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LESSONS IN SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT LEARNING FROM LEADING CHRISTIAN-ETHOS SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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About this briefing

This briefing presents an overview of findings and implications from the Ten Leading Schools project, which assessed models of spiritual development in Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales. It highlights features of these schools that contribute to pupils' positive spiritual development, offering insights of practical use for other schools.

Context

In England, schools are required to promote spiritual development, defined by Ofsted as pupils' ability to be reflective about their own beliefs - religious or otherwise - that inform their perspective of life and respect for other people's faiths, feelings and values.

However, spiritual development is often overshadowed by pressures of meeting exam performance targets and there is confusion over how it should be addressed, particularly in the context of an increasingly diverse

Implications for practice

- The study provides best practice examples of how Christian-ethos schools contribute to pupils' spiritual development. The findings are also relevant to non-religious schools, as all schools are required to promote the spiritual development of pupils.
- Making context-appropriate decisions is crucial to success. Decisions about policy and practice in spiritual development have to be sensitive to the background and nature of the school's pupils and staff.
- In a religious and culturally diverse society, it is important to learn from each other and provide an inclusive experience of spiritual development.
- It is crucial to listen to the views of young people to understand their experiences and help them be active agents in their own, and others', spiritual development.

society. The question of faith schools further adds to the lack of clarity: many teachers feel uncomfortable talking about the contribution that might be made by a Christian or other distinctively religious school when many pupils are not from a religious background.

The Church of England, the main provider of state-funded faith schools in England, aims for its schools to offer an education that is 'deeply Christian' in the cause of 'serving the common good'. However, if this is to happen, more clarity is needed on how religious-ethos schools should approach spiritual development.

The Ten Leading Schools project seeks to contribute some helpful insights into this confused landscape, drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from 10 Christian-ethos secondary schools in England and Wales that have prioritised students' spiritual development.

Key findings

The student perspective on spiritual development

The research found that students' understanding of what it means to be spiritual fell into four distinct categories:

The development of self: Staff and students in all 10 schools stressed the importance of recognising young people as individuals who need support and encouragement to fulfil their potential. Key features of schools that contributed to this area of spiritual development included a pastoral care system rooted in a Christian context, a school culture of care and nurture, and the prioritising of hope and aspiration.

Community: Staff and students emphasised the importance of belonging to an inclusive and forgiving school community. Having a welcoming atmosphere was important, including little things such as saying hello in the corridor. The sense of community often extended beyond the immediate school and was expressed as a duty to care for others. Several schools root their Christian ethos in the concepts of hope and justice and actively raise awareness of social issues in the local community.

Deepening knowledge and understanding: Students wanted to understand more about the nature of spirituality and religion and articulate an informed, reasoned opinion on matters of faith. They value time to discuss, debate and ask questions; in many schools this is found in RE and in collective workshop programmes which aim to enhance questioning skills and encourage students to interrogate complex theological concepts.

Connection with God: Students spoke of spiritual development as being about developing a connection with God. In all 10 schools there were a variety of opportunities for regular collective worship, including assembly and form worship, to develop this connection and provide a safe space for faith conversations.

Thinking strategically and acting deliberately

Establishing an environment in which spiritual development can flourish depends on it being prioritised at all levels, including governance and management, rather than left to chance. All 10 schools in this study had thought strategically and acted deliberately to have a positive influence on students' development. For example:

Further information

This briefing is based on:

Casson, A., Cooling, T., and Francis, L.J. (2017) *Lessons in Spiritual Development: Learning from Leading Christian-ethos Secondary Schools*. London: Church House Publishing.

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- Offering opportunities for students to put beliefs into action, such as encouraging them to organise charity events or take part in community action projects.
- Providing space and time for staff and students to reflect on their behaviour and beliefs.
- Ensuring a holistic approach to spiritual development by not restricting it to any one part of the curriculum or time of the day, nor to the responsibility of just one individual.
- Understanding individual students' needs and existing experiences of faith, to ensure a more profound and relevant contribution to spiritual development can be made.

Conclusion

The stories of the 10 schools visited in this study demonstrate that Christian-ethos schools can successfully contribute to pupils' spiritual development. It is not a question of inflicting a particular religious viewpoint; rather, it is about offering an inclusive experience of spiritual development where everyone can flourish, regardless of religious belief. Across all 10 schools, there was a consistent emphasis on the importance of learning to live well together in the context of significant diversity in wider society. Although the study has focused on Christian-ethos schools, much of the practice that has been highlighted can be adapted by non-religious schools too.

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