

## **Exploring the spiritual dimension of the curriculum**

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### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines how the spiritual development of children through education is a directive of the Irish state and thus the right of every child in both primary and second level schools. Yet the role and responsibility of teachers to provide for the spiritual wellbeing of the children in their care has traditionally been given scant attention. Indeed, questions such as how teachers are equipped to fulfil this role and can teachers nurture the spirituality of children without an appreciation of the spiritual dimension of persons, of themselves, and of life itself are seldom discussed. In what follows the chapter highlights the state directive to nurture the spirituality of children. Next it offers a definition of ‘spirituality’ and explores its relationship to religion. It goes on to lift up the lacuna in teacher preparation and continuous professional development where this aspect is concerned. Finally, it draws attention to one programme, still in its pilot phase, which allows teachers to explore the spiritual dimension of humanity and their own spirituality, and asks what learning might be drawn from such a programme for teacher preparation and development.

### **The Government directive to nurture the spirituality of children**

The *Primary School Curriculum* states that it is designed to ‘nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life—spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and

physical.’<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one of the stated aims of the Primary School Curriculum is to develop children spiritually.<sup>2</sup> It states that

For most people in Ireland, the totality of the human condition cannot be understood or explained merely in terms of physical and social experience. This conviction comes from a shared perception that intimates a more profound explanation of being, from an awareness of the finiteness of life and from the sublime fulfilment that human existence sometimes affords. The spiritual dimension of life expresses itself in a search for truth and in the quest for a transcendent element within human experience.<sup>3</sup>

According to the Curriculum, the spiritual development of the child is to be fostered throughout the breadth of the learning experiences offered by it. A general objective of the Curriculum is for children to ‘acquire sensitivity to the spiritual dimension of life.’<sup>4</sup> While Religious Education is seen as one subject area within the curriculum to foster this dimension of the child, it is important to recognise that the Curriculum sees the spirituality of the child being fostered in many other areas as well, particularly the “aesthetic and affective domains of learning.”<sup>5</sup>

The *Primary School Curriculum* is not the only government directive regarding the spiritual nurture of children. *Our Children – Their Lives, The National Children’s Strategy* also gives importance to the spiritual dimension of the child, naming the spiritual as a dimension of the child’s development. It is interesting that the document makes a distinction between the spiritual and religious dimension of the child’s life. It states that ‘for many children’ the experiences and

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<sup>1</sup> Government of Ireland, "Primary School Curriculum: Introduction," (Dublin: Stationery Office, 1999), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 27. For instance, drama. See Ibid., 54

questions of life are supported by ‘traditions of belief, observance of religious duties and attendance at designated places of worship.’ However, it goes on to say that ‘for all children’ the spiritual dimension of their lives needs to be validated by their peers, parents and significant adults. In other words, the document suggests that there is a spiritual dimension to *all* children, whether or not that dimension is supported by a faith tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The national curriculum framework for children from birth to six years of age, entitled *Aistear*,<sup>7</sup> provides adults with information on offering learning experiences for children so that they can ‘grow and develop as **competent and confident** learners within loving relationships with others.’<sup>8</sup> Once again, in keeping with the other documents thus far mentioned, spirituality is recognised as an important element in the child’s learning and development, this time because “experiencing a spiritual dimension in life enhances children’s sense of well-being.”<sup>9</sup> .

### **Nurturing the spirituality of children at second level**

The directive to nourish the spirituality of children at second level is also clear, although again the role of the teacher is not explicit. Section 9 of *The Education Act* obliges schools to ‘use its available resources to promote the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students and provide health education for them, in consultation with their parents, having regard to the characteristic spirit of the school.’<sup>10</sup> It goes on to charge the Board of Management of the school specifically with this task.

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<sup>6</sup> ———, "Our Children - Their Lives: National Children's Strategy," (Dublin: Stationary Office, 2000), 24.

<sup>7</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, "Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework," (Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009), 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>10</sup> Education Act 1998 9.

A board shall perform the functions conferred on it and on a school by this Act and in carrying out its functions the board shall uphold, and be accountable to the patron for so upholding, the characteristic spirit of the school as determined by the cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions which inform and are characteristic of the objectives and conduct of the school.<sup>11</sup>

In practice, the Board of Management upholds the characteristic spirit of the school through, among other priorities, the teachers it employs. In other words, the role of the school in nourishing the spiritual development of students, along with their moral, social and personal development, is long regarded as an employment issue.<sup>12</sup> There is a contractual obligation on teachers to support the characteristic ethos of the school. While the trustees provide for the continuation of the characteristic spirit, the board has responsibility to uphold that spirit, and any teacher who becomes part of the staff shares in this responsibility. In short, although not explicitly outlined, the role and responsibility of teachers in fostering the spiritual development of students in accordance with the characteristic spirit of the school is embedded in *The Education Act* and as such is directed by the state.

### **The wider context**

There is also a wider context for paying attention to the spiritual dimension of the child. The *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child* takes a holistic view, recognising the

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<sup>11</sup> Education Act, 1998 15. - (2).

<sup>12</sup> See for instance Education Act 1998 22.—(1).

physical, mental, spiritual, cultural, moral and social aspect of the child's development. The *Convention* specifically refers to the spiritual rights of children in four of its articles.<sup>13</sup> These articles not only acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension of the child but seek to protect this dimension from threats such as exploitation and a poor standard of living. The Irish Government ratified this *Convention* in 1990.

Taken as a whole, these documents—*United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*, *The Education Act*, *Primary School Curriculum*, *Our Children – Their Lives*, *National Children's Strategy* and *Aistear, Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*—recognise the holistic nature of the child. While one would imagine, as secular documents, that they would include the social, emotional, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic and physical dimensions of the child, it is highly significant to see the inclusion of the 'spiritual' in all these sources. Whereas none of them define the term (although the *Primary School Curriculum* and *Our Children* both go some way towards it), they all assume that children are spiritual. Further, the Department of Education publications formally link the nurture of this spiritual dimension of the child to the educational endeavour.

### **The challenge for teachers**

The role of schools in nurturing the spirituality of children is clear. Of course, talking about the role of schools and education in this way is an abstraction. The responsibility ultimately lies with the trustees of each school, the Board of Management, and of course, the principal and teachers. Adequate preparation and ongoing support of teachers to provide for the spiritual wellbeing of the children in their care is something traditionally given little, if any, attention.

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<sup>13</sup> See United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, articles 17, 23, 27.1 & 32.1.

Yet spiritual development through education remains a directive of the state and the right of every child in both primary and second level schools. This presents an enormous challenge.

This chapter argues that as a first and crucial step in fulfilling the requirement to foster intentionally and positively the spirituality of the children in their care, teachers must be aware of the spiritual dimension of human persons and conscious of their own spirituality. This initial step is essential. However, in the present situation, provision for teachers to reflect and work on their own spirituality is limited indeed.<sup>14</sup> In order to redress this challenge, colleges of education need to afford an opportunity for beginning teachers to reflect on their spiritual lives. Teacher preparation programmes need to offer these opportunities. Moreover, as this is a life long directive and one that teachers shoulder for the whole of their professional lives, teachers need continuous opportunities throughout their working lives to reflect on the spirituality of persons and foster their own developing spiritualities.

### **Defining ‘spirituality’**

Spirituality is a nebulous term. It means different things to different people. Indeed, the term has become so overused and loosely understood that Nicholas Lash has remarked ‘My mistrust of contemporary interest in ‘spirituality’ arises from the suspicion that quite a lot of material set out in book stores under this description sells because it does not stretch the mind or challenge our behaviour. It tends to soothe rather than subvert our well-heeled complacency.’<sup>15</sup> Lash’s comments imply that spirituality must do more than keep people within their comfort zones; it needs to push them beyond themselves towards something other than themselves. It is vital to

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<sup>14</sup> Primary teacher preparation programmes do, for the most part, include a module that refers in some way to spirituality. However, these tend to be academic in focus, and assessed as such.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and End of Religion* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 174.

articulate clearly how the term spirituality is being used in this chapter in order to contribute to a more nuanced and focused debate on the spirituality of the teacher. At the same time, as most Irish schools were set up and remain under the trusteeship of religious clergy and congregations, the relationship between spirituality and religion must also be defined. The work of Sandra Schneiders is particularly useful here.<sup>16</sup> According to Schneiders, although spirituality can be both stranger and rival to religion, healthy spirituality can also be partner with religious traditions.

Schneiders proposes that spirituality has two distinguishing features. First, it is *an anthropological constant*. By this she means that, like personality, spirituality is a characteristic of the human person, whether one recognises it or not. Although all humans are spiritual in this basic anthropological sense, each person develops his or her spirituality in a unique and personal way (just as every person develops a unique personality). Every human person has a capacity for spirituality. However, spirituality as a developed relationality (rather than a capacity) is not universal. In other words, while everyone has the innate capacity to live a spiritual life, not everyone recognises and nurtures this capacity.

Second, for Schneiders, spirituality is *a life project or practice* with four distinct characteristics: (a) Spirituality is not a theory, ideology or movement of some kind. It denotes experience and has both active and passive dimensions. In short, spirituality is a personal-lived reality; (b) Spirituality involves conscious involvement in a project – an ongoing, coherent and consciously pursued approach to life; (c) Spirituality is a project of life integration, aiming for holistic

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<sup>16</sup> Schneiders work relates to adult spirituality and is helpful when discussing the spirituality of teachers – the focus of this paper. It is important to note that whereas the spirituality of children shares much of the same features, it is necessarily a less developed, less cohesive and less conscious enterprise.

synthesis – of body and spirit, emotions and intellect, active, passive, social and individual aspects of life. It involves one's whole life in relation to reality as a whole; (d) Finally, this project of life-integration involves consistent self-transcendence toward ultimate value.<sup>17</sup>

In summary, Schneiders defines spirituality as 'the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life integration through self-transcendence toward the ultimate value one perceives.'<sup>18</sup>

Her reading suggests spirituality is the capacity of persons to transcend themselves, to reach beyond themselves in relationship to others; acting on this capacity is a conscious, life-long enterprise, which brings the person beyond themselves towards what they perceive to be of ultimate value. Schneiders is quick to point out that ultimate value is objective rather than merely subjective. Thus one might perceive life itself, the health of the earth, justice for all people, or union with God as ultimate value. Sometimes however, the perception of ultimate value is mistaken, often with tragic results.<sup>19</sup>

### **Spirituality and religious tradition**

Spirituality is always contextual and assumes a different form and meaning depending on the context within which it operates. Spirituality is often but not always contextualised by religion. For instance, spirituality in a Catholic school, which is the concern of this paper, is embodied in the Catholic Christian tradition.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Schneiders suggests that whereas spirituality and religion can be strangers or rivals, they should be related as partners. Spirituality that lacks the

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<sup>17</sup> Sandra Schneiders, "Religion and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals or Partners?," *The Santa Clara Lectures* 6, no. 2 (2000): 3-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Schneiders cites Heaven's Gate cult as an example.

<sup>20</sup> Although all parties agree on the need to address this imbalance, at the time of writing, 92% of primary schools and a large majority of second level schools in Ireland are under the trusteeship of Catholic patrons. This set up is the focus of this paper.

structural and functional resources of religious tradition is rootless and often fruitless for both the person and society; religion that is uninformed by a lived spirituality is dead and often deadly.

When we apply Schneiders' general definition of spirituality to the specific tradition of Christianity, we encounter a religious spirituality where the ultimate value is the triune God revealed in Jesus Christ, in whose life we share through the gift of the Spirit. Schneiders defines Christian spirituality as 'the life of faith, hope and love within the community of the Church through which we put on the mind of Christ by participating sacramentally and existentially in his paschal mystery. The desired life-integration is personal transformation in Christ, which implies participation in the transformation of the world in justice for all creatures.'<sup>21</sup> Schneiders' definition echoes others offered from the world of contemporary Christian spiritual writings.<sup>22</sup>

### **Fostering the spirituality of teachers**

Despite the enormous challenge presented by the responsibility of teachers to nurture the spiritual development of the child as outlined above, there appear to be very few opportunities either in teacher preparation programmes or in continuous professional development programmes for teachers to explore this dimensions of the human person, or more specifically, and perhaps more importantly, of themselves. In a trawl through state-approved courses<sup>23</sup> offered in 2010 to primary school teachers by bodies such as INTO, SESS, Marino Institute of Education, Hibernia, Church of Ireland College of Education, Mary Immaculate College, and St

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>22</sup> See for instance Sheldrake, Philip. *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 35. See also Griffith, Colleen. "Spirituality and Religious Education: Fostering a Closer Connection." In *Horizons and Hopes, the Future of Religious Education*, edited by Thomas H. Groome and Harold Daly Horell, 51-62. New York: Paulist Press, 2003, 56.

<sup>23</sup> Our search extended only to those state approved and subsidised courses that qualify for 3 EPV days. We did not include for instance third level MA or PG Dip programmes.

Patrick's College, only one viable course offered an opportunity for teachers to explore this aspect.<sup>24</sup> No such courses are offered to second level teachers; in-service at second level appears to be exclusively tied to curricular change and development. However, at second level a provider has emerged in the form of new trustee bodies. The following section outlines how one trust body – CEIST (Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust)<sup>25</sup> – has piloted a programme to deal specifically with this lacuna.

### ***Joining the Dots: A programme for teachers***

*Joining the Dots: Faith, Life, Teachers, Teaching and Theology* is a programme in theology and spiritual renewal for teachers.<sup>26</sup> As a school based programme there are no fees, no travel and no exams; it involves a maximum of two hours one evening a week for six weeks. It is an invitation to every teacher in the host school, of every subject area, to explore their faith and connect it to their life, especially their work life. Through connecting how God is revealed with the deep desires of the human heart, it hopes to deepen participants' own faith, praxis and relationships – with God, with themselves, and with others - especially in the context of the Catholic school community.

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<sup>24</sup> We found one course that related to spirituality offered in Glenstal Abbey through Mary Immaculate College entitled "Teaching for Life: Deepening your teaching through sacred sound and space." A second course, also offered by MIC entitled "Exploring Spirituality in a Religious Landscape" was offered but did not run due to lack of numbers.

<sup>25</sup> Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust (CEIST) is a new organisational framework for exercising educational trusteeship set up by the Daughters of Charity, the Presentation Sisters, the Sisters of the Christian Retreat, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. In existence since 2007, CEIST has responsibility for the 112 schools associated with the five collaborating congregations in the Republic of Ireland. See CEIST: CEIST Catholic Education, an Irish Schools Trust Charter. Maynooth: CEIST, 2007.

<sup>26</sup> As a programme for teachers in CEIST schools, *Joining the Dots*, like CEIST itself, is deeply rooted in the Christian tradition. It finds many ways to explore that tradition - music, art, literature, and particularly Scripture – both Hebrew and Christian.

The programme emerged as a response to suggestions from within the teaching profession. For instance, the desire for something of this nature was communicated in a very specific way when one principal asked “what will CEIST do to spiritually sustain teachers in CEIST schools – all teachers – those of committed faith, those who are very doubtful, and those in between?” The challenge to CEIST was clear, and echoed in schools around the country: What was this new trust body prepared to do to nurture the spirituality of teachers. An earlier section presented spirituality as contextual, thus the spirituality of a Catholic school is embedded in the Catholic Christian tradition. But what of the spirituality of individual teachers in such a school? Teachers give so much of themselves, and every teaching day is so busy. Daily events and encounters can be life-giving while others can be draining. Making sense of the experience of teaching, which is so dependent not only on good relationships and reflective practitioners, but on life-integration and self-transcendence, is largely a matter of the spirit.

*Joining the Dots* was designed to address the challenge of linking one’s experience of life, personal spiritual quest, and work in a Catholic school. This includes quotidian work such as achieving high quality teaching and learning, providing pastoral care for all and encouraging respect for every child, parent, teacher and member of the school community. The programme is an opportunity for teachers in conversation with the Christian tradition to catch their breath, to ask good questions of life, of relationships, of themselves and of God. If Christian spirituality is fundamentally about a consciously lived relationship with God through Jesus, then this programme provides an opportunity to develop that relationship. It gives teachers the opportunity to explore both their own spiritualities while simultaneously lifting up the richness and wisdom of Christian spirituality and theology. Returning to the work of Sandra Schneiders,

the programme attempts to give participants time and space to reflect on the personal-lived reality that is their own spirituality, how this integrates with their lives, including ‘work lives’, and to come to know for themselves the Christian ultimate value that is a personal lived relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The 6 week programme outline reads as follows:

- a) Spirituality and life’s journey: living life with meaning
- b) Being a reflective teacher: is it possible and why bother?
- c) *Imago Dei*: Who am I and Whose am I – and whose are those kids!
- d) Jesus - the face of God
- e) Living and working from a Christian spirituality
- f) Connecting the dots: what this means for me, for us and for our school.

### **Joining the Dots so far . . .**

*Joining the Dots: Faith, Life, Teachers, Teaching and Theology* was piloted in Mercy Mounthawk, Tralee in the autumn of 2009. The second pilot run took place in St Mary’s Secondary School, Mallow in spring 2010, with a third hosted by Coláiste na Toirbhirte, Bandon, in autumn 2010.<sup>27</sup> In all instances, between 12 and 15 teachers from a host of different subject areas took part. To date, over 90% of participants have said that *Joining the Dots* enhanced both their faith understanding and their own spirituality.<sup>28</sup> One participant summed up her experience as follows: “I really enjoyed the time for spiritual reflection with other people - the combination of intellectual rigour, the experiential and the prayerful relaxation.”

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<sup>27</sup> At the time of writing the programme had commenced in St Mary’s Secondary School, Nenagh (November 2010).

<sup>28</sup> Participants are surveyed by means of a confidential questionnaire in the final week of the programme.

One of the most common themes to emerge from the programme is participants' appreciation of the time and space to reflect, as the following responses indicate: "Time out to reflect is essential. I felt that it was 'my' time in the week"; [It was] lovely to have reflection time"; "We need more nurturing of teachers like this". Further, many participants valued the collegial aspect: [*Joining the Dots* presented] "a great opportunity for openness and sharing with colleagues"; [I valued] "talking to colleagues at a different level, so much deeper than "shop" talk"; [it was helpful] to take the opportunity to meditate and reflect on what we're about as teachers. Also, to discuss this with others in the group." On a deeper level, participants appreciated engaging with their own spiritualities. Further, some remarked on the value of doing this within the Christian tradition, as these responses suggest:

- "I was glad of the opportunity to hear and read Scripture portrayed in a most enjoyable way. It has jogged my belief in God."
- [Most helpful was] "the opportunity to think at ease about myself in the light of my faith. My faith was nurtured and strengthened throughout these seven weeks. I needed this guided time more than I knew."
- "I really found the programme helpful in looking and reflecting on my own spirituality. The programme gave me a greater appreciation of Scripture. I found myself asking myself so many real questions."
- "It has made me look to my inner self and beliefs".

Finally, some participants explicitly 'joined the dots' of life, faith and work in their evaluations: "It helped and pushed me to think about myself, God, and how I relate to others, [things] that I would normally not think about or ask myself"; [Most helpful was] "finding the spiritual side of

myself, looking at my relationship with God and relating this to students that I teach. I reflected a lot.”

In summary, *Joining the Dots* is one, modest attempt to meet the spiritual needs of teachers and through them, of their students and school communities. The response from participants has been positive and energetic – particularly remarkable in the current climate of uncertainty and cutbacks across the education sector. Most interestingly, the response has been one of surprise. This type of work has typically not been offered in teacher preparation and support, and teachers of all ages are surprised at how relevant and restorative they find it. Whereas one can in no way extrapolate from the very new experience of *Joining the Dots* to form reliable conclusions regarding the desires of teachers or the success of the programme, it can serve to remind us of the importance of teacher spiritual welfare. Further, the evidence that school communities desire such a programme, that members are prepared to commit a most precious resource – time - and the resoundingly positive feedback to date might give confidence to potential providers of such programmes in teacher preparation and continuous support.

### **The challenge for teacher education programmes and life long learning**

The characteristic spirit of the school and accountability to the patron for upholding it are hallmarks of second level education. As teacher preparation programmes for second level are for the most part located in secular colleges and universities, the role of welcoming new teachers and supporting existing teachers in the spirit of the school is probably best located in the school itself or in the community of schools under the same trusteeship. However, the situation for primary school teachers is slightly different: nearly all the colleges of education have Catholic trustees,

while one is run by the Church of Ireland. Whereas support for the spiritual lives of teachers ought to be an ongoing concern, perhaps there is room in primary teacher preparation programmes to begin this journey earlier.

### **Implications for colleges of education**

If it is recognised that one of the core aims of the Primary School Curriculum is to foster the spiritual dimension of the child, then teachers have a responsibility to fulfil this expectation from the outset. In order to do this, it is only reasonable to suggest that teachers ought to be prepared to engage in such work. At present, there is very little in the curriculum of the colleges of education for primary schools that either alerts students to this responsibility or prepares them to engage with it in their professional lives. Perhaps in the past, spirituality and religion were seen as synonymous and as long as teachers were prepared to teach Religious Education, then the spiritual needs of the children were catered for. Possibly the past homogenous nature of education within the Catholic Christian tradition and the lack of any apparent diversity among pupils, parents, teachers and schools did not give rise to question about the spiritual dimension of all children – ‘sure aren’t they all Catholic.’ Clearly, there are many in schools and colleges of education who are not part of a religious faith tradition yet consider themselves spiritual.

It is not appropriate to think that student pre-service teachers will be sufficiently prepared to foster the spirituality of children in schools solely by attending Religious Education classes in college. As pointed out earlier, spirituality is distinct from religion. Someone who may not want to teach Religious Education in the classroom may at the same time be open to finding ways to foster the spirituality of the child. If colleges of education want to take this dimension of

education seriously, they need to do two things: (a) create awareness among students about their responsibility as required by the state to foster the spirituality of children and (b) prepare students to fulfil this responsibility in their future lives as teachers.

#### **a) Creating awareness of the responsibility to foster the spirituality of children**

This first task implies that the faculty and staff of the colleges of education need to be aware of this responsibility. The historic conflation of spirituality with religion and the difficulty in defining what is meant by spirituality, all contribute to an avoidance of the subject. In short, the lack of awareness is an institutional question. Do the colleges of education value the spiritual dimension of the child and do they accept that they have some responsibility to prepare students to cater for this aspect of their education? If so, where does this responsibility lie? Is it within Religious Education, across the faculty of Education, or elsewhere - perhaps in Philosophy or SPHE? However, while these are institutional questions, there are also cultural ones in any institution. They are part of the 'hidden curriculum' in the colleges. Aristotle says that the brave are found where bravery is honoured. In a culture that honoured bravery, soldiers had statues built to them, children were told stories of courage and heroism, and thus, brave people were found. By Aristotle's analysis, if colleges of education are to honour the spiritual dimension of children, then faculty and staff will also need to do the same. In short, if the spiritual welfare of children is honoured in colleges of education, teachers will be found to foster this dimension in the schools.

#### **b) Preparing student teachers to foster the spirituality of children**

The second task follows from the first. If the colleges are to honour this aspect of the Primary School Curriculum, what changes are needed in the preparation of teachers? This dimension of learning cannot be sourced from a book or explored only in the head. By its very nature, it involves the heart and the soul – the inner life of the student. If students are expected to foster the spiritual dimension of children, then they must, at some stage, explore what this means for them, personally. Within teacher education programmes some sort of space needs to be found in an already overcrowded curriculum. Some confidence might be drawn from the limited experience of *Joining the Dots*. The participants found it very helpful to have time to explore something of their own spirituality, with their colleagues, in the context of their teaching lives.

Many students today easily self-identify as being spiritual. However, when asked to explore what that means, they find it difficult to explain how their ‘felt sense’ of being spiritual shapes their decisions, imaginations, affect and behaviour. They are unable to say how it might impact on their teaching. While they may know lots of things about Plato, Jesus, Montessori, the importance of relationality, child centred pedagogy, and the aesthetic dimension of learning, it is difficult for them to connect their spirituality with what they know and are learning, with who they are and how they teach. Can a teacher really be expected to nourish the spirituality of children without any prior awareness and reflection on the possibility of this dimension in their own lives? This is a complex question and while there is no doubt that teachers do nourish the spirituality of children in thousands of ways across the curriculum, such activity would be greatly enhanced though some intentionality and purposefulness on the part of teachers.

### **Ideas for the preparation of teachers for primary schools**

While organisational and cultural change is needed, some practical suggestions might help to focus the issues involved. The implementation of these or other such ideas could help to address the lacuna in teacher education programmes. The limited experience of *Joining the Dots* programme is helpful here. Appropriation is at the heart of that approach, where participants come to see things for themselves. They make sense of their own questions and experience and explore the implications for their lives and their teaching. Consequently, whatever emerges in the colleges of education needs to prioritise appropriation along with information and formation. The following practical suggestions might help students to learn about their responsibility to foster the spirituality of the child and provide pre-service teachers some experience of how this might be done in practice. Towards this end, teacher education programmes for primary schools might offer:

- opportunities for students to become aware that while their responsibility in the future will be to children's emotional, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, cognitive, imaginative, social and physical well-being, it will also require them to care for the spiritual development of the child. Further, they will need to appreciate the inter-relationship between all of these aspects of the child. Who in the colleges will bring this responsibility to the attention of the student? Will it be SPHE or Religious Education, Philosophy or Sociology, or a combination of some or all of these and perhaps other disciplines?
- moments across the curriculum where the spiritual dimension of education is addressed and explored explicitly – for instance, could sociology, philosophy, SPHE and Religious Education find ways to co-ordinate an approach in this endeavour, each touching on the subject from different points of view?

- a curriculum specialisation in the spiritual development of the child, offered in an interdisciplinary manner. Such a development could provide the necessary space for students to explore and critique ideas from many points of view regarding the nature of spirituality. It might also foster reflection on the part of the students themselves about the place of spirituality in their own lives and it could offer ideas for how teachers intentionally foster the spirituality of children, both in Ireland and abroad;
- within teaching practice, supervisors might explore with students how they think the spiritual wellbeing of the children has been enhanced during their teaching of any subject area. Such exploration would help students become more intentional about this dimension of the child's development, and if necessary, prompt students to ask for help in fostering such development;
- models of how others have sought to foster the spiritual development of the children in their own classrooms – practical examples of good practice can go a long way to giving confidence and embodying ideas that are difficult to make concrete;
- opportunities to explore the relationship between spirituality and religion.

## **Conclusion**

The Irish state directs teachers to provide for the spiritual development of children in schools. In order to intentionally and positively foster the spirituality of the children in their care, teachers must be aware and conscious of their own spirituality. However, the present situation suggests that provision for teacher spirituality is largely ignored. Colleges of education ought to afford an opportunity for beginning primary school teachers to reflect on their spiritual lives. Such teacher

preparation programmes need to offer opportunities to explore both what it means to be spiritual and one's own spirituality. However, spiritual development, as a function of human development, is a lifelong journey. Similar opportunities need to be offered to both primary and second level teachers at various stages of professional life: beginning, mid-career and near retirement.

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