

Promoting the Spiritual Well-Being of Children and Young People with Special Needs

Robin Jackson

Professional Development Consultant, Camphill-Rudolf Steiner-Schools,
Aberdeen

Angelika Monteux

Camphill Course Leader, BA in Curative Education, Camphill-Rudolf Steiner-Schools, Aberdeen

Last year Camphill-Rudolf Steiner-Schools in Aberdeen hosted a conference entitled *Promoting the Spiritual Well-being of Children and Young People with Special Needs: an Inclusive Vision*. The conference, which formed part of the National Debate on Education and was financially supported by the Scottish Executive, arose from a recognition that the spiritual dimension in a child's development continues to be neglected.

The Conference noted that the right to spiritual well-being is firmly embedded in the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Whilst reference to meeting a child's spiritual needs is explicit in only a few clauses, recognition of these needs is implicit throughout the Convention. A clear duty is placed on all relevant bodies to ensure that a child's spiritual well-being is nurtured in just the same way as his or her physical and intellectual well-being. A shortage of time is usually the reason (or excuse) advanced for not addressing the spiritual well-being of children; but little or no additional time is needed if the training and practice are well founded, for the qualities, attributes and values inherent in human personality and experience do not require separate attention.

Spiritual well-being can be defined as a sense of good health about oneself as a human being and as a unique individual. Thus it is not so much a state as a process of growth and development. It happens when people are fulfilling their potential as individuals and as human beings. They are aware of their own dignity and value; they enjoy themselves and have a sense of direction; they can sense this quality in others and consequently respect and relate positively to them; and they are at ease with the world around them.

Religion and spirituality are identified among the most important factors that structure human experience, beliefs, values and behaviour, spirituality being that aspect of human existence that gives it its humanness. Thus, all carers have an ethical responsibility to recognise and respond to spirituality as it is presented within all human beings and they must be equipped to recognise, understand

and deal with this dimension. To that end, there is a case for returning to the Aristotelian virtues of benevolence, compassion, honesty, sympathy, respect and loyalty; but in order to be good educators, we need to think in terms of an individual's humanity as well as engage in the abstract world of ideas, concepts and arguments.

Conference participants identified a number of concerns. Attention was drawn to the danger in adopting top-down, officially approved sets of procedures or guidelines for promoting spiritual well-being, as these might become another slate of requirements, another set of standards, complete with check-lists to be ticked or a further set of 'competencies' against which professionals are assessed. Matters spiritual, it was argued, should emerge from working with and relating to children in all contexts, particularly by inviting them to explore their own thinking and feeling in relation to their perceptions of human nature and the world at large. Spiritual well-being is not promoted by an instrumental, examination-centred curriculum that ignores or discounts the everyday, every-minute spirituality of all human action. The basic requirement is a curriculum that is imbued with the spirituality that will foster the promotion of spiritual well-being.

Reference was made to the pioneering work of Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), an Austrian philosopher and scientist, who sought to link the conventional natural sciences and spiritual science, thus necessitating an holistic approach embracing body, soul and spirit. The 'spiritual essence' in each person is considered to be eternal and carrying a divine spark which cannot be affected by illness or disability. As a result, Camphill schools have never subscribed to the deficit model of disability, for each child is seen as unique and possessing a potential which it is the task of Camphill schools through curative education to develop. Curative education may be described as an integrated range of professional activities that are carried out on behalf of children with special needs and which involves diagnostic assessment, care, education and the application of therapeutic measures. The aim of the curative educator is to get behind the presenting problem, whether a dysfunctioning body, a disturbed mind or troubled spirit, and to stimulate and support the development of that person's potential so that a harmonious balance between body, soul and spirit is achieved.

At the conference, it was recognised that because of the watchful and cautious climate in which we now live and work, local authorities are increasingly resorting to defensive forms of professional practice which seek to minimise all risks. If the principal driving force behind current reforms is the elimination of the risk of abuse, then one is likely to witness the emergence of sterile and stultifying care regimes in which opportunities for spiritual growth and development are significantly reduced.

The present preoccupation with different forms of abuse, especially sexual abuse, has led to measures being introduced, such as 'no touching' policies, which deny the child the affection, reassurance and comfort that can be offered through physical contact, thus removing an important means for developing relationships and thereby promoting well-being. Hermetically sealing children in a protective cocoon and denying children tangible expressions of warmth, compassion and understanding must impact upon their intellectual, social, emotional *and* spiritual growth.

Concern was expressed about the representation of children in residential care as either victims or villains - neither of which representation touches their essential humanity. As a result of such labels and the kind of assumptions that accompany them, we treat rights and relationships as if they were commodities. The message needs to be communicated that we are who we are only by virtue of our relationship with others. Relationships in all their intimacy and imperfections need to be accorded greater prominence.

Conference participants had some difficulty in seeing how the spiritual well-being of children and young people can be effectively promoted if the educational system is so narrowly preoccupied with competition, performance and assessment. The ethos that this kind of utilitarian emphasis creates works against the development of a curriculum that nourishes the spiritual well being of children and young people. Further, if a child's intuitive and creative capacities are to be enhanced then the current contraction in the artistic and creative components of the school curriculum has to be reversed.

The conference concluded with the recognition that if a more socially responsive, responsible and genuinely inclusive society is to be created we need to promote, respect and cherish the humanity which resides in every child.