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Preparing pupils for spirituality in religious education

Joanne Pearce

Institute of Education, London, United Kingdom

Background

I here defend a conception of spiritual education that is appropriate for the common school. I argue that spiritual education is twofold, including education about spirituality and preparation for spirituality. I contend that a comprehensive religious education should include spiritual education.

I show that we can, and must, reject the assertion that spirituality is beyond definition. I then embark on the task of defining spiritual education by considering Hand's "logical geographical analysis" (Hand, 2003: 396). Of Hand's four possible categories, a case is made for "education in a spiritual activity" (Hand, 2003: 397). This includes education in activities such as prayer, worship and meditation. This fits with common usage of the word spirituality, which for the most part would have spirituality as a dimension of religion. For some this is reason to reject spiritual education as inappropriate for the common school. It is argued that education in spiritual activities does not cohere with the obligation to be neutral in matters of religious truth; sincere participation requires commitment (Carr, 1995). Hand acknowledges that non-religious pupils cannot engage in sincere participation. However, they can "learn what these activities are all about, how they are conducted and why they are important to religious believers." (Hand, 2003: 398). They "can come to an empathetic understanding of ... religious feelings" (Hand, 2003: 399). It is entirely appropriate that such activities be included in religious education, in the common school, because they are an important aspect of religion.

Religious education should go further than teaching pupils about spirituality; it should include preparation for spirituality. In order to demonstrate this, it is necessary to clarify what I consider to be the primary aim of religious education. Following both Hand (2004) and Wright (1998), the main purpose of religious education is that of enabling pupils to critically engage with religious truth claims. The justification for this is that some of these claims may be true (Hand, 2004). If a pupil concludes that one of these claims is true then she is likely to want to participate in the spiritual activities that accompany it. If she is unable to do so then her religious education has been no more than an academic exercise. However, if her religious education prepares her to enter into such activities should she choose to do so, then she genuinely has the option of living according to what she believes to be true.

Research Questions

So, if religious education is to be more than an academic exercise, the incorporation of a secondary aim is necessary. This secondary aim is to enable pupils to engage in those religious activities which accompany truth claims, should they conclude that any of those claims are true. Spiritual education is a necessary, albeit secondary, aim of religious education.

As Hand points out, education about spirituality is already "an integral part of any adequate programme of religious education" (Hand, 2003: 400). However, this is not, as far as I am aware, the case with preparation for spirituality. I can say with certainty that neither aspect of spiritual education is given such prominence as to be considered a key aim of religious education.

Methods

Where education about spirituality is concerned, it is simply a case of emphasising its importance for religious education. But how do we prepare pupils for spirituality? We do so by enabling pupils to take seriously and develop their "inner lives". As Scheindlin has it:

[A] rich inner life is a prerequisite for spirituality. Spirituality entails reaching from inside to something transcendent. The inner life is, therefore, a necessary ... condition for spirituality.

(Scheindlin, 1999: 193)

It has, of course, been previously argued that religious education should provide opportunities for pupils to develop their inner lives. Hammond and Hay (1990) suggest that one way of providing such opportunities is to engage pupils in "stilling":

While stilling is an end in itself for some religious people, for others it is a preparation for worship and prayer. The ability to still, focus or centre ourselves needs careful attention... It is through the raising of their own awareness that [pupils] have an opportunity to understand religious practices.

(Hammond and Hay et al., 1990: 72)

Research findings

Activities like stilling would both educate pupils about and prepare them for spirituality. At the same time, asking pupils to engage in such activities is not the same as asking them to engage in spiritual activities. Therefore, by focusing on inner life development, religious education can remain neutral in matters of truth at the same time as enabling pupils to engage in spiritual practice should they choose to do so. The argument I offer is that opportunities for inner life development should be given their rightful place as part of a secondary but essential aim of religious education.

References

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