out that a non-denominational school could simply leave out the prayer).

“I think this is really important in any job, but especially in our job,” he says. “You begin each day reflecting on why you’re here. We’re not only here for academic progress but also for spiritual and moral growth. We need to reflect on what we do to make the community a better place.”

GET PUPILS MOVING

eastern exercise regimes, such as yoga, tai chi, qigong and some martial arts, often allow for a spiritual dimension. But they are not inherently spiritual: using them as warm-up stretches or as a means of destressing before an exam moves the focus away from spirituality.

The aim is to consider spirituality from a physical perspective on a more cerebral perspective.

Focus on the experience of the moment and on how the body responds to it. Concentrate on harmonising movement with the breath and on the movement of others. Try to be conscious of your entire body as you move.

Some martial arts, such as aikido, require two people to work together. This allows pupils to feel two different energies coming together, and to see how the other person’s body and energy affect their own.

Spirituality, however, rarely emerges in a single lesson. Regular, discrete spiritual practice is far more effective than one-off sessions.

If possible, dedicate some time each week to an Eastern exercise. Alternatively, introduce a number of these practices in assemblies, or as a warm-up at the beginning of any lesson, regardless of subject.