

Soul Searching

at Park Street Church of England Primary School, 2012-13.



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For the Church Schools of Cambridge

*The spiritual draws attention to
what is invisible - but not illusory,
to what is powerful - but not explicable,
and what is non-rational - but not meaningless.*¹

With thanks to
all the staff, pupils, governors, clergy and parents
who helped to confirm
the reality, power and meaning of spirituality
at Park Street School

**Cover Image: Anneke Kaai, Psalm 13 from Seeing in a New Song: The Psalms Collection
2008 Piquant Editions**

¹ D Webster (1990) In Francis and Thatcher (eds), Christian Perspectives on Education, Gracewing

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Soul Searching: **The Background**

This project is a direct response to recommendations arising from the evaluation of a previous CSOC project, Chosen Vessels' which had identified 4 priorities for further investigation and support

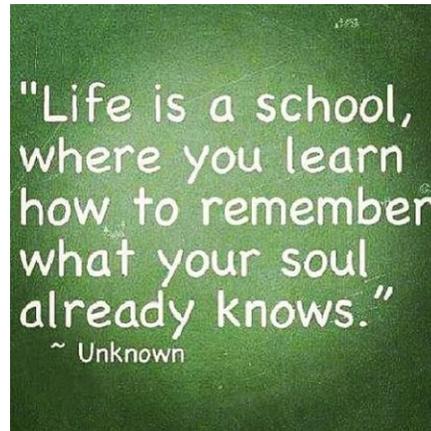
1. *To listen carefully to **children's perspectives** on spiritual issues*
2. *To address and try to understand more about pupil **negativity** towards **RE & Christian** based school activities*
3. *To provide opportunities to **involve teachers and develop teacher's thinking and practice** about pupil's spirituality, and where religious language fits into that*
4. *To recognise and affirm the **distinctive spiritual character of a school** : to discover more about 'its soul'*

To make lasting impact on current and future *pupils, teachers* and the spiritual ethos of the *schools*, a 3 year, multi-school research and development programme was proposed, from autumn 2012. CSOC funding for an initial year was granted, to support Rebecca Nye's work 1.5 days per week.

This report focuses on this initial **1 year project** to investigate in depth how spirituality was thriving in just one school: Park Street Church of England Primary School. This approach meant this year could make a dual contribution

- *Offer* a sensitive and beneficial process of awareness raising about spirituality for this school, and
- *Gain* insights to shape the development of subsequent stages of the programme in other schools, and ways the CSOC can support them.

Soul Searching: **The Rationale**



In a **broad** sense, 'the spiritual' dimension is fundamental to school education.

- Spiritual sensitivity is part of the raw material and resources pupils bring to their education. There is a good body of modern research evidence that children have considerable natural spiritual capacities.
- Being human presents everyone, children and adults, with existential or spiritual questions, whether or not they are conscious, spoken or rejected.
- Promoting spiritual development is embedded in the Education Acts and other policy documents as a statutory element of what education entails.
- Spiritual aspects of education are subject to inspection.
- Spirituality is meant to be particularly salient in RE frameworks and curricula, but its potential is intended to be supported in all school subjects and activities.
- In the current educational climate, attention to education's spiritual dimension may have a counterbalancing role for school wellbeing. As the focus on school and pupil 'performance' increases, affirming the ways in which education is also about matters of deeper significance, meaningfulness and our connection with the world and each other – a spiritual perspective - seems increasingly vital, as well as increasingly difficult.
- Spirituality references concepts and experiences that require discussion and interpretation rather than definition. Schools may lack the language, time or confidence to discover a meaningful understanding of spirituality's wide parameters for their context.

So, spirituality is...	Yet, spirituality...
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<p>✓</p> <p>at the heart of our idea of what education is</p> <p>meant to be present in all areas of the curriculum, inspection and have special significance in RE</p> <p>an essential part of life for teachers, schools and children.</p> <p>a matter requiring open discussion and room for manoeuvre</p>	<p>✗</p> <p>takes effort to ensure it does not get lost, marginalised or forgotten</p> <p>can be very hard to see, touch or speak about.</p> <p>receives very little, if any, attention in teacher training.</p> <p>may come with 'un-inspected baggage' associated with personal and cultural attitudes to religion.</p>
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The project's broad rationale was therefore that this topic represents an area of significant need for schools, especially for Church schools, and the project would help to address:

- *What added implications does the spiritual dimension of education have for Church schools?*
- *How is spirituality manifest in the lived school experience of Church school pupils?*
- *How do staff at Church schools approach this area, making sense both of their own position about a spiritual dimension to life and in relation to their professional practice as educators of it?*

A more **specific** rationale was responds to needs in the local context of Cambridge Church schools.

Evaluation of the Chosen Vessels project (2011-12) picked up a tendency for schools to subsume spirituality under 'self expression' in an otherwise excellent creative arts project. RE was much less likely than art to be perceived or used as a significant means of spiritual engagement by pupils or staff. Even though the standard of RE and collective worship in these schools was judged to be very high, there was initial evidence that pupils were disaffected with RE's capacity to engage with spiritual matters.

This needed further investigation to provide for better support for pupils and staff by undertaking to

- examine this possible disaffection in closer detail, and to understand why pupils may feel unhappy with RE and other things they associate with it, including their Church link and collective worship
- give time and space to hearing more from pupils and their authentic spiritual voice,
- provide at least one school with opportunities for consultancy to become clearer about how and where spirituality does thrive, or might thrive even more, in their school life including through their RE.

Soul Searching: **Objectives**

The design and style of this project was shaped by 4 objectives

- to collect evidence to promote better understanding of what pupils' spirituality is like at one Church school, why it matters and how to help this to flourish
- to provide the target school with direct evidence of spirituality in their school, and show how this can be used to articulate and plan for spiritual aspects of education
- to give value and voice to pupil's own spirituality, to learn specifically from children's views about how this relates to RE and other religious activities in a Church school
- to establish good relationships for further work with teaching staff in a sensitive area; to inspire long term professional interest & expertise in how Church school teachers can provide conditions that 'promote spiritual development', especially through RE

Soul Searching: **Setting up**

Spiritual development is an ambiguous and potentially sensitive area for staff, pupils and parents at Church schools. This meant it was essential to set up this project carefully.

It was emphasised that this would be a **negotiated, and open-ended process to develop dialogue and understanding**. It took effort to explain how this project differed from other projects the school has undertaken. This project was *not* about 'using' of the pupils for research purposes, and was *not* about introducing a new teaching practice, resource or policy. Rather it was the opportunity for extended conversation, observation and reflection that would include pupils, staff and the whole culture of the school.

Teacher Engagement

Though much of the work would be with the pupils, it was vital to engage the staff too. Building and maintaining good relationships was a priority at all times.

Every visit was made with prior permission ensuring it was convenient to the school, and children came out of lessons only when convenient to the specific teacher and pupils.

Once the assent of the headteacher was given, I met with the teachers at a staff meeting at the beginning of the school year to introduce myself and the project. This also provided an informal baseline of their interest & awareness of spirituality.

First impressions from staff meeting –

- a high level of interest in what children's spirituality might be about
- open and positive, rather than dubious or reluctant/hostile
- a consensus that 'their children' would have plenty of this and have lots to say
- a consensus that 'their children' would enjoy opportunities to explore this in special groups
- admissions of professional uncertainty, 'not sure what this means for my work?'
- one teacher needed reassurance that spirituality would not be limited to religious/Christian interpretations of that

These initial reactions confirmed that there was a significant opportunity at Park Street to build on the instinctively positive staff viewpoint of spirituality in a Church school context. It also indicated potential for this project to contribute to staff development as well as benefit the children.

Parent and Pupil Consent

Teachers' early involvement included canvassing their views how to explain this project to parents. All parents of children in Y1-6 were provided with a letter about the school's involvement in the project. (Reception children were not invited as they were still so new and part time). Parents were invited to give permission for their children to participate in the focus groups.

46 letters were returned, 45 of which gave consent.

In addition, pupils were always given the choice to participate or not. No pupil ever declined, though many complained I didn't come often enough!

Steering Group

A CSOC steering group, chaired by Catherine Nancekeivill, met at least once a term.

Soul Searching: **Tasks the project engaged in**

This project engaged in 10 different tasks. Attending to pupil, teacher, governor, and clergy points of view this helped to build up a rich picture of Park Street's approach to promoting spiritual development from as many angles as possible.

1. **Pupil focus groups** from each class (age 5-11), recorded conversations held in quiet library space, resulting in many meetings with each group.
2. **Observation of whole class of RE** (classes 1, 2 & 4) and a class RE trip (class 3)
3. **Leading whole class sessions of RE using Godly Play** with classes 1 and 4, and follow up discussion with teachers.
4. Facilitated a '**focus on spirituality**' at **3 staff meetings** – twice using Godly Play
5. **Introduced 'prompt' materials** to stimulate staff awareness and discussion in the staffroom
6. **Informal discussions** (many!) with head teacher, teachers, TAs and admin staff
7. **Delivered formal INSET workshop** on spiritual development (offered to all CSOC schools)
8. **Analysis of some school documents** eg newsletters, website, noticeboards, inspection reports to see how spiritual aspect is engaged with and communicated to parents etc.
9. **Clergy Interview** with incumbent and associate from GSM the school's link Church.
10. Facilitated **Foundation Governor's session** (90 mins) about spirituality in their school

Soul Searching: Highlights and Challenges in the Findings

- Soul of the school: a consistent and deep spirituality of caring relationships
- Masterclass standard examples of spiritually sensitive RE, yet teachers were not always conscious of what contributed their own good practice
- Abundant ordinary spirituality amongst the children; huge eagerness to share and to be heard
- Willingness of GSM and Foundation Governors to support spiritual aspects of school life, but lack of clarity about how to do that.
- Raising awareness of spirituality in a Church school thrived on having an extended period of focus. Over a whole the year, staff became increasingly open and able to explore this: (e.g. in comparison to schools that were provided with 'one off' INSETs)
- More 'direct' and word-based emphasis (written or oral) was difficult for both staff and pupil engagement with spirituality. But more indirect means, including demonstrations (e.g. Godly Play), images and symbolic thinking, reflection time, and practical examples (e.g. evaluation of RE trips) were invaluable media through which to find shared language and experience of how spirituality is manifest in their school life.
- Time issues were very important. There is understandable reluctance (amongst teachers) to give time to something like this which does not directly produce an outcome, a plan etc. But, when provided with time for this, a key teacher insight was how much they relished having time for reflection/spiritual space to be rather than 'do'. It is hard to justify taking time for spiritual reflection amongst staff, but proved very valuable to give time to them for this.
- Having a designated person present to identifying and raising awareness of spirituality in the school seems to make a difference. Written prompts did not work or entailed too much extra effort for staff. The value in a 'second pair of eyes' was clear, and suggests a potential role to develop for clergy and/or foundation governors.
- The key role of the headteacher in shaping the whole school approach to spirituality was confirmed. Her style is person-centred, open, intuitive, mindful that education is about 'more than this (curriculum, results, performance management etc)' and one of ongoing spiritual questing rather than authoritative certainty. This offers a particular kind of inclusive 'spiritual leadership' to pupils and staff that fits well with both its diverse community and its link with GSM. A 'good fit' is likely to be very important for spirituality to thrive at all levels: pupils, staff and whole school ethos.
- Gathering a variety of pupil opinion about RE, Collective worship and the link with GSM was illuminating. There is more negativity, confusion and indifference than teachers and clergy seem to be aware of. The spiritual potential of religion (and being in Church

school life generally) seems both a challenge and an opportunity – since children may be taking their experiences of this more ‘to heart’ than other subjects or activities.

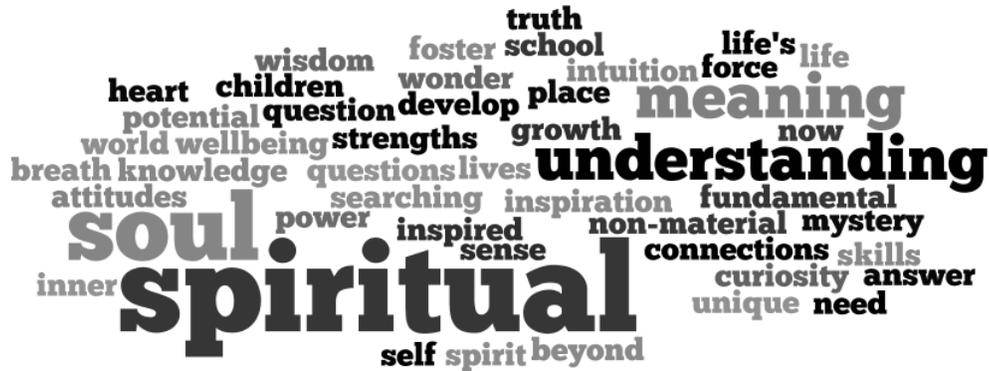
Priorities for next stage of this project (2013-4) are therefore

- To bring together a focus on markers of spiritually sensitive RE teaching and pupil’s views of their RE experience
- To investigate approaches to support clergy understanding of spirituality in school, and ways in which that role might be offered.
- Opportunities for other schools to have some of this experience – both to learn from their pupils, and to give time and tools for teacher spiritual awareness to be nourished.

Soul Searching Findings: Whole School Spirituality

This 'Soul Searching' project has involved looking deeper into aspects of school life than is normally possible, over a whole school year.

The key focus has been on the 'spiritual' aspects of education². These are aspects that are hard to pin down precisely, and which different people and different traditions interpret in their own ways.

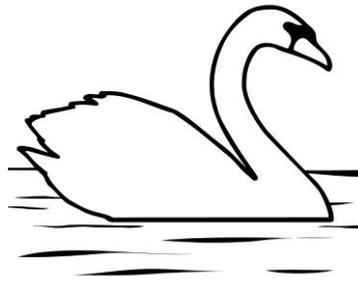


In many religious traditions, 'spirit' is associated with wind - something dynamic and on the move, or with breath - something essential to being alive, that literally and metaphorically 'inspires' what we do, yet something very hard to see directly.

However, schools have so much to pay attention to, especially to the things which can 'be seen' like test results, OFSTED reports, attendance figures, etc, so it could be easy for spiritual elements not just to go unnoticed, but to become devalued, never discussed and even atrophy.

² 'Pupils' spiritual development involves the growth of their sense of self, their unique potential, their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and their will to achieve. As their curiosity about themselves and their place in the world increases, they try to answer for themselves some of life's fundamental questions. They develop the knowledge, skills, understanding, qualities and attitudes they need to foster their own inner lives and non-material wellbeing'. Dept for Education <http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/a00199700/spiritual-and-moral>

Despite these challenges, at *Park Street* spiritual aspects of education thrive. It is in the air the pupils and teachers breathe and in the dynamics of lessons, routines and community. Looking hard for thing kind of thing inevitably finds some areas stronger than others, and details about can be found in the later subsections on the pupils' experiences, the teachers' perspectives, the special ways that RE contributes, and the support of the school's link with Great St Mary's and the foundation governors. But what is given here is the 'big picture', i.e. an impression of the soul of Park Street School as a whole, and to celebrate how the soul of the school *is* greater than the sum of its parts!



Park Street's logo is a black and white image of a single swan, swimming *serenely* and *alone* across gently rippling water. Yet, whenever I enquired, neither pupils nor teacher seemed sure of any meaning this might have, or have had for the school. Crucially, it seems almost the opposite key elements of Park Street's Soul!

What comes across really strongly at Park Street a **spirituality of care and personal relating**. There is an overriding concern for building, repairing and maintaining good relationships in the school. The school has a 'person shaped' soul, or rather shaped like the *connection between people!*

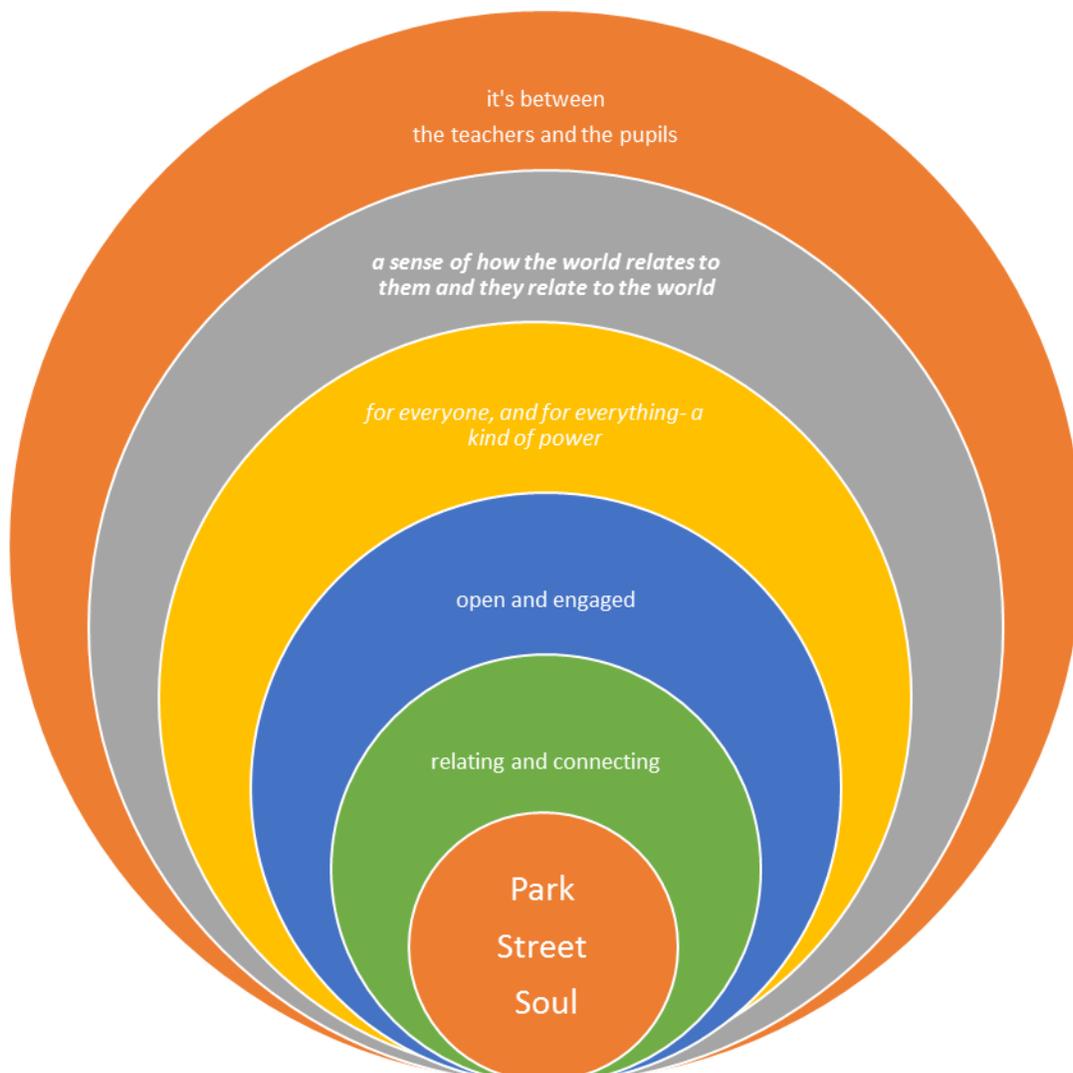
All schools place a certain emphasis on care and relationships, but at Park Street this 'people first' mindset is so deeply embedded, so natural. It has become a guiding principle that almost nothing is allowed to penetrate – as if to do so, it would be 'sacrilege'. In traditional Christian terms, this³ could be called the schools 'rule of life' and where its 'spiritual practices' are most clearly expressed.

Park Street's emphasis on spirituality as caring and interpersonal spirituality is illustrated in the *diagram below using key comments* made by pupils, teachers, governors and clergy about the school. This also suggests the school has a profoundly Christian 'soul' – where its spirituality is driven by living human encounters rather than dominated by rules, doctrines, ritual actions.

For example

³ The special term 'Koinonia' perhaps close this in the Christian tradition. It be about community life where the joys and sufferings of others are really shared, and about having a strong sense of inter-dependence. However at Park Street the emphasis on the 'community' especially emerges from a care for its individuals.

- INSET workshop comments made about 'why we teach RE', at Park Street more emphasis is placed on the potential for RE to contribute to 'relational' parts of pupil's development. In particular, this was more about relating to who the pupils are at the moment, and not just long term goals and ideals set by adults (e.g. more knowledgeable, more tolerance).
- Foundation governors indicated that although 'spiritual development' involved lots of different modes of engagement (searching, discovering, reflecting, believing, questioning, etc), the most fundamental of these for Park Street was 'relating and connecting'
- GSM clergy defined the 'spiritual leadership' style of the head-teacher in terms of her abilities to relate and care, being 'open and engaged' around all the issues and people involved
- Some pupils have a vision of the 'spiritual' as something that should accommodate 'everyone and everything', and other pupils said they found God in love and kindness, which at school meant 'between the pupils and the teachers'



Signals of something bigger – thresholds to ‘something more’

In the course of the project, this was evident in countless other ways. Many of these were ‘almost invisible’ examples, an apparently small thing or incident. However, they silently point to the school’s understanding of much bigger concerns, its sense of ‘something more’, of what ‘really matters’, i.e. to a potentially spiritual level of expression.

For example, the school’s ‘spirituality of care and personal relating’ is present in its expression of **welcome & hospitality**.

- Even though the school has to carefully guard its physical security, the way visitors are *personally* welcomed give a strong signal about the warmth and value of feeling cared for in this community.
- Events to ‘welcome new families’ at the start of the year also express this spirit of care and relating – and that the business of this school is about ‘more than’ the obvious tasks of teaching and learning. The school has a focus that makes it hard to feel ‘like a stranger’. This seems profoundly important to its often transient pupils and parents as well as the more permanent parts of the community.
- Similarly, the headteacher commented that the school does feel strange, even scary, to her at the start of the new school year, until the pupils start coming in. When the staff-pupil, and pupil-pupil relationships take shape, the school (and the head!) starts to really ‘breathe’.
- In addition, Park Street enjoys a natural homeliness thanks to the small numbers of pupils and staff, its lack of uniform, its cosy footprint etc. These features help to keep ‘the institution’ of school at a discrete distance – foregrounding people. This means the focus in the ‘soul’ of the school feels a good fit with its natural features, rather than trying to work against them.

Challenges and Tensions

Being ‘proud’ of your soul is perhaps not quite right, but Park Street has a lot to be thankful for. Spirituality is such a natural and integrated part of its school life. But there are challenges too.

For pupils, this challenge shows up in RE and collective worship. This may be about the tension between the specially personal way spirituality is generally cared for, and the ‘stress’ created when it feels as if this is neglected in favour of other priorities in these particular areas.

- For example, if it feels to them that RE is really more about how well they can write or knowing mostly about what others do and believe.
- Or when collective worship’s potential to express their collective sense of relationship, awe, wonder, gratitude, compassion, solidarity etc, is crowded out by louder distractions of the social context and how differently people ‘relate’ during assembly– who gets to have a turn, who has privileges, ‘having to behave’, and tokenistic opportunities to express their views.

For staff, the challenge seems to be in a kind of unacknowledged ‘role tension’. Staff are caught between a deep down ‘knowing’ and way of being a teacher and serving pupil’s best

interests, and some of the values and pressures of the prevailing culture. As more attention and energy is spent on tasks to do with measuring pupils, judging them or having your own performance judged, the less provision there is for investing trust and time (the prerequisites of caring and relating). In the course of 'soul searching', many staff realized not only some tension between these, but more worryingly, that they didn't usually even have time or opportunities to notice. There is a strong case for having times and processes to help *teachers* to reflect on the big picture too. The fact that *this* school year began with an hour 'just for this' on the staff training day before the pupils returned showed a real step forward.

Finally, the school's link with parents and with the Great St Mary's community, is another kind of communication challenge for Park Street's 'Soul'. A significant way the school communicates with parents is through its newsletter. Already this often addresses far more than just 'factual' news and reminders, but gently notes how a particular event or moment has been 'special'. This could be tweaked just a little to more intentionally call attention to the different ways the school engages with pupil's capacity to take a 'this is also about something bigger/deeper' (i.e. spiritual) perspective to life. (The 'Christian values in schools' might be a useful checklist). Such news items could then also be shared in Great St Mary's newsletters too.

The remainder of this report gives separate accounts of how spiritual development and spirituality was searched for (and found!) in Park Street this year.

- In Pupil Voice and Views – including their feelings about RE
- In observations of RE across the school
- In approaches to staff training and engagement
- In the wider support received in this area by the school (through GSM and Foundation Governors)

Soul Searching Findings: Pupil Spiritual Voice

Small groups (2-6 children) from each class met with Rebecca repeatedly through the year for about 25 minutes. Our recorded conversations were held in quiet(ish) library space.

In the first term, the focus on pupil spirituality was deliberately open and general, gleaning insight about their natural spiritual concerns and capacity.

In the second term, there was a more specific focus on these children's experience of RE and other school religious activity, and how that supported their spiritual development.

Each session had a planned focus (see below), but this was just a stimulus to open an area of conversation and see where they led it.

In each session, there was no agenda to teach them something, and no way of being 'right or wrong'. Not surprisingly,

- pupils found this refreshingly different from lessons, and became very eager to come!
- pupils said they especially enjoyed being in a small group and being listened to rather than 'taught'/told things.
- being recorded added to pupils' sense that their views mattered.
- it was easy for them to 'open up'. Although this was an unusual meeting, pupils at Park Street clearly already feel the school is a safe place to bring up all kinds of issues and a place where adults do take these kinds of thoughts and feelings seriously.
- but quite a few said that it felt there was too little adult time /priority for this kind of open discussion and attention, and they urged me to come much more often. (Compared with other/larger schools, it is likely that Park Street children already get more individual /small group attention than average – but not of this kind perhaps). So, whilst these children are fortunate, they still experience this is lacking in their school life.

<u>Session Focus</u>	<u>Key activity/process</u>	<u>Main findings/observations</u>
WHO AM I, WHAT MAKES ME JOYFUL OR FULL OF LIFE	<i>Pupils invited to talk and draw pictures about themselves and their favourite pastimes/play experiences</i>	<p>Once children were drawing, spiritual themes and ideas (see below) started to flow more freely.</p> <p>Creative activity opens spiritual kinds of processing for children, working just in words can inhibit it.</p>
BELONGING AND FEELING PART OF A COMMUNITY	<i>Pupils invited to talk and play with groups of wooden 'people' figures</i>	Play with physical objects, even for the oldest, opened and supported their thought processes. Play helped them to explore some 'dark' corners – leaving one figure out, ridiculing a figure because it looked different, not being treated as an individual.
TIMES AND PLACES TO REFLECT	<i>Pupils shown photos of individual (unknown) children looking 'reflective' in different contexts – and invited to suggest what the child might be thinking or feeling/identify with the child in the photo.</i>	<p>Many children interpreted being alone/reflective/still as negative – lacking friends or unhappy.</p> <p>Most thought they rarely had a time or place to 'stop and think'. They felt school wasn't a natural place for that.</p>
CREATIVE STORYTELLING/WINDOW ON SALIENT ISSUES IN THEIR IMAGINATION	<i>Pupils invited to tell a made up story to the group loosely based on a picture they'd chosen from a large selection</i>	<p>Their concentration, energy and length of their storytelling (and listening) was remarkable.</p> <p>Oral storytelling offers them a much richer level of (spiritual) expression and exploration than writing can at this age.</p>
WHAT I LIKE DOING IN SCHOOL (RE ETC?)	<i>Pupils chose their 3 favourite times/lessons at school and their 3 least liked times/lessons. Discussion about their choices followed, and about specific RE experiences such as recent topics, school trips etc.</i>	<p>NB : See full analysis later.</p> <p>Overall confirmed earlier findings at other CSOC schools – RE tends to be disliked (older) or is unnoticed (younger)</p> <p>-the style and 'feel' of RE, assembly and Church visits can overshadow engagement with their content.</p>
GODLY PLAY SESSIONS	<i>Pupils participated in 'the parable of the pearl of great price' – including questions about what they felt about this approach</i>	<p>-Thoroughly entered into by each age group,</p> <p>-reached new levels of insight and focussed collaborative discussion of spiritual issues</p> <p>- made combined use of creativity, play and</p>

		<p>pupil voice</p> <p>- not perceived as 'RE' (!?)</p>
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In these focus group sessions, it was stunning how naturally pupils introduced a variety of further spiritual themes, issues or ways of knowing. It was like lighting a touch-paper.

From the pupil focus sessions, the following themes surfaced spontaneously, and were rarely the same as a planned focus of the session.

Pupils' own Spiritual Themes and Issues

- *Facing fears*
- *Evil/dark/chaotic forces*
- *Sources of comfort and security and 'good' forces and power*
- *Being known/being lost or forgotten*
- *Feeling significantly connected to others*
- *The mystery being a child: awareness of change who I 'was'/'am'/'will be'*
- *The mystery of death and dying*
- *Unusual/unconventional ways of knowing – dreams, insights, premonitions, 'feeling in my bones', empathic understanding,*
- *Explorations of what might be 'real' and 'true', and a sense of 'knowing/feeling' that is valid and powerful to them (but perhaps not to the rest of the world)*
- *Love and loss*
- *Material wealth versus 'spiritual' wealth – being happy or honest*
- *Making personal sacrifices*
- *The mystery of creation and 'before time'*

What does this tell us about pupil spirituality at Park Street?

Pupils at Park Street have rich, natural spiritual inclinations.

Pupils readily muse on a very wide range of themes, whilst expressed in ordinary child-like ways.

The conversations in which these themes arose most easily were relaxed, often lively, exploratory rather than 'heavy', intellectual or explanatory .

Asking pupils directly about these themes is much harder. They bring a different energy and engagement to their reflections when it comes more naturally from them rather than 'fished out'.

Pupils thrived on having permission to use 'other kinds' of thought – e.g imagination, intuition & wisdom drawn from personal experience – which are probably more natural to children than logical and rational ways of thinking.

Pupils mostly did not stop to talk 'about' this or that theme for long – but opportunities to these ideas and feelings might be developed. Recognising and valuing the spiritual hinterland these come from is a strong affirmation in itself.

Sometimes the 'raw material' can mask the profundity of the spiritual theme to which it might relate – for example, a child 'just drawing' a scary dragon, or puzzling about something that is 'just in a dream'.

Spiritual elements often crop up between the lines: in their stories, anecdotes, recollections, choices of image to draw/or an aside while drawing something else.

Noticing these themes required very deliberate adult attention at the time and reflection afterwards. This is necessarily difficult when the teacher's focus is on so many other things about the children (spelling, behaviour, understanding etc.).

Overall, it is exciting to report how much treasure is buried just below the surface here. This confirmed the confidence teachers at Park Street had in their pupils from the outset : that their pupils would be 'full' rather than empty – even if they hadn't been sure of what forms it would take.

This evidence should encourage teacher confidence and respect for pupil's complex inner lives, and their appreciation that children's strong feelings and big questions are more than emotional or intellectual issues – but may have deeper roots in the child's developing spiritual worldview.

Examples of how spiritual issues were present 'between the lines'...

Fear, Power and Powerlessness

A boy recalled being new at school and getting lost - even though this was quickly resolved and in the past, it has remained a vivid benchmark experience for him of being totally out of one's depth and at risk of going right under - feeling 'that's it..this is the end...!', insight about the edges of existence

Some girls spoke about their fears for the future -what does it mean when things change, what is permanent? Having heard about bullying in the next school, fears about family member illness or family stability. Sometimes these were about their own lives, sometimes framed more hypothetically/fancifully - e.g. 'like in Victorian times, your parents might die and you'd just be left as an orphan at some hospital...that wouldn't really happen now..*could it?*'

Death - In free-rein imaginative play or storytelling, death featured in nearly every conversation. This suggests it's a salient, potent theme that fascinates and concerns pupils.

One group (Y1 - the youngest) after death came up again in a story they'd made up, specifically asked me 'can we *really* talk about dying next time, please please!!' After a break of some week over Christmas, they still excitedly remembered their plan to 'really talk' about death - and did. They developed elaborate and very original ideas about heaven too.

Feeling connected: Came up through mentions of privileged relationships: where you feel really known and really know the other person. Sometimes mentioned in contrast to feeling misunderstood/treated as just another one of a group/class or left out. Being alone (unless through choice), even for a short time, was perceived very negatively - a deep crisis.

Truth/Real/Special ways of 'knowing': Children used what they called dreams to explain or explore tricky to 'explain' ideas and experiences. These were probably not dreams they'd actually had -but calling something a dream gave them permission to bracket off the usual rules about reality and rational thought and share something that mattered to them, something that *feels* real.

e.g. two (Y1) boys who feel a very close bond sought to 'prove' how real this feels by explaining that they even share the same dreams, and then collaboratively corroborated their recent dream experiences at length!

e.g. a boy (y5) referred to hearing a 'mirage of voices' when he spends time alone which he found unsettling, but it stimulates his curiosity about whether there *is* more to the conventions about what's real and what's not.

e.g. children spoke about having a sense of special/secret knowing (about things which adults didn't know, or that adults wouldn't know the children knew) Knowing through intuition or through your body is valued by children and can feel especially 'true'. (NB a lot of 'schoolwork' inadvertently sends children the message that only rational knowing is valid)

Soul Searching: Pupils' Views of RE, the school Church (Great St Mary's) and Collective Worship

Through the range of activities and conversations covered in the focus groups (discussed above), Park Street pupils readily experience and have an urge to think about spiritual issues which are the basis of themes and experiences in religious stories, beliefs and practices.

Therefore, in theory, pupils might be expected to really enjoy RE and the wider range of religious foci that a Church school offers.

However, in practice, this connection between children's own experience of existential issues and religious material seems to be very hard to promote, as this section now describes.

When asked in free recall 'what do you do at school?', RE was mentioned by only 1 child (Y5). Some in KS2 commented that they didn't know what 'RE' stands for. Most KS1 children are not aware of its name.

'RE? I don't know what that means'

'I think we do it on the computers sometimes. I think we go into RE on the laptops.'

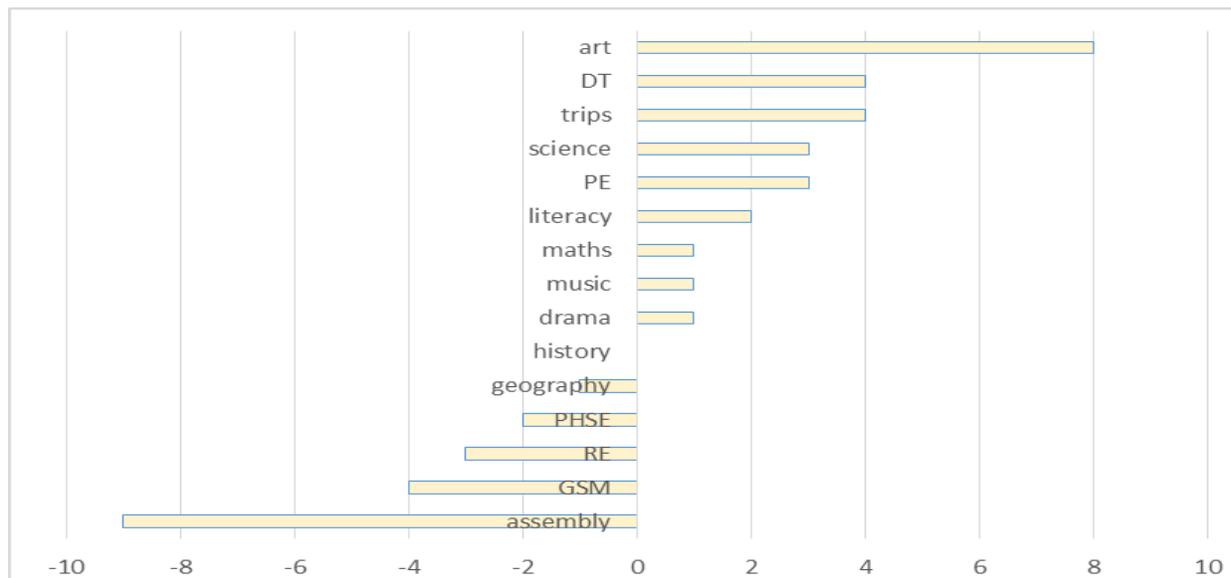
So, children in the focus groups were shown words and pictures representing their school subjects and other regular activities, like lunchtime, register time, assembly, school trips etc. After we'd talked through the words and pictures (to be certain they knew what each card referred to), they chose their 3 favourites and their 3 worst.

- RE is a 'worst' for half of KS2 pupils in the focus groups. RE was never in the top 3 favourites for KS2 or KS1 pupils.
- Visits to GSM Church were a 'worst' for more than a third of pupils in the focus groups, but a couple chose this for one of their top 3.
- Over half of pupils chose 'Assembly' as a worst part of school life. It was not in the favourites choices for anyone.

Giving each pupil's 'favourites' choices a score of 1, and each pupil's 'worsts' choices a score of -1, the diagram shows the combined overall positive/negative attitudes to all their choices.

Art is strongly liked, with an overall rating of +8, and Assembly is strongly disliked with an overall score of -9. GSM church visits and RE are also negatively viewed overall.

Least Liked and Most Favoured things at school



This is clearly a depressing picture. But needs to be interpreted cautiously.

It does not reflect view of all the pupils, just those in the focus groups.

It does not mean that there may be some difficulty with this area for pupils at Park Street school in particular – there was exactly the same trend at other CSOC schools last year.

It does not mean that RE, visits to GSM or assemblies are sub-standard. On the contrary, discussed in other parts of this report, **all the teacher-led RE observed at Park Street was excellent** and pupil satisfaction during the lessons seemed high.

Pupils were generally very positive about their school life overall, taking delight in discussing their favourites much more than they were miserable about the negatives. i.e. any negativity here is just a relative effect.

Pupils may not have a clear enough 'category' in their minds when referring to RE or to assembly. They may have associated 'RE' with just *some* of the work that involves, and their view of 'assembly' will include more than the collective worship elements of that.

But, it does set out how much more difficult it may be to teach RE and lead other activities perceived as religious.

Children's comments about RE, visits to GSM and assemblies help to unpack these their views further.

Pupil Comments about RE:

There were some positive views:

'I like the symbols because you have to take really careful sense of them' (Y2)

'I liked it when we made a Bible' (Y2)

They recalled warmly specific roles they'd played in the Nativity, *'it's quite special because it only happens once a year'*, but they were sad that it was something you 'give up' by KS2.

'[A good RE time was] when I was learning about Christianity and Jesus' last supper and we had a 'replay' and had to hand out bread and grape juice, and it was really good and fun.'(Y6)

'We read the story but he has stuff to act it out, it makes it real – well, they are not real stories....well some people believe them...but they make you think.'

But many gave their reasons for disliking RE, especially in KS2 once there was a clearer 'category' of RE.

STYLE OF STORIES

[Are there ever stories in RE?] : *'NO, well yes, but they are really boring'. 'I only like stories when there are pictures to see' (Y4)*

INACTIVITY/ADULT TALK

[about an RE trip to a synagogue] *'we looked at the Torah that was interesting but ...it would have been fun if they'd given us activities to do, or walked around, but we just sat in one room and she talked to us...no, talked AT us' .. 'at the beginning we asked questions but then she stopped answering after a while...in our RE lesson we learnt about a Rabbi's day and we wrote down 3 questions to ask them on the visit but we didn't even get to do that. (Y5 & Y6)*

'Shed for Lent was different cos there were activities and stuff you actually do, cos usually Jesus and activities don't go together' (Y3)

DISABLED by WORDINESS and WRITING

'Sometimes I like it and sometimes I don't, mostly I don't. Cos they kind of teach it in a boring way, and you get talked at instead of doing anything...if I designed it there would not be so much writing, because we constantly write pages and pages..we should do a play or something sometimes. I mean a bit of writing is OK. (Y6)

'in normal RE you just get told, its loads of videos and you have to write down lots of stuff and do RE quizzes'. I like this more (Godly Play) cos you have characters and no writing and move them about. It makes you think more, because when you try to think in a normal lesson you daydream, but in this it was fun and you concentrate'

LIMITED CHANCES for PUPIL EXPRESSION

A number mentioned the difficulty of getting a turn to be heard in whole class RE (and in whole school GSM visits & assemblies). They feel it's something they have natural views and questions about, (as the themes in the focus group confirms) but lack what they want in terms of time and space to express those sometimes.

Reasons for disliking RE continued...

FEELING INVISIBLE

Some felt their religious identity was unaddressed by RE

'But I am a religion that one actually ever knows, catholic, but no one ever actually talks about catholic' (Y5) He became bothered by this, asking 'what country is 'catholic' from? I don't know much about it'. He sensed he couldn't ask about this in RE or at school in general: 'people are busy, I don't know if that would be a good idea' and rejected another pupil's suggestion to look in a book. He wouldn't ask his friends 'because they'd tell you to go away'. He decided his granny would know, but that she lived too far away to ask.

HISTORICALLY CONTROLLING & ABUSIVE

Negative attitudes to RE may be formed unintentionally in other activities. Y6 pupils recalled a history visit from which they had formed very negative impressions of religion and RE *'It was really, really scary*

*and the man was sexist and made us learn this psalm 21 or something, and recite a prayer and all the books of the Bible. He shouted at the girls saying we were idiots and worthless. He made (name)** cry, and picked on how we looked and how we were dressed'. Asked if the visitor had just been acting – they weren't sure. It didn't feel like history to them: this was an encounter with religion that had affected them in 2012.*

What does this tell us about Pupil Perspective on RE at Park Street?

- pupils think RE's 'stories' often don't feel like genuine stories to 'get into' – they seem flat, illustrated 'points', don't stimulate their imagination enough
- -pupils feel that teacher talk to dominate (even more than in other lessons)
- -pupil feel that (taxing) writing activities seems to dominate (even more than in other lessons)
- -pupil voice feels limited to them. They feel only some get heard: can end up privileging the articulate⁴ or loudest
- pupils feel it can be difficult to raise issues/questions of personal importance relating to their own religious identity
- pupils have a desire for opportunities to think things like this through actively, with personal involvement and imagination
- pupils sense that this can/should 'feel special', 'different' from other aspects of learning

This suggests **that pupils sometimes experience a mismatch between the promise of applying their spiritual capacity in RE and the reality of how limited that feels.**

Religious education presents material which can automatically stimulate their intuitive spiritual inclination and experience. It naturally wrestles with matters of 'ultimate concern' (Tillich), and therefore about things which children naturally (but often unconsciously) have a *strong* stake in. So, it is perhaps confusing and disappointing for them when it seems somewhat flattened, and their own part in this (voice/imagination etc.) feels limited – e.g. when every religious story turns out to be merely a disguise for making a 'point'.

When they are really young, children have particularly natural spiritual inclination (e.g. to wonder, to delight, to connect or see more in things, to know desolation and fear absence, to be present and in the 'now' etc.). But the more it becomes possible to shape and encourage

⁴⁴ Perhaps the comment attributed to St Francis '*Preach the gospel always, but use words only if you have too*' is about recognising that a lot of spiritual and religious ideas and feelings are rather clumsily expressed in words?

children's rational minds via cognitive and verbal skills, the greater their sense of frustration that this sophisticated other way of knowing and engaging is being sidelined, rendered redundant and without value. Some of the older pupils' negativity expressed here about RE's dry wordiness and cognitive load (so much writing), may be their way of complaining that it just feels wrong, or feels like a loss or a personal affront, to try to compartmentalize an evidently rich quality of thought and experience.

Working within the constraints of what amounts to an RE curriculum, in particular the volume of information primary aged pupils are required to study, it seems inevitable that depth will often be sacrificed for breadth. And it seems that, from the pupils' point of view, the RE attainment target of 'learning about' religion to tower over the RE attainment target of 'learning from' religion. What pupils may be trying to convey is their dismay that the 'deep' parts feel skated over as if they are shallow, and the invitation to engage 'personally' can feel hollow or tokenistic.

This suggests that one way to address negativity towards RE is to increase the focus on ways RE engages or invites spiritual response even further, especially with the older, more vulnerable, pupils. This would mean making the most of both the ways the content of RE resonates with profound issues of children's experience, and the ways RE teaching & learning methods can maximize pupil's spiritual potential – working to their strengths..

Again, it must be emphasized that RE lessons observed in Park Street included lots of excellent methods for supporting pupil expression, so this commentary refers to the inherent challenge of *RE in general* for children and their spiritual development – and does not imply criticism of the excellent lessons and teachers, and later parts of this report makes clear.

Soul Searching: Pupil Views about visits to GSM Church

Why do you think you go to GSM church with your school?

'because John and Annabel can't come here that week' (Y2)

'I like that...it's a special church, you have to sit at the front. It makes me feel good' (Y2)

'Churches are really really boring, just bricks and Jesus things, boring, so boring, lots of Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. Jesus things and statues of Jesus' So boring. I don't like church really, so much just sitting' (Y4)

'Going to GSM' was not a favoured activity for more than a couple of children, and for many it was chosen as something they actively disliked.

In the focus groups, most children were rather confused and often unaware that their school had a special relationship with GSM Church. They knew that they went there, but had little understanding about why that might be. For a few, finding out they were 'a church school' was horrifying. For most it was just a bit of an enigma – or just a word that goes with 'school'.

Positive aspects of their experiences at GSM Church included

'it's where we go to celebrate' (y2),

'the singing'

seeing the parents in the street on the way there

'I like the building – it's a cross',

getting to hold things up,

getting chocolate coins or eggs,

getting to use the microphone,

sitting at the front

'John is really nice and talks to us' (y6)

But it is noticeable that the most common positives had to do with very practical aspects of pupil's experience, rather than a more personal response to the content explored there or its unique spiritual atmosphere. It is seen as a place that nourishes the tummy (chocolate!) or the child's ego (getting chosen to use a microphone), rather than a place of reflection and spiritual nourishment? There was little sense of the school (and them personally) feeling part of a wider community through this link. However it is possible this is something they feel, but don't articulate. Either way, this suggests pupils might benefit if there was more intention and attention directed towards spiritual qualities and intrinsic rewards of their Church visits, and deliberately limited focus on the more extrinsic rewards which are so easily salient in the child's mind.

Negative views about GSM visits frequently referred to

'it feels boring',
'long prayers',
'they talk a lot about God',
'sitting still'.

- frustration that they keep getting the same 'lesson' there –the 'one' about Jesus,
- children felt embarrassed for the clergy (!) who seemed not to have been briefed about what the children have 'already covered'
-some strong feelings about being left out when there were opportunities to take part, it felt that others are always chosen *'only the little ones are chosen – it's like we are always last – so it can be a bit of a fail'.*

Many of these comments about Church visits echo the issues pupils felt about RE.

- too much based around words or *explaining* symbols, actions etc. into words
- adult dominated talk
- feeling passive not responsive
- feeling unaddressed in a personal way/excluded (ironically by attempts to counter passivity!)
- very limited opportunities for personal response/viewpoint
- a sense that this is still 'a lesson about God' rather than experiencing this as something else/more.

As with the RE lessons, the adult intentions and efforts never sets out to be 'wordy', to dominate communication or restrict the amount or quality of pupil personal involvement – quite the reverse! So, as with RE, their complaint seems to arise out of a mismatch between an intuitive understanding that this could/should be about a highly meaningful, personal, but significantly ineffable or at least symbolic kind of thought – and the salience of a few things which contradict that. It might help if adults really exaggerate, turn down the volume, on the things which create this discomfort (e.g any sense in which this is 'another lesson', about explanations, or a chance to perform/be noticed), and really 'turned up' the ways spirituality can be engaged through less-verbal forms of communication in a Church – e.g. sense of sanctuary or Sabbath, the experience of a journey or signals of belonging.

Soul Searching: Pupil Views about Assembly

Positive feelings about assembly included:

acting out of stories, and making them seem real

the intimacy of class assembly, and having a more comfortable space to be (carpet)

enjoying singing

special assemblies – mostly more secular ones mentioned (birthday assembly, science assembly)

feeling stimulated to really think

However very few children recalled the content or any response they'd had to a specific assembly or the assembly they had had that day or week.

One exception was a couple of Y5 children who spoke about their 'biggest questions' class assembly.

It made me think about this question: what happens when you are dead' because 'it splits into lots of different questions, like if you kill yourself to find the answer, you can't get at it that way, it's so hard it's like a big fight – not with knives but in your head – it's just such a big one'

This resonated with personal concerns of another boy in the focus group, and wondering if the risks he takes with his own life might be quasi-suicidal – that he sort of 'knows' something about this edge of living and dying⁵. This is a good example of the unseen processing and tangents that can be stimulated in children's minds when engaging with spiritual material. In applying this to themselves, children may end up in very different places from the planned/spoken agenda at the front. This suggests careful attention to the ways in which this is not 'like a lesson', and even in RE lessons, the material may bring up things that are quite outside the planned/spoken lesson. It makes sense therefore that children are saying here that it's important to 'feel safe/comfortable' as difficult stuff can come up.

⁵ He was not saying he 'felt suicidal', but letting us know that he sees himself as a 'risk-taker', and sometimes feels things that have happened in his life have brought him towards a sharp edge.

Negative views about assembly included

boring, slow, everything seeming 'long' (*'long story, long song, long prayers'*)

just sitting, doing nothing, just watching

too one way – e.g. listening but not being heard, feeling preached at, *'she prays, we just say Amen'*

too many words – some suggested small amounts of silence = space to be and think

feeling imposed on – with friends but not allowed to talk, told where and how to sit,

repetitive 'lesson'(same stories) – rather than something more than a lesson, or something new

conflicting messages – *'we are told it is meant to be relaxing, but 'yeah, right! ??!! Well, you relax but then, when you kind of start day dreaming, someone starts telling you off about it, to concentrate, concentrate. You are not allowed to talk, but loads of people do...you can't use it as a relaxing time cos you can't really relax in front of so many people, you can't really do anything in front of about 12 teachers either (Y5)* Also, a Y2 boy said he prays at home, church and school, but he felt school assembly is definitely the hardest place to pray.

A bit exclusive – only younger children chosen when volunteer interaction is offered, hard to see unless at the front, Y6 get 'privileges'

Critical of singing resources (older children) – *'cheesy, shallow and annoying, the words don't make you think and the tunes are just taken from nursery rhymes and stuff'*

As with RE and experiences at GSM, pupils seem to be hypersensitive to factors which in fact adults are already doing their very best to mitigate!

Collective worship at Park Street already includes a great many elements deliberately designed to promote and nurture children's spiritual development – e.g. qualities of ritual, a variety of moods/styles, visual and symbolic focus, and in the personal style of the headteacher – genuine openness & authenticity.

Nevertheless, its interesting to see how easily derailed pupils can be in this context – and end up focused on the almost inevitable sense of control that the physical requirements of a whole school meeting entails, or distracted by the frictions of not having their particular needs met.

Perhaps assembling for school collective worship is, like any kind of communal worship, full of challenges and never going to be perfect. Keeping this in perspective, and developing conversations about what pupils find positive and negative with others who plan and lead assembly, and the pupils themselves (as they too might help to lead some of these) may also help.

Soul Searching: Observing Class RE

RE in every class was observed at least once. In other schools there is a rising tendency for RE to be delivered by TAs or visiting teachers who may not know the pupils so well. However, at Park Street teachers value the opportunity to teach RE themselves.

There were countless examples (in each lesson) of very good practice in terms of supporting the spiritual aspects and pupil experience of RE both in words and actions, even though teachers found it hard to articulate or recognise those features for themselves. The accounts below for each observed lesson are an attempt to feedback how this came across to an observer, to identify good practice and to suggest some issues for further planning or improvement.

However, it is hard using words on a page to recreate and communicate some of the softer signs of how teacher's successfully led RE to support spiritual development. Below there is a quite extensive analysis of what seemed a 'masterclass' of spiritual development practices (symbols lesson), and shorter vignettes of features in other observed lessons. A more effective model is suggested in year 2's proposal: to produce a video recording of lessons and an observer's commentary. Such a resource will more effectively illustrate a range of good examples and challenges, and facilitate discussion and awareness amongst teachers.

Class 2: Symbols

A lesson taught by the SENCO in class 2 on 'Symbols' was an exceptional demonstration of ways in which RE teaching can engage children's spirituality and promote their spiritual development.

- 1) by building from children's ordinary visual experience of symbols and signs in everyday life,
- 2) by exploring children's initial mental understanding of symbols and introducing the need for symbols for things that are perhaps bigger than words or definitions – such as love, which in turn is something naturally within children's experience
- 3) by helping children to access possibly more intuitive knowledge about symbols (for love) through creative activity via an invitation to draw on whiteboards, the temporary nature of which emphasised this as an opportunity for reflection rather than to produce a final piece of work. It was clear children benefitted from the chance to work their way into their thinking, as many initially just hastily drew something they really love (e.g. a car, a hamburger) but 'seeing' their thought, seemed to aid their capacity to reflect more deeply and take it to another level (e.g. erasing the car image, and taking great care in drawing two human figures encircled by two huge wedding rings).
- 4) by equally valuing children's verbal and non verbal ways of understanding as 'evidence', for example offering to photocopy one child's whiteboard ideas, and offering to 'talk that through more later' when a child had a thought she couldn't express in the whole group discussion. And

particularly through offering an extended period for creative drawing which enabled children to develop more connections, both verbal and non verbal, between religious material and their own lives.

5) in visual and emotional 'unspoken' lesson of the teacher's presence as she was teaching. I'd noticed there were not any school examples to represent or symbolise 'love' on their whiteboards. Would the teacher not ask them 'where might love be 'seen' in this school'? Then I realised we could all this as a living symbol, since as the teacher spoke and listened to the whole group she was literally cuddling and stroking the hand of an easily agitated boy with SEN who otherwise often needed to leave lessons.

The number and range of ways in which children given chances to engage with how symbols try to contain deep meaning, especially in religions like Christianity was important. However it was also important that there was a sense of flow between the activities, which ensured the learning atmosphere felt safe and thoughtful, serious but warm and playful. This encouraged 'opening up' and courage to look more deeply.

The lesson progressed to examine other Christian symbols, bringing in explicit Christian language and tradition, such as a dove, and candle light. Thanks to the earlier processes (1-5), pupils were able to reflect on their own associations and experiences with these symbols. For example, a child commented on the dove being linked in his mind with seeing the Pope on TV with some doves, and some discussed their school assembly ritual of lighting a candle to start⁶.

The second part of the lesson invited children to respond to the first part of the lesson by drawing a symbol of their own choosing on paper. This open-ended creative task was given a subtle frame of reference which the children could use or ignore – each table had some photographs of Christian symbols for inspiration. It took a while for pupils to accept that this really was not a 'copying' task, but evidently the freedom and open-ended ness of activity enabled many pupils to really enjoy this time and get very absorbed, as they do in play. Possibly a little more support in the transition to the new task ('before you get up, close your eyes and think about what you might like to draw'), and its open-ended nature, could have averted some initial 'what are we meant to be doing' and disruptive noise levels which the teacher had to call attention to.

The quality and quantity of 'spiritual debate' as pupils chatted at their tables made clear how effective having an open, creative task and the preceding stimulus activities was. For example, at one table there was a spontaneous discussion about their different attitudes to believing in God/gods, and their awareness of those (such as parents) who don't believe.

The more emotional face of spiritual engagement through this RE lesson was evident too. For example, one girl had drawn a picture (her symbol of love) showing two large initials, that clearly hold some deep significance because she cried when a boy tried to guess silly things these letters could stand for. It transpires the picture has prompted reflection on a lost friendship, an

⁶ Though interestingly, none could recall the opening sentence which is said as the candle is lit 'This is the day that the Lord has made', only the communal response 'Let us rejoice and be glad in it'.

'ideal' friend made on holiday who symbolises love (and the pain of that) for her. This illustrates young children's capacity to process some aspects of their RE lessons at a deeply personal level. It illustrates also the need for such lessons to provide pupils with safe boundaries and closure when deep places are opened up. Clearly there was more than 'just drawing a picture' going on here. RE's potential to stimulate profound existential questions and responses has implications for lesson structure, especially how it ends and what happens to any work produced or that will be re-visited in subsequent lesson.

For other pupils, the quality of spiritual processing was less fraught, and more integrative, often showing images reflecting on 'who am I' and 'what really matters to me' alongside Christian images they'd chosen to copy from. A few pupils doing this became very engrossed, impervious to anything around them, including the teacher suggestion that pupils begin to add words to their work and later to come back to the carpet for discussion.

It was very sensitive of the teacher to recognise their need to stay focussed, and gave them permission to carry on drawing rather than urge them to get on with the writing or contribute to the plenary. Their quality of their work could be described as meditative or contemplative.

When the lesson had ended, a couple who'd not joined the plenary stayed behind and began to talk about their drawings and thoughts with me, perhaps needing a more intimate context. One girl explained that her picture showed a cross 'which reminds me of God'. All it appeared to be was a copy of the picture on her table, but her extended focus suggested this was the tip of an iceberg. She expanded that other things also remind her of God '*Jesus...and love...and kindness. God is where there is kindness between people.* Our conversation roamed for a while. Then I asked if she could tell me or show me where love is in her school? She replied '*it is in between the teachers and the children*'.

Some of the key observations here refer to moments 'in between the cracks', which it would be easy for a class teacher to miss. The benefit of having a designated 'observer' to catch and reflect on these moments might be explored further, as an occasional role for a foundation governor or clergyperson.

Class 1: Advent

In class 1 (reception and year 1), a discussion about advent and the introduction to the class advent calendar was helpfully prefaced by a period of calm whilst enjoying their fruit snack time. The teacher created this calm partly conveyed by playing quiet music children were preparing for their nativity play, and by the teacher's own patient, warm presence supported by the same from her TAs. This engaged pupils' heightened non-verbal spiritual capacity, allowing some of the qualities of advent – waiting together, quietness, attentiveness and expectation, free associations with the Christmas story, to be communicated wordlessly.

The pupils clearly responded to these cues, as many spontaneously began to sing along quietly and thoughtfully to the music whilst eating their bananas(!). Moreover, the teacher was moved by the children's sensitive response and affirmed it. One boy asked for the chance to sing a carol he had a copy of in his schoolbag to the whole class, but was asked to wait till later. The teacher later regretted that she never did manage to hear him. This is an important illustration of the challenges of spiritually sensitive RE : opening a reflective space for personal connections and experience is often set against meeting the needs of the whole class or particular input.

When the teacher introduced words to develop and discuss the advent theme, she linked this to the pupil's recent experience in collective worship. She also encouraged a 'spiritual' focus, by clearly re-phrasing things in less secular/more 'spiritual' vocabulary– eg a child said advent was about 'a countdown to Christmas', the teacher replied 'yes, to help us get ready to celebrate Christmas'. The teacher also avoided the temptation to use the advent calendar focus to address numeracy goals, e.g. turning this into merely a counting exercise.

In this class, the play-based culture of the foundation stage provided a naturally open context for children to take this stimulus further in their own ways, in their own voices, and having a number of extra adults around to support this child-led activity. Pupils became involved in a wide range of activities around the classroom, and perhaps the most notable thing was the continuation of the quiet, peaceful and collaborative mood amongst children and staff. The boy who'd wanted to sing from his carol sheet in the group, was able to find an available adult (me) and asked to sing his song to me. In fact, he struggled to sing it, but was keen to explain how important these words were too him, so much so, he'd asked his mum to write them down for him to have his own copy which he'd specially brought into school. Later, a girl brought me paper and pencil and asked me to write down the words of 'Away in a Manger'. She did not want to be drawn into any discussion about them, but as soon as she had them, found a private space near the 'den' and sat singing them to herself. It is often not possible to know what meaning children take or make from RE, but in this class these observations suggest children were provided with good verbal, non-verbal, formal and informal opportunities to tune into ways in which the Christmas theme really touches them or inspires them.

Class 2 : Holy Week/Easter with the class teacher

In Class 2, the class teacher reported that her class had been especially thoughtful and questioning about Easter this year, not least the challenge of Jesus' death. She had supported their capacity and desire for debate by letting go of some of her usual planned activities. She did not explicitly describe this as giving value to the pupil spiritual engagement, yet it seems to be a good example of that. It was clearly not an easy subject theologically or emotionally to facilitate with a young class, but she appeared to choose (at least intuitively) to 'roll towards' the spiritually challenging work, rather than to take a safer 'moving on' option. Her openness to a) notice what is really captivating the children in the present moment and b) to re-route her lesson to support to that, was excellent. However, the written work the class did could perhaps have included further scope for this thoughtful pupil energy. Pupils were asked to write about each part of the Holy week story, following a storyboard of pictures – a rather descriptive exercise. Some had also coloured in some of the pictures, but the impression was that this was only an option if there was time left over – so those with slower writing skills would be excluded from this non-verbal reflection opportunity. An option for free-drawing could have extended children's need to wrestle with this material even more. Spiritually sensitive RE might need to look at the balance between oral, written and non-verbal ways of engaging and of responding.

There was also an interesting boundary in the class teacher's mind, as she was marking this written work about Holy Week/Easter for its merits as 'literacy'. There seemed to be some uncertainty about whether RE was meant to be formally assessed, let alone how in KS1. The shift from an RE focus to a literacy assessment also raises questions about how pupils experience that treatment of their spirituality – where their responses in words, pictures or feelings to the mystery of Easter, or the horror of the cross, or questions about 'truth claims' are reduced to whether or not they've used capital letters, full stops and good adjectives!

Class 4 : Using a Philosophy for Children approach in RE

In Class 4 I observed an exciting first use of 'P4C' (philosophy for children) in RE. This lesson was great example of another way of providing conditions to promote children's spiritual development in RE, i.e deliberately encouraging a pupil-led thinking-style in which meaning is sought and made by the group, rather than elicited by the teacher to match pre-determined chunks of knowledge or understanding.

The teacher signalled non-verbally that this lesson took a 'different' approach to knowledge and knowing, by clearing the room of tables and chairs, and sitting in the round with the pupils – at the same level as them⁷. In the whole class discussion of Galileo⁸, pupils raised a number of rich questions,

⁷ In the opening discussion, the 'openness' to think creatively and honestly was further modelled, when for example a child inadvertently recalled 'Gandalf' had been a person of courage and faith referred to in their last lesson, rather than Gandhi. The teacher responded encouragingly, that in fact Gandalf might also be in this category too. This was

including the suggestion that the Church's powerful and threatening opposition to Gallileo was 'not very holy' behaviour, which the teacher acknowledge with interest. In P4C, part of the approach is a process to identify what are significant questions for pupils. Certainly this comment contained a potential seed for subsequent exploration – e.g. what pupils think 'being holy' means, the possible distinction between 'religious' and 'holy', or the relationship between institutional religion and personal experience.

However, in this lesson, the focus moved to consideration of some pre-determined (but highly interesting) 'thunks' (big questions), which the pupils debated in groups of 4. Again this emphasised that pupils were free to say what they thought, encouraged by permission to be as noisy as they liked. There were a lot of questions to get through, so this part of the lesson was high energy and loud. However, in groups I observed this often meant they rushed to find 'an answer' rather than reflected at length or in depth on the questions. Possibly the unintentional learning was that these matters could be sorted out quickly! It was also a struggle to ensure all pupils had the chance to contribute where there was no adult on hand – those less verbal or less extrovert were perhaps compromised by the style of this task.

There was an effective plenary discussion, where the pupils' energy and enthusiasm was much in evidence, and gave more opportunities for pupils' views to be aired. By this stage, pupils were able to make lots of connections between the often abstract 'think' questions and things this was 'like' in their own lives. At the end of the lesson, the teacher took an informal poll (out of 10) about how much they'd enjoyed it (average of 9/10) NB the contrast with the attitude to RE they reported in their focus groups! And earlier it was interesting that there was a 'cheer' when the teacher said there would be no writing at any point.

This exploration of the P4C style for RE looked promising. It addresses some of the complaints pupils have about the style of some RE and its connection to their opinions and experiences. And it provides an effective way of stimulating questions and a culture of open inquiry which should help to guarantee that religious material is not perceived as finite facts, but rather tries to attend to infinite spiritual issues of human experience.

As a 'standalone' exercise, this spiritual potential may be limited though. It would benefit from further sessions to build on what comes up, to embed its open thinking style throughout RE and to ensure a wider range of modes of pupil engagement. For example, building on the particular questions children raised themselves (eg about holy behaviour) and by providing and valuing other ways for sensitive reflection on the big questions, to complement the 'buzz group' fast thinking style.

followed by a debating exercise to encourage the children to understand that often there are different points of view, rather than clear 'right answers' – as he'd already demonstrated in fact!

Class 3 – Inhabiting the RE teacher role in a Church School

In class 3 I did not observe the teacher teaching, but discussed our joint observations of the 'Shed for Lent' RE visit to St Phillips Church, and his general impression of teaching RE at Park Street. His reflections indicated a genuine interest in challenges of RE, its relation to his own experience of religion as a child, pupils' capacity to respond in quite individual ways and the opportunities for creative connections through the teaching about more than one faith.

One area for development however was that this new teacher had never taught RE before (having been trained and worked overseas where RE is not part of the state school curriculum), so the idiosyncracies of our non-confessional approach were not yet clear to him. For example, he had assumed only Church schools in the UK taught RE. This example raises questions about how new teachers in general are inducted into Church schools (not just at Park Street), their understanding of their RE responsibilities in that context and how the wider requirement to promote spirituality fits in. This suggests a role that clergy supporting the school could be trained to assist with, since the headteacher's task of general induction and new teacher support is already huge.

Godly Play – in whole class and in small groups

Running sessions using Godly Play was another way the project explored the ways RE can engage and promote pupil spirituality.

Godly Play is an atypical approach to RE. It takes the view that children already have a rich inner spiritual life and that a function of religious language can be help them to find ways to be more aware of that, to promote their capacity to think and speak about this kind of knowing. It has an 'experiential' emphasis, and is built around exploration of religious narratives or traditions (Judeo-Christian, though some have extended this to other faiths). It was first taken up by some UK schools in 2000, and now makes a contribution to RE in many schools. For example, Godly Play is a core part of the Diocese of London RE Schemes of work⁹, widely promoted and resourced for schools in the Diocese of Oxford¹⁰.

This was not something teachers at Park Street already used, so I was invited to first demonstrate it to the staff, and then use this in sessions (whole class and small group) with pupils.

In summary, pupils of all ages responded very positively to this kind of RE,

In normal RE you just get told, its loads of videos and you have to write down lots of stuff and do RE quizzes'

I like this more (Godly Play) cos you have characters and no writing and move them about. It makes you think more, because when you try to think in a normal lesson you daydream, but in this it was fun and you concentrate'

...although perhaps because they did not perceive it as RE.

One pupil said '*this is great...what lesson is this anyway?*', and during a parable session, another pupil said '*this isn't going to be about Jesus is it?*' in a tone of voice that suggested that would ruin it for them.

⁹ <http://schools.london.anglican.org/99/re>

¹⁰ <http://www.oxford.anglican.org/mission-ministry/youth-children/children/godly-play/godly-play-for-schools/>

Some teachers also expressed a sense of relief and release, for example that parables had a lot more to them than they'd realised, and that even familiar (Christian) material could be rather interesting!

Overall, Godly Play sessions promoted an imaginative, questioning and hands on opportunities for using religious language to explore and make meaning. At the end of sessions, I was often asked 'do you have more of those' or 'when can we do that again'?

Godly Play sessions provided a context in which sharing and probing a religious narrative allowed pupils to become more aware of some important personal/spiritual concerns. For example, reflection on the 'pearl of great price' stimulated thoughts about loss and connection to family members who had died, in danger or far away, and what they'd be prepared to 'give up' to secure those things/people of great value to them.

The playful but structured style of Godly Play meant deep things could be explored without being heavy.

Pupils' natural learning/recall of the religious narrative presented was impressive, despite a lack of formal activities to ensure this. Returning some weeks later, groups would enthusiastically re-tell the story in considerable detail.

Pupils found the visible and tangible objects used in Godly Play helped them to see ideas and make connections more easily, providing a visual and kinaesthetic ways to express the spiritual sense in the stories or in their minds. It cuts through the burden of wordiness pupils can feel restricts their engagement with religious material.

Teachers commented on the participation of pupils who were normally reticent – a typical finding with this approach – it gets round some of the traditional privileges that more able and more verbal pupils have.

Godly Play sessions at Park Street confirmed that, with the appropriate tools, very young children have a capacity for meaning making from religious topics that equals or even surpasses the more inhibited capacity of older children. This is illustrated in the account of a small group session with year 1 pupils.

Parable of the Pearl of Great Price: Small Group Class 1 – age 5-6

The session began with a lot of excitement as they recognised the ‘gold box’ which had contained a different parable (the lost sheep) that we’d done with their whole class some weeks before. On seeing the box, they spontaneously retold the story of the lost sheep. At first they seemed disappointed that this time it would be a different story. That contrasts with pupils’ usual complaint that too often it feels like there’s repetition in RE – in this case, they wanted to revisit the material.

Using the Godly Play approach to parables (Vol 3 The Complete Guide to Godly Play), the first stage encouraged children to enter into a really imaginative, creative frame of mind – to put literal, linear thinking to one side in order to help get into the metaphorical mindset of parables. Pieces from the box were considered one at a time, not to ‘decide’ what they would become in the story, but rather to imagine an infinite set of possibilities and give the pupils permission to feel personally engaged in a meaning making process. This clearly appealed to these children, whose creative and lateral thinking was playful and full of energy.

In the next stage, a preface was spoken outlining that this parable explores a question: *what could the kingdom of heaven be like?* Jesus’ parable words were spoken with care (in less than 50 words) whilst slowly moving physical images (taken from the box) to help to see the story. Visually, this story has great impact as the merchant searching for a pearl ends up giving up the entire contents of his home (represented by about 10 separate wooden images) and even walls of his home, for a single pearl. In this short, but key, part of the session (presenting the religious content) the children were very still, focused and really gripped by the unfolding and surprising action.

A stage of ‘wondering’ aloud followed (carefully guided), as the children enthusiastically tried to make sense of what they’d just seen and felt. They gave the protagonists feelings, motive and character. In so doing, they playfully opened up themes including – *morality and stealing, what makes someone deeply happy versus materialism, sharing and inequality, love of neighbour*. None of these issues was suggested to them – these were meanings that arose for them from this story.

A period of free play with the story objects developed very naturally – the pupils quite literally took hold of the story to explore it further. At this point the small group was very collaborative, and having the pieces to move and play with enhanced their ability to see, listen and debate each others ideas. They also seemed deeply contented at this point – singing and humming. Their conclusion was a re-arrangement of the material, using the ‘walls’ of all the dwellings where the merchant had search into one big place which they decided was better as it could now be *‘for everyone, and for everything’* (putting all the pearls and home contents in it). It was interesting how this resonated with themes this group had discussed with me previously – about death and dying, and their imagining that in heaven people need to make new homes from scratch. Finally, they were prompted to wonder about ‘what the pearl could really be?’ They suggested it *could be like a power* – because it had the power to create homes for everyone

and provide everything people needed in life – pointing to the new picture they'd made with the story. This thought seemed to touch on a sense of deep mystery for one boy, inspiring him to tell us about the idea that there was a time before anything was created, even before day and night, light and dark.

Although the predominant mood of this session was open-ended and playful, it is possible to see significant, natural, exploration with the question 'what might the kingdom of heaven be like?' in the discussion described above. .

Unfortunately, the session ran out of time. The children were frustrated by that. They said they wanted more time. In particular, they wanted time to draw at this point. They were right to feel that – and the next stage in 'proper' Godly Play would provide that. Amongst other things, this would have helped them to integrate or at least focus/manage some of the otherwise overwhelming volume and depth of thought experienced in this session.

Some key points from this session (and others)

- 1) Even the youngest children have profound spiritual insight in response to religious language.
- 2) Teachers can ease children's access and help them to communicate spiritual thought when allowing them to speak in the 'native' languages of childhood: play and story, and art.
- 3) Dialogue between children can produce rich spiritual conversation especially if it is in a small group in which the adult is present to support them, but not to direct them.
- 4) The value of Godly Play materials/lessons is that it has worked out a way for the religious language speak for itself through an image, gesture or carefully planned phrase. This puts much less pressure on the teacher, and also helps to curtail unnecessary wordiness (which children complain of).
- 5) This session illustrates a wide range of moods. Spiritually sensitive RE needs to avoid being compartmentalised as 'just the very personal and reflective bit' – it's also about energy, debate, collaboration, difficult stuff and really enjoying yourself.

The potential of the Godly Play approach at Park Street?

It might be one way to counter the negative mindset some pupils have towards RE

Its approach to creative response has a lot of potential to make links with the popularity of art amongst pupils¹¹, and offer a range of learning style responses.

It matches and would extend the existing good practice that strives to give opportunities for children to engage personally and/or spiritually in their own ways in RE

It provides a way for teachers to teach RE 'differently' from other subjects – distinguishing this from their role as 'experts' or those who 'know the answers/understand the subject'. Teachers may feel more comfortable and authentic in tackling the spiritual implications of religious material from this less 'expert' position

It provides a way to acknowledge pupils intuition that RE, especially in a Church School, is an opportunity for learning to be different and sometimes special

It could intersect well with developing a broadly Christian/Church School approach to PHSE

It could provide some common language and habits for the way pupils across all school years approach religious language (not just in RE lessons).

It seems to provide teachers with a means of reflecting together and attending to their *own* needs for some space to think, be and make meaning – nurturing staff spirituality.

Challenges?

Despite this potential, embedding this approach at Park Street would be challenging.

Some superficial skills associated with the approach can be picked up quickly, and the school already has a few resources. But Godly Play represents almost 40 years of research and involves rather some counter-cultural teaching methods. Some training to help staff would make a big difference to their understanding and proficiency. CSOC has also funded Godly Play training for some local practitioners who the school could bring in to provide some Godly Sessions with pupils.

¹¹ Many pupils explain that what they like about art is the sense of freedom and play, even if they feel they are not especially 'good' at producing art.

Soul Searching: Inset work and staff training

Being responsible for promoting the spiritual development of pupils is neither an easy nor obvious part of a teacher's role. In most cases, teacher training will not have addressed this at all. A key part of the Soul Searching project vision therefore to explore teachers' understanding and needs.

It also seemed reasonable to assume that in order to support their pupil's spirituality, teachers might benefit from being more aware of their own spiritual well-being and perspective, especially the ways in which this shapes their view of education.

But tackling 'teacher spirituality' and nurturing teachers' interest in 'the spirituality of education' were particularly difficult tasks.

In the context of other more tangible priorities, this is low on the list and of dubious value. Generally there's also culture in continuing teacher development and training for a relatively 'quick fix' and 'being told what to do or think' in the form of a new policy, strategy or framework. Yet it seemed clear that a rushed or imposed approach to spirituality would be insensitive and ineffective. Time and personal engagement would be essential – the problem was how to make this possible.

Different strategies were tried including

- Planned contributions about spirituality in staff meetings. Notably, each time I was invited to do this, I was given a longer 'slot'. There was increasing awareness of the value of this area for staff, and that it was rewarding rather than time consuming.
- Informal discussions with staff, eg being 'around' at lunchtimes in the staff room and sharing in the highs and lows of their working day
- Producing 'prompts' to encourage staff to think about spiritual aspects of education independently. For example, a selection of 'thoughts for the week' to be displayed on the staff noticeboard.
- Inviting staff response to a questionnaire (see below), hoping this might encourage their own discussions (without me) about their understanding and practice.
- Fostering discussion of specific examples of other teachers' practice, such as on RE trips
- Providing a planned 'staff INSET' spirituality workshop during the school day, whilst pupils attended a CSOC funded drama workshop. This also included illuminating data from 'evaluation' questionnaire about the workshop. This also suggested ways in which Park Street's view of spirituality, especially through RE, was distinctively focussed on relationship and caring.

Promoting staff attention to 'spiritual development' : approaches that work and don't work

Some of these approaches worked much better than others, and learning from this helps to clarify how best to support and meet teacher needs in future.

It was clear that being given prompts or information on paper did not help at all. Teachers either didn't give themselves time to read it, or found the scale of the subject matter too daunting and had insufficient time to 'waste' reflecting on it. 'Just talking' about spirituality in an impersonal way was also quite challenging for them, and didn't really meet any needs.

**This mirrors issues that pupils have with attempts to engage their spiritual interest: Just because you are asked to think or talk about something does not ensure that it feels meaningful*

There was much better reception of approaches which

- deliberately carved out time for this (like the INSET workshop – described in detail below),
- provided a 'third focus' (often in a Godly Play style visual/contemplative style) or which focussed on a 'safe' example (perhaps not their own lesson), and
- helped them to make personal connections about both in school and outside

**This mirrors pupils' experience too: spiritual work needs sufficient time and clear signals that this is a different yet valuable kind of way of understanding things, and it thrives on using visual and symbolic media and doing everything possible to make participants relax and feel safe*

Therefore, despite the challenge to 'finding time' and doing something potentially 'a bit personal' , when they were provided with the right conditions, teachers became aware of the value and need for their own 'golden time' to reflect on the bigger picture , 'what really matters' and their sense of vocation. It also became clearer to many of them how rarely professional life as a teacher gave them chances or space to do that, and a realisation that in fact they wanted more.

For example, the head wished many more staff meetings could include a Godly Play time for staff *'because as we watched the (Exodus) story unfold, it felt like the clock stood still, and it was like having a massage – just what we needed at the end of a busy day to put it all in perspective!'* . It felt significant that the head also requested a 'Godly Play' session for staff to put the new school year in perspective too, setting aside over an hour of their 'training day' before term started. This involved both class teachers and teaching assistants, and inspired a creative and thoughtful discussion (emerging from a focus on the parable of the mustard seed) about metaphors of learning, growth, maturing and the conditions which the school and teachers provide for that.

In some larger Church schools, some teacher 'spiritual' needs might be met by having prayer groups or termly staff Eucharists, but clearly this would not provide a safe or inclusive option for all or even most staff. What the Soul Searching project demonstrates is a need for 'something' that gives permission, focus and support to teachers spiritual needs, and how closely connected this will be to enabling them to better understand and support pupils.

What might spiritual development mean questionnaire

It was hoped that a leaving a questionnaire¹² about teachers' views what of 'spiritual development in Church schools should mean' would create some staffroom discussion in between my project visits. It didn't – they completed it but did not discuss it with each other.

However, it is interesting to see the areas on which teachers most agreed (grouped nearer the top) and those which rather few thought were important aspects of spiritual development (at the bottom).

There is more consensus at Park Street about the interpersonal/community enriching and generic aspects of spiritual development, but less consensus that 'religious' aspects of spirituality are an important contribution. From *informal conversations* with teachers over this year, those who are less sure of religion's role in spiritual development in school felt either

- 1) anxious that a religious approach is likely to be narrow and exclude some pupils – i.e. unethical, or
- 2) uncertain how to make use of more religious material in practice, even though they felt it did have potential to address pupil spiritual development inclusively in theory

Park Street Staff Consensus on 'what spiritual development' means for a Church School

(% of teachers who agree/strongly agree with each aspect)

Sense of community 100

Developing Ability of relate to others 100

Searching for meaning and purpose 100

Exploring personal beliefs 100

Encouraging pupil creativity 100

Finding inner peace 100

All curriculum areas 100

Experiencing Awe and wonder 83

Developing personal identity 83

Search for meaning more than finding answers 83

Exploring Christian spirituality 66

Exploring Spirituality in non Christian faiths 66

Experiencing periods of silent reflection 50

Discovering that life is grounded in mystery 50

Practicing techniques such as breathing exercises, guided imagery, fantasy 50

Developing Christian beliefs 33

Leave promotion of spiritual to home/church 16

Spirituality can't be disconnected from religion 16 (i.e. most think it can be separate)

¹² This questionnaire was adapted from one used to research view of Church school headteachers in Wales.

Soul Searching: Spirituality INSET Workshops May 2013

An INSET workshop was provided in the summer term for all teaching staff. The difficulty of finding time/prioritising this was solved by having pupils attend a CSOC funded drama presentation, freeing up staff to attend the INSET.

This INSET happened in two other Church schools, as well as Park Street. This made it possible to gather slightly more information about schools views and needs in the areas of spiritual development and RE. It also provides some sense of ways in which Park Street has a distinctive 'soul' and their role and RE's role in spiritual development. It is difficult to know how much their prior involvement in the Soul Searching project, and their raised attention to this area, has shaped their understanding.

The INSET (less than an hour) was designed to meet 3 needs

- to provide time for teachers to reflect rather than 'work hard' – ie to be a model of spiritual education as much as input about it (SOUL)
- to initiate some dialogue between staff, to invite their voices into the discussion/discover their needs to shape further provision (HEAD)
- to provide something practical to try in their classroom practice. (HANDS ON)

This involved:

A five minute introduction to broad themes, acknowledging range of feelings teachers bring, range of view/perceptions children have, and the centrality of spirituality to education. This aimed to act as a warm up prior to the 'deeper bit', and to provide some basic information about the context of spirituality in primary education.

A reflective, contemplative presentation of 3D objects representing ideas about children, spirituality and ways religious language and education might help both to thrive. This aimed to demonstrate the value of taking time and creating space for quieter, personal, reflection for teachers in the first instance; and by implication for children they teach too. It also offered a partly tangible/visual framework for the typically intangible, invisible nature of spirituality.

Open discussion following the reflective presentation – with no agenda, following what was meaningful to that staff group. The aim was to ensure they had a positive (safe) experience of sharing ideas/views of children's spirituality, and therefore more inclined to engage in further discussion in future.

Introduced a very simple (MOG) classroom practice to initiate heightened attention to spirituality in their day to day teaching. This included a handout to guide their thinking and use of MOGs.(Moments of Ordinary Grace – see appendix)

Finally, staff were asked to complete a short evaluation and survey of their needs/views about spirituality and RE teaching.

Findings

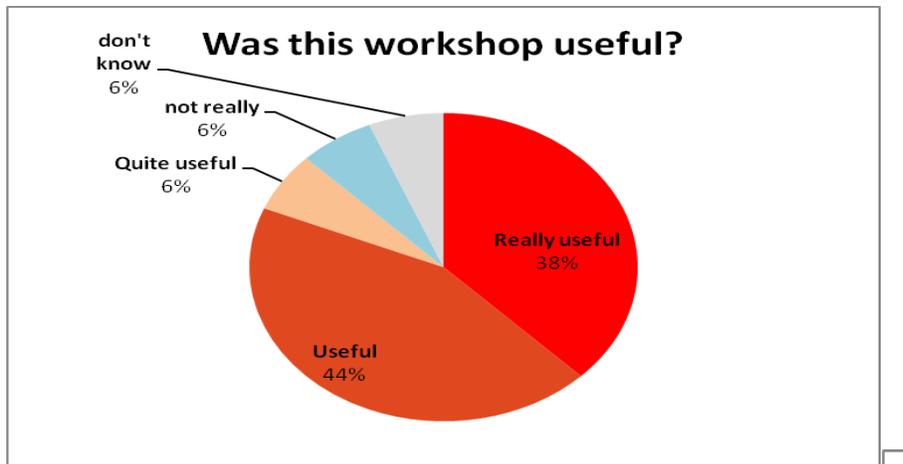
** NB Many of the figures/charts combine Park Streets' responses with those of staff at other schools**

Overall the process worked well to achieve its aims. Staff engaged, often despite some initial anxiety or resistance. Feedback was positive and many particularly appreciated the intentionally non-traditional approach to INSET. In each school something was identified that they wanted 'more' of. More time would have helped, in particular explaining the MOG was difficult as time ran out, without curtailing the preceding discussions.

'Teachers Wondering aloud about Spiritual Development'...(from all schools)

- *This happens in the spaces between lessons rather than in my planned lessons/teaching*
- *This happens through spontaneous chat, having time to listen to children ('I wish there was more of that')*
- *This happens when teaching attends to the present moment*
- *Play is very valuable – for all ages, including as teachers - time to be present and to 'let go'*
- *Recognition of children's natural 'sparkle'; the responsibility to nurture what's already there*
- *Recognition of the unintentional disconnect with some forms of religious language*
- *Voicing teacher anxieties about teaching RE*
- *Children need to Feel Safe and Trust the teacher for spirituality to be explored/thrive*
- *The ideas explored here confirmed why it feels impossible for me to 'assess' spirituality*
- *Children do have deep questions, depth, capacity, including for 'difficult' things like death.*
- *Younger children have an initial honesty, lack of reservation about communicating spirituality to teachers and peers- an early window of educational opportunity.*
- *Children develop a more critical, and more reserved/guarded attitude towards the spiritual as they pass through primary school. Become less open with peers and teachers?*
- *Children struggle to balance an emerging 'scientific' outlook with a spiritual perspective: how can I help as the teacher with that?*

The evaluation and survey provide further detail, which is summarised below.



Sch 1: *yes, partly, unsure at present, yes,*

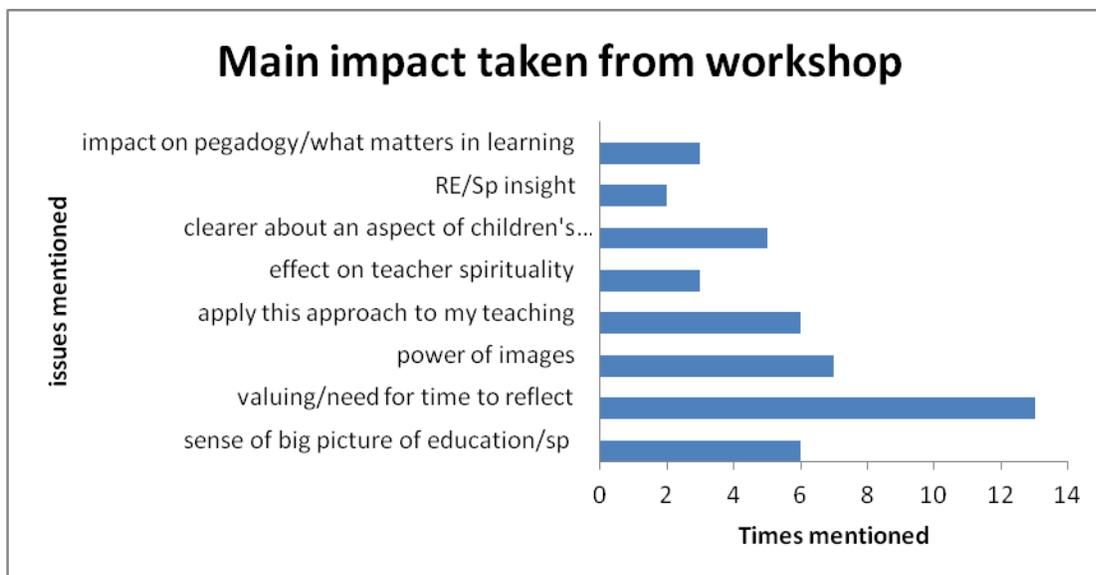
Sch 2: *quite useful, very useful, excellent reflective storytelling example, 'not really - nothing wrong with delivery – I just don't get it**', yes really helped, yes, yes – allowed me to reflect on my own practice, yes*

PARK STREET : *very useful, yes – needed time to reflect, yes – fantastic, yes, really useful ideas of MOGs to catch the moments.*

This suggests it may have been more difficult for this INSET to 'work' for some teachers at other schools without the context of the Soul Searching project experience. This area is difficult to address in a 'flying visit' or in a policy document.

What will you take away from today?

It was good that the INSET was able to have a *variety of impacts* on the staff – they were able to take what they needed from it. The chart combines responses from all schools.



Lasting impressions clustered into 4 areas – many teachers citing more than one.

1. Things to take into their own teaching practice,
2. Things affecting their own spirituality as teacher,
3. A greater clarity about certain characteristics children's spirituality
4. A recognition of the different kind of learning spirituality taps into and the bigger horizon of education that it calls their attention to.

For Park Street Staff, the impact was about...

Opportunity to stop and think about where I fit into spirituality as a teacher, but also my own spirituality. Peacefulness

Time of stillness and reflection – wished all staff (TAs) could have benefitted from this too

Appreciated chance to reflect

The importance of objects as a stimulus for thinking in abstract ways [teaching impact]

Time to reflect was fantastic (wanted more time for it though)

Good to have time to reflect and see potential of spirituality in all areas

Will remember that the only moment that matters is this one

Image of the sparkle and who we encourage children to use/reflect on their sparkle

At school a, the impact was about...

Holistic scenario of life

how children and teachers need to connect their space with spiritual possibilities

space to reflect

images thought provoking

all the symbols were really useful as the children will have a better understanding of spirituality(?)*

opportunity to reflect on my own spirituality,

interesting use of symbols

the idea of spiritual development and understanding being multi-faceted and non linear

being reminded of this topic's importance, not just swept along by the curriculum

the need to take time for thought and MOGS

At school b, the impact was about...

Links between children, religion and language

Realising teaching about religion is not the same as exploring spirituality

Time to reflect

Lovely imagery, I'd like to develop that in my teaching

Reminder of wide scope that comes with spirituality

Excellence of reflective storytelling

Children as full vessels of ideas, emotions and perceptions in place already

Building in time to recognise and respond to incidental learning
Use of images and story helped me to grasp the nature of children's spirituality
A few moments of reflective calm in a world driven by measuring achievements (wanted longer/more)
Good use of images to back up ideas, thoughts and feelings
Allowed me to reflect on my own practice
Re- affirms the importance of open discussions with children

Teachers need more 'Sabbath Time'

By far the most frequent thing teachers valued/would take away, was the importance of **making time to reflect**. This need for Sabbath as a spiritual fundamental **for children, for teachers** and **for the process of education itself**, was powerfully recognised. And yet, some previous resistance to giving or finding time for this ('what's the outcome? We're too busy') was the very thing which had made the structure of this event (around a theatre workshop for pupils) necessary!

Other INSET Training on RE/Spirituality?

Asked 'What other workshop topics would you like?', there were 4 broad areas in which further help was requested –

- 1) skills/process tools for teaching and learning (approx 55%)
- 2) content – eg topics, with new curriculum, cross curricula ideas (approx 35%)
- 3) assessment issues (approx 5%)
- 4) efficacy/authenticity of collective worship (approx 5%)

Park Street's further needs

Delivery of new curriculum

Compassion – how to develop this in children from spiritual point of view, not PHSE/rules/feelings perspective

Other centredness, patience and selflessness

Doing this session with older children

How to question, confidence to raise questions

Developing compassion for others, key values

School A's further needs

Philosophical discussion and ethical openness to others viewpoints

Sharing good practice ideas for RE and spirituality, ways to do cross curricula spirituality

Relationships and links between faiths

Ideas for effectively discussing spirituality with pupils

Practical ideas and resources to encourage spiritual development across the curriculum

School B's further needs

How to discuss spirituality with children

How to create links between religion and spirituality

How to balance content /reflection

Leading collective worship. making collective worship valuable for all children R-Y6

Support for planning and leading new syllabus (RE)

How to assess spirituality when its so intangible

How to translate this to RE lesson

More on basics/role of reflection as a tool in all curriculum, and at different ages

'demo' lessons on going from learning ABOUT to learning FROM RE that works for both religions and non religious pupils

Getting the most out of children when showing them resources/images/symbols

Approaches to teaching RE

The variety of requests is indicative of the broad and complex needs teachers experience with RE, and with spiritual aspects of teaching and learning. There is also a diverse set of priorities within each staff group. When the mountain seems this big, are you inclined to even think about climbing it?

But teachers specially expressed a need for help with how to teach RE. It would seem reasonable to assume this tracks back to the paucity of RE in initial teacher training. This also raises significant concerns about delegation of RE classes to TAs in some schools (not Park Street)

Why teach RE? What's its value?¹³

It was fascinating to see how each school had a subtly different profile of views about this.

In 'school A', teacher's language was quite interventionist (*making* children into something else, *giving* them something), rather than eliciting or building on qualities children bring? 'Spirituality' focussed comments relating to the value of RE in relation to the child's personal journey were in the minority.

School A Comments: Why teach RE?

*To learn openness/respect other view points and beliefs; to make children into tolerant adults.
To give children sense of their identity/culture/faith; To give children religious role models from history
Space to think about big issues; to learn about spirituality; to make children comfortable with themselves*

But in 'school B', there was a more even spread of ideas about RE's value— many about learning tolerance and about other's views, but quite a few about its personal and spiritual value to the child, and others locating its value as a vehicle for morality/other learning. There was one strongly negative view of RE's value.

School B Comments: Why teach RE?

*To learn others beliefs and view points; to learn tolerance and respect for use in adulthood.
Opens doors to other areas of learning; teaches/instils morality and values
Supports reflection on 'big questions', helps children to make their own choices about how to live
Has limited value compared to learning to read, write and add.*

At Park Street School, many teachers commented on the **personal spiritual value of RE for children** – in different ways. As in other schools, the value of RE to teach 'good behaviour and attitudes' (tolerance/respect) was prominent too. However, in this school the language teachers used to express this was **noticeably 'relational'** – perhaps framed by a concept of loving people rather than the control of negative impulses towards others? This strongly resonates with the 'soul' of this school. I suspect there may be quite different implicit models of personhood/childhood in each school.

Park Street: Why teach RE?

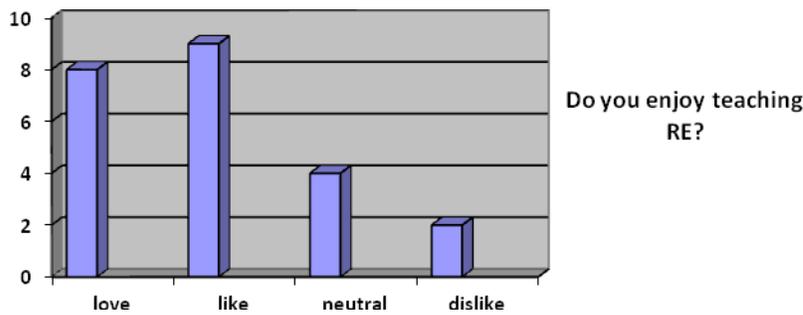
*An excellent medium for spirituality; exploring 'big questions', helps children address the difficult stuff in life; encourages qualities of stillness, reflection, being comfortable with seriousness, being able to question
To understand others beliefs and view points; to develop tolerance; to promote relationships and love; explores a sense of how the world relates to them and they relate to the world
Can gently help children to explore their own faith*

¹³ [This particular question, but in the context of the whole workshop and other questions, offers a very interesting picture on the implicit theory of teaching RE in each school. It could be very interesting to extend this to other schools, and to find ways to use the information to develop discussion with each school about its emphases?]

The evaluation form asked teachers to use a free rating scale to locate their position on a number of statements about RE and Spirituality. **NB This chart show all teachers surveyed, not only Park Street.**

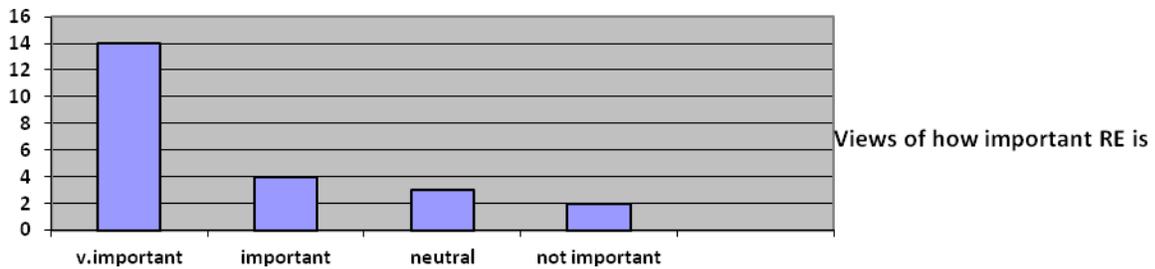
ENJOYMENT of Teaching RE?

I really enjoy ←-----→ *I really dislike*
teaching RE *teaching RE*



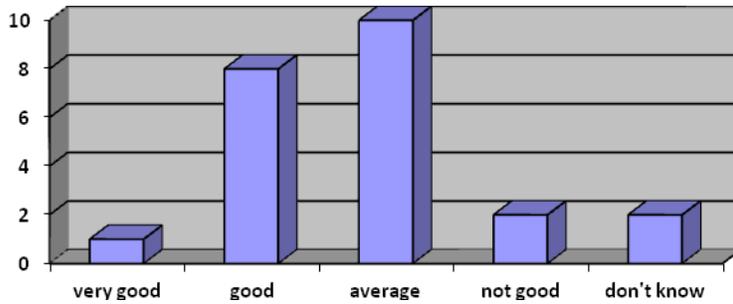
IMPORTANCE of RE

Really important ←-----→ *Unimportant*
at teaching RE



ABILITY to teach RE

I am good at ←-----→ *I am not good*
teaching RE *at teaching RE*



Are you good at teaching RE?

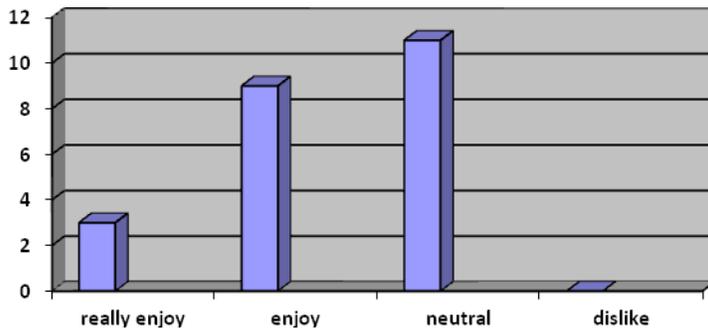
Overall, **most teachers report enjoying teaching RE (74% positive)**.

Most teachers view it as an important subject (78%). Teachers also rated how important it was to nourish children’s spirituality: this showed exactly the same pattern, a majority viewing it as very important.

But overall teachers are less positive about their ability to teach RE well. **The majority (43%) felt their RE teaching was just average**. Only 1 teacher self-evaluated as ‘very good’, and 2 stated they really didn’t know.

TEACHER perception of CHILDREN’s enjoyment of RE

The children I teach really enjoy RE ←-----→ The children I teach really dislike RE



Do children you teach seem to enjoy/get a lot from RE?

Teachers think that children have either a broadly positive view of RE, or are neutral about it. No teacher thought it was a disliked or slightly disliked subject. Park Street staff were most likely to think their children *really* enjoyed RE. This contrasts with views collected from the pupils about their relative enjoyment of RE compared to other school activities.

TEACHER awareness of resources/help available for RE

There was an even spread of responses to this question. About a third of staff were positive, about a third felt their awareness was average, and ***just over a third admitted they did not know where to get RE resources or help from*** .

TEACHER awareness of resources/help available for SPIRITUALITY

This question asked if they felt they had good resources, ideas and plans for observing and encouraging spirituality in the classroom. The view here was considerably more uncertain/negative than for RE above.

A majority of teachers (61%) felt they had very few or resources/ideas for supporting spirituality.

One teacher commented 'only natural instinct'. As the year at Park Street has found, there can be a lot of good practice that teachers are unaware of doing it or too preoccupied to notice/value it. There is a need to become more intentional about it. Without awareness of their practice, it will be hard to value what is good/critique what is poor or unhelpful.

This has been the aim of the 'Soul Searching' project in Park Street School – offering a spiritual profile of the school based on a year long series of observations and developing relationships with pupils, staff, governors and its Church links. It is hoped that using this model can help other schools to feel more resourced and confident.

Soul Searching: **Wider Support for Spiritual Development?** **Great St Mary's and Foundation Governors**

There were meetings with a) the clergy at Great St Mary's and b) the school's Foundation Governors. In both cases it was clear that these parties saw the spiritual life of the school and its pupils as something important. They were aware that their roles included making a contribution to this, but often commented that they were less sure how to do that and had not reflected very much on what this part of their role really meant before.

So, in attempting to find out how clergy and foundation governors perceive the spiritual life of Park Street, and how they support that, this project discovered that in fact there was a significant need to provide more support for them to raise awareness of spiritual development issues, and help to discern what actions they can take.

"it slips down the agenda. If no one reminds you what you've got to do, you just do other things, so really I just go in and do assemblies when it is my turn and go to school governors"(clergy comment)

The next stage of the Soul Searching project has specific plans to develop this.

Great St Mary's Link

Park Street School's link with Great St Mary's Church is a relatively new relationship, and this is viewed positively on both sides. In making the link, there had been a deliberate attempt to match the character of the school and its diverse community with the 'open, liberal' character of the church. There is certainly potential for these to be 'soul mates' – something that can't be assumed for all Church schools!

However, most of the 'link' seems to be with the clergy and the Church building, rather than with the wider Church community. The school seems more aware that GSM is 'its Church' more than GSM is aware that Park Street is 'its school'. There may be scope to develop ways in which the spiritual resources of that community could benefit the school, and ways the spirituality of the pupils could make more contribution to the life Great St Mary's. This might address the negative attitudes expressed by some pupils about their association with the Church and RE.

The conversation with the clergy addressed the following

1. the relationship with staff and what the staff do (eg teaching RE, leading worship)
2. how they thought pupils viewed GSM, and how visits there might engage spirituality
3. in what ways they felt the Church link promoted pupil's spiritual development, and in what ways this was challenging
4. what resources or prior experiences of Church School links helped them in their role to support spiritual development at Park Street
5. how their acts of collective worship were shaped by or intended to shape pupil spirituality.

<p>GSM relationship with staff and what the staff do (eg teaching RE, leading worship)</p>	<p>Very positive relationship with headteacher but uncertain what the SIAS (2009) point about 'developing as a spiritual leader' really meant, or how they can affirm/help her in that. They thought it could be about her positive approach to discipline/gold stars – though that would seem moral leadership?</p> <p>Minimal relationship with other staff and little knowledge of RE provision. This was a source of regret/oversight. It may also be a source of confusion about methods of teaching RE – that clergy and teachers could have quite different views</p>
<p>How they thought pupils viewed GSM, and how visits there might engage spirituality</p>	<p>Found it hard to imagine pupils might dislike Church etc, and attributed that to parental attitudes formed rather than pupil's own experience of Church</p> <p>Conscious of doing things with pupils to 'engage them' in general (participation, interaction) but felt ill-equipped to speak about or provide for children's <u>spiritual</u> engagement (nb as in teacher training, this area is neglected in clergy training too)</p>
<p>In what ways they felt the Church link promoted pupil's spiritual development, and in what ways this was challenging</p>	<p>Optimistic view that the 'link' works for pupils – eg choir, one or two congregants... <i>'When they go to the church they know it is their church, can show their friends its their church, and they are very conscious of it, and gives a sense of them belonging...'</i></p> <p><i>Challenged by responsibility as governors to help ensure school produces 'outstanding' results versus being the representatives of a wider Christian vision of personhood and development</i></p> <p><i>Feel tense/unsure about ways they might use the Church link to develop pupil spirituality in case parents object, felt their objective was 'to keep things muted'</i></p>
<p>What resources or prior experiences of Church School links helped them in their role to support spiritual development at Park Street</p>	<p><i>Unaware of support or resources for this, but would welcome help! Experiences in other Church schools didn't help much, as context had been very different (eg many more pupils in congregation)</i></p> <p><i>Need for opportunity to discuss 'what it means' not</i></p>

	<i>just 'what to do'</i>
How acts of collective worship they lead are shaped by/intended to shape pupil spirituality	<p><i>This opened up a big discussion and indicated a significant area for further work. e.g. to understand how collective worship differs from corporate worship (especially from pupil's point of view), how worship differs from reflective teaching and learning, and the spiritual impact of both)</i></p> <p><i>There were good intentions: 'to evoke some kind of response from them, trying to make them...to help them connect and see some relevance to how Bible stories might relate to their lives in some way'</i></p>

It would be beneficial to provide further discussion and support for clergy (and foundation governors) on these topics, starting from an exploration of childhood spiritual development and the Christian perspectives on that. Like teachers, there is a danger that the role become dominated by a long list of things to be 'done' (eg in their role supporting the school), without opportunities to reflect on the 'whys' or 'hows', and what meaning or purpose it has.

It is also apparent that the 'linked' worlds of Church and Church school do not necessarily speak the same language or mindset about RE, worship or even 'what a child is/needs', with the potential of making assumptions or speaking at cross-purposes. To make the most of Church – School links, in particular the already very positive friendship between Park Street and Great St Mary's, it is recommended that more opportunities for thinking together (eg about RE resources and approaches, collective worship, planning/reflecting on RE trips, meeting pastoral needs of pupils and staff) are routinely built in.

Foundation Governors

This group's role to look at 'the big picture' issues in the school has the potential to be a natural resource for calling attention to and support for spiritual development at Park Street.

As with teacher and clergy, it was not a topic they felt fluent to discuss. They welcomed the chance to develop their perspective on what it meant – especially to reflect on the ways pupils have their own spiritual strengths, the ways this school naturally is a 'spiritual' place and education is a 'spiritual endeavour', and to apply this to issues of 'Christian distinctiveness'.

A key insight was that many of them had also observed or felt positive examples of spiritual development in teaching, learning and the ethos of Park Street, but had never thought of *speaking* to the staff about this. Having permission and prompt to use the vocabulary 'the spirit/soul' of the school, a lesson or a policy would be helpful. They recognised that their role as observers/extra pair of hands gave them a special opportunity to provide feedback about the often non-verbal or at least 'soft' signs of good practice.

There was some consensus that at Park Street, spiritual development particularly meant, and was evident in, **connecting** and **relating**. This insight echoes the views expressed by the staff in their INSET workshop, the views of some of the pupils and many of my other observations. Obviously if some foundation governors are able to help the school maintain its focus on spiritual development, it will help if they set out with a similar vision and values.

There was 'role strain' for foundation governors too, i.e. feeling torn between a responsibility for a 'standards, measurement, accountability, policies-in-place agenda' and the possibly contradictory priorities of provision that values pupil (and teacher) spiritual well-being and development. It is unlikely that the requirement to attend to the 'standards' etc will slip off the list, whereas it may be easier to lose sight of the need to interpret and call attention to more spiritual values and needs. It might be helpful to make a habit of looking at issues addressed in their meetings through both agendas, conscious that this is a tension.

Soul Searching: **Adding your voice**

This project was designed to be and to develop dialogue and awareness of spiritual development, and to give a profile of 'whole school' spirituality.

This report has tried to represent voices contributing to this dialogue, in particular those of pupils and staff.

But in an important way, the value of this dialogue now depends on those reading this to keep the dialogue going. Like spirituality, it needs to move and breathe. Like Park Street's spirituality, it might thrive on making personal connections to this research.

If you are able to, please allow yourself the reflection time to consider -

- what you liked best in this project?

- what you think is the most important point or finding here? Or a concern?

- what you *wish* you could make possible in the light of this? Your hopes?

- what you will do in response to this? Any plans?

Thank you.