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Jayne Guiney

A Poet in Exile  
Teachers'  
Perspectives on  
Spirituality in  
Catholic Primary  
Schools

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# Teachers' Perspectives on Spirituality in Catholic Primary Schools

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Jayne Guiney

Spirituality is notoriously difficult to define. Although it is a complex and contested concept, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) stresses that every child has a *right* to spiritual development.<sup>1</sup> In Ireland, this right is also recognised in the 1998 Education Act<sup>2</sup> and the 1999 Primary School Curriculum.<sup>3</sup> While there are multiple understandings of what spirituality entails, when it comes to education, there is a lack of detailed and specific guidance for teachers on how they might support students' spiritual development. In addition, there is a gap in both scholarly literature and policy documents regarding teachers' roles and responsibilities in this domain. While some policy documents speak of nurturing the spirituality of the child, it is not entirely evident what this might mean. My own professional background as a primary school teacher, entrusted with the task of developing children's spirituality in the classroom, prompted me to investigate this topic. I was also fascinated about how other primary school teachers understood spirituality and whether they saw themselves as having a significant role in fostering children's spirituality. This prompted me to carry out sustained research into teachers' perceptions of the spirituality of the child. This article outlines the findings of that research.

People interpret spirituality in various ways. For some it is a search for meaning or purpose.<sup>4</sup> Others see it as a quest for

- 1 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Accessed 19th October 2021. <http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/pdf/crc.pdf>
- 2 Government of Ireland, "Education Act 1998. Accessed 19th October 2021. <http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/bills28/acts/1998/a5198.pdf2>
- 3 National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) Primary School Curriculum. Accessed 9th January 2021. <http://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum>
- 4 Hans Morten Haugen, 'It is time for a general comment on children's spiritual Development'. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 23 no.3 (2018): 306-322.

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Jayne Guiney a Limerick-based primary school teacher interested in spirituality, religious education and teacher identity. She is currently undertaking doctoral studies in the area of spirituality and primary education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick.

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belonging to oneself, or a search for connection to others, the environment or to something transcendent.<sup>5</sup> Elsewhere, spirituality is described as an experience of wonder and awe.<sup>6</sup> As a result of its elusive nature, attempts to define spirituality have sometimes contributed to the notion that it is a vague, indefinable term. Recently, spirituality and the spiritual development of children has played an increasingly important role in both international and Irish educational policy documents. Some people who call themselves spiritual but not religious, emphasise that spirituality is distinct from religion. In the Irish educational system where spirituality was traditionally conceptualised as a subset of religion, there have been calls for change to the existing educational status quo.<sup>7</sup> This changing landscape led me to research teachers' understandings of spirituality in Catholic primary schools as well as their lived experience of developing the spirituality of children in their professional care. My research, which was undertaken in 2018, was also concerned with the *plurality* of spiritual expressions present in contemporary Irish classrooms. I was also interested in whether school ethos impacted upon diverse understandings of spirituality and approaches to children's spiritual development. Due to the Catholic denominational patronage of the majority of primary schools in Ireland, the research focused on the perceptions of teachers in Catholic primary schools in the Munster region.

### CONTEXT

According to the Education Act, the school is responsible for the promotion of the moral, spiritual, social and personal development of students while also providing health education for them, in consultation with their parents.<sup>8</sup> As the Board of Management are accountable to the patron, all school functions should be carried out in a manner which upholds the characteristic spirit of the school, stemming from the 'cultural, educational, moral, religious, social, linguistic and spiritual values and traditions', of the school, in accordance with its ethos. As Ireland becomes increasingly belief diverse, with one in ten people self-describing as non-religious,<sup>9</sup> teachers experience real challenges when tasked with fostering

5 John Fisher 'The four domains model: Connecting spirituality, health and wellbeing'. *Religions* 2 (2011): 17–28. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2010017>

6 Sturla Sagberg, 'Taking a children's rights perspective on children's spirituality'. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality*, 22, no.1 (2017): 24-35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1364436X.2016.1276050>

7 Josh Grajczonek, "Interrogating the spiritual as constructed in belonging, being and becoming: The early years learning framework for Australia," *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood*, 37, no.1 (2012): 152-160.

8 Government of Ireland, Education Act 1998.

9 CSO 2016.

the spiritual development of children, since spirituality is often conceptualised as being an integral aspect of religious education. This is of particular significance when the deep-rooted place of religion in education in Ireland is considered.

In Ireland, in order to understand the complexity of spirituality in primary schools, the historical position of religion in education must be explored. Indeed, children's access to spiritual development is often perceived as being synonymous with and dependent upon, their access to religious education. Over the past two hundred years, the changing role of religious instruction in the denominational system of national schools has developed.<sup>10</sup> This raises questions about the spiritual development of children who are withdrawn by their parents or guardians from religious education under Rule 69 of national schools. At the time of the study, 96% of primary schools in Ireland were operating under denominational patronage, with 90% of schools operating under Roman Catholic patronage.<sup>11</sup> Lack of school choice for religious minorities or non-religious parents in Ireland has resulted in international criticism from bodies such as the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.<sup>12</sup> As part of their role in the child's holistic development, primary teachers are tasked with nurturing the spirituality of the child in the context of their school's patronage and ethos. Indeed, issues surrounding the patronage of schools in Ireland<sup>13</sup> present a complex set of challenges to teachers in primary schools, when considered alongside the inextricable links between spiritually and religion.<sup>14</sup>

Curriculum documents require teachers to be sensitive to the spiritual domain of the child and to align with the requirements for schools presented in the Education Act so that the child's spirituality should be supported in a manner that is cognisant of

10 Patrician Kieran and Anne Hession, *Children, Catholicism and Religious Education*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2005).

11 Department of Education and Skills, "Looking at our Schools: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools," Accessed 17th January 2019. <https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Inspection-Reports/Publications/Evaluation-Reports-Guidelines/Looking-at-Our-School-2016-A-Quality-Framework-for-Primary-Schools.pdf>

12 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, "Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – Ireland," Accessed 2nd December, <http://daccessods.un.org/TMP/453855.246305466.html>

13 John Coolahan, Caroline Hussey and Fionnula Kilfeather, "The Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector", Accessed 31st October 2018, <http://www.education.ie/en/PressEvents/Conferences/Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector/The-Forum-on-Patronage-and-Pluralism-in-the-Primary-Sector-Report-of-the-Forums-Advisory-Group.pdf>

14 Amalee Meehan and Daniel O'Connell "The 'Deeper Magic of Life' — a Catholic response to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism," *The Furrow* 63, no.6 (2012): 286-294.

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the ethos of the school.<sup>15</sup> As Irish society continues to change, the conflation of religion and spirituality in educational discourse in an overwhelmingly denominational school system, creates many challenges for teachers. Indeed, policy requirements often fail to reflect the new demographic and the social changes in Irish society where increasing numbers of children come from non-religious or from minority belief worldviews. In this context, teachers may experience uncertainty about how to address and nurture the spiritual needs of children in their classrooms, where some children may also be withdrawn from religious education. Although Article 44 of the 1937 Constitution affords parents the right to have their child 'opt-out' of religious education,<sup>16</sup> it is widely recognised that locating the spiritual development of children within the curricular area of religious education *alone*, is problematic, as it fails to reflect the changing landscape of Irish society as well as the holistic nature of a child's spiritual development which extends beyond any one curricular area.

### TEACHERS' LIVED EXPERIENCE

As my research was concerned with the lived experience of primary school teachers and their perceptions of spirituality, a *qualitative* study was undertaken. For the purpose of the research, a case study approach was adopted in order to focus on a particular phenomenon, in a particular location. My study focused on primary school teachers in schools operating under Catholic patronage in the Munster region. In alignment with the case study approach, semi structured interviews were used as the main means of data collection. Semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to explore teachers' lived experience in a highly detailed manner.<sup>17</sup> Ethical integrity underpinned all aspects of the research process. Participants engaged in pre and post interviews due to the centrality of the human person within the study. The questions posed to the research participants emerged from a systematic review of the literature and interview transcripts were analysed in an inductive and thematic manner.<sup>18</sup>

15 Government of Ireland, "Education Act" 1998.

16 Government of Ireland, "Constitution of Ireland," Accessed 18th October 2021 : [https://www.constitution.ie/Documents/Bhunreacht\\_na\\_hEireann\\_web.pdf](https://www.constitution.ie/Documents/Bhunreacht_na_hEireann_web.pdf)

17 Dine Wahyuni "The research design maze: Understanding paradigms, cases, methods and methodologies", *Jamar* 10 no.1 (2012): 69-80.

18 Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using thematic analysis in psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2 (2006): 77-101, <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

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### PARTICIPANTS

Using a blend of purposive and convenience sampling,<sup>19</sup> six teachers, four female and two male, who worked in Catholic primary schools in Munster, were recruited for the purpose of the study. This ratio was representative of the gender ratio of primary school teachers at the time the study was conducted. This small sample size was impacted by the limited time available in the research field and the researcher's focus on schools operating under Catholic denominational patronage. At the time when the research was undertaken, 98% of schools in the county where the research was undertaken, were Catholic schools. Teachers in both urban and rural settings participated in the study

### SPIRITUALITY AND RELATIONSHIPS

Each teacher was interviewed and at the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to outline their understanding of the term spirituality. The research showed that participants viewed spirituality as involving relationships. These relationships were either with the self, with others, with the environment, with the Transcendent or a combination of all four. Half of the participants mentioned these 'self-others-environment-Transcendent' categories which form part of a model for spiritual wellbeing.<sup>20</sup> Further, there were links between how the scholarly literature described the spirituality of the child and how the teachers I was interviewing perceived it.<sup>21</sup> The teachers saw authentic, considerate relationships as being central to the spiritual development of the child and they discussed values and beliefs. One teacher said "I think that's where self-identity and self-awareness would come into it for me. You would be teaching it (spirituality) almost incidentally. You wouldn't call it spirituality, but that's what it is. From what I can see, you are helping to build that - their morals and their values and beliefs".

### SELF

According to the research participants, a relationship to the *self* refers to self-awareness, self-identity and mental health and wellbeing. As a result of this understanding, participants Cian and Caroline (not their real names) link the spiritual development of the

19 Abbas Tashakkori and Charles Teddlie, *Handbook of Mixed Methods in Social & Behavioral Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2003)

20 John Fisher "The four domains model: Connecting spirituality, health and wellbeing," *Religions* 2 (2011): 17–28, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel2010017>

21 David Hay and Rebecca Nye, *The spirit of the child (Rev. ed.)*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006).

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child to the Social, Personal Health Education (SPHE) curriculum. Megan defines spirituality as “that voice deep within you”, which facilitates present-moment awareness. The theme of wellbeing emerged from discussions with all participants as they spoke about their understanding of spirituality. A positive relationship with the self was identified as essential for positive mental health and wellbeing. Aine said “When I think of spirituality, I would think of the child as a person, valued, respected, treated equally... [Spirituality means] that the children are respected and valued in the classroom”. Yet, four of the six participants expressed a degree of *uncertainty* regarding the perceived links between spirituality and wellbeing. One participant Cian, grounded his understanding of spirituality deeply in his Catholic faith, and he feared that an individualised conceptualisation of spirituality was insufficient. “It [spirituality as being purely individual] doesn’t actually deal with anything for you... I think mindfulness has a very positive impact on your mental health but again, you need something to fall back on.”

### OTHERS

*Interpersonal* relationships were identified across all the interviews as imperative for a meaningful, spiritual life. Developing the child’s sense of what Steven called “the wider connectedness of it all” and the teacher’s awareness of this, emerged as essential for nourishing the spiritual domain of the child. The participants again highlighted SPHE lessons, as well as religious education lessons, as appropriate opportunities for spiritual development. Ella stated that for her, spirituality in the classroom was “teaching the children to be good, to be kind”. Cian believed that it is membership of a faith community that enables the child’s spirituality to flourish. He said “Everyone has their individuality, and they see spirituality differently, but if you break the link between school and that community through religion, you’re not really at anything with it”. However, only one third of the participants explicitly highlighted the need for spirituality to be grounded in religion.

For Megan, raising the child’s awareness of their membership of a global community, as well as a faith community, increased their spirituality. Through opportunities to be “in tune with the world around them” the teacher can facilitate the child’s spiritual development. When praying, Megan reminds the children, “It’s not just about you and your feelings. It’s about everything around you, you have to protect it and be keepers of the earth”. The findings of this small-scale study reveal that a relationship with others is the conceptualisation which emerged most consistently when

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teachers defined spirituality and outlined opportunities for spiritual development in the primary school classroom.

## THE TRANSCENDENT

While all participants mentioned spirituality as being related to religion in some sense, only four of the six participants mentioned relationship with God or transcendent relationships, in other words a relationship beyond the physical world and a concern with an ultimate reality as being significant.<sup>22</sup> Two participants spoke explicitly of personal relationships with God when describing their lived experiences of spirituality in the primary school classroom. Half of the participants believed that spirituality was concerned with that which is mysterious and beyond the human realm. Cian called this “something more” while for Ella “It’s belief in a higher being. A belief that there is a purpose to why we are here. A belief that there is something greater than ourselves, a oneness with that spiritual being, whoever he or she may be”.

## INFLUENTIAL FACTORS

When exploring what influenced participants’ understanding of spirituality, as well as their classroom practice in nurturing the spirituality of children, research findings highlighted that factors such as teachers’ own families, their personal faith and individual educational experience were key. As they attended to nurturing the child’s spirituality in the classroom, the research showed the interconnectedness and entanglement of teachers own relationships, experiences and identity with their professional practice in the classroom. For Steven, supporting children’s spiritual development is “personal, but it’s also learned experience, life experience and reflection on that. Also, I suppose with teacher training, you become more aware of how to deliver that to a child”. Caroline says that her spirituality is the “sum total” of her relationships and experiences while Áine spoke of her role as a parent, alongside her strong faith, as being influential. She stated that she wants children in her classroom to feel “nourished and cherished” while “always being conscious of children that I feel might be at risk or a little vulnerable”. Áine was also “acutely aware of mental health issues” and was conscious of supporting the spirituality of children in her class who were “struggling or anxious”.

The research findings from the six interviews showed that teachers experience multiple *challenges* as they attend to the

22 Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking spirituality: guidelines for a Christian spirituality for the twenty-first century*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012).

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children's diverse spiritual needs while negotiating educational and curricular policy requirements, school ethos and children's diverse backgrounds and spiritual expressions in a culturally responsive and respectful manner. Further, the teachers in the sample group had a sense of ambivalence and concern when it came to supporting the development of the child's spirituality, as they were also simultaneously navigating their own identity, beliefs, and values which, in turn informed their teaching practices and philosophies.<sup>23</sup> Against this backdrop, it is unsurprising that the research concluded that teachers experience a strong sense of uncertainty when it comes to fostering the child's spirituality in the primary school.

### UNCERTAINTY

The results of this small-scale study suggest that there is both ambiguity and ambivalence present in educational discourse on spirituality in Ireland. This impacts significantly on the manner in which spirituality is approached in Catholic primary school classrooms. Two thirds of the teachers in the small-scale study expressed discomfort and lack of confidence when discussing the plurality of spiritual expressions present in their classrooms. Teachers were also conscious of avoiding "indoctrination" or the "imposition" of beliefs when attempting to address children's spirituality. Cian believed that "it's up to us to show [the children] the morals and then [they] make up their own mind". He also expressed the need to "step back" from his personal beliefs at times. The research literature in this area suggests that when teachers experience uncertainty about their own role, it can restrict the spiritual development of the child through an avoidance of existential conversations and explorations.<sup>24</sup> Such uncertainty was highlighted by two-thirds of the teachers in the study.

Further, teachers were concerned about the "business/busyness" of classroom life and the temporal restrictions placed on them by external forces such as policy requirements. Cian said "We don't have the time. It's just everything is so loaded. Like the curriculum is overloaded ... It is the last thing that is done because there's no real urgency in a way, where there is a deadline with other projects ... The accountability is different. The accountability is your own ethics". Despite being aware of the child's rights to spiritual development, an over-crowded curriculum impacted

23 Parker J. Palmer, *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998).

24 Brendan Hyde, "Weaving the threads of meaning: a characteristic of children's spirituality and its implications for religious education," *British Journal of Religious Education* 30, no.3 (2008): 235-245.

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negatively on teachers' capacity to develop the spirituality of the child. Indeed, there appeared to be a conflict of interest as teachers spoke of their multiple responsibilities in the classroom. Ella noted that 'Until they start to change the system at secondary [level], we have to make sure our kids are ready for that. It's all very well taking time from the curriculum for mindfulness or SPHE or all different types of activities that promote the holistic child and we do that very much in primary schools, but parents want them to be ready for secondary school! So, there's no point in saying that we did mindfulness instead of Irish grammar'. The research findings pointed to the very real challenges in attending to the diverse beliefs of children in contemporary primary schools, while *also* upholding the ethos of the school as required by the Education Act.

It is important to stress that all of the teachers participating in the research agreed that the space for spirituality should *not* be confined to any one particular subject area. In the interviews, it was evident that spirituality was important to all of the teachers and that they value its contribution to school life and to the life of the child. Yet the research also highlighted the lack of guidance available to teachers regarding their role in fostering the spiritual development of children. Caroline stated that spirituality is "interconnected. It transcends everything" while Steven's believed that "it's not just within the curriculum. It transgresses all aspects of school life". For these teachers, spirituality is an element of their professional practice which permeates the curriculum, ethos, identity, and classroom atmosphere, yet it goes beyond all of those elements too.

## SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION IN IRELAND

This study set out to identify a small group of primary school teachers' perceptions of spirituality and their role in the spiritual development of the children in their professional care. The research concluded that there were both similarities and differences in the way a small group of primary school teachers understood spirituality. All of the research participants conceptualised spirituality in terms of relationships under the three main categories of relationships to self, others and the Transcendent. Further, the study found that teachers' understandings of spirituality were influenced by their families, educational experience, personal relationships, and life experiences. Despite being aware of the child's right to spiritual development, the research concluded that much of the teaching of spirituality is *not* explicitly identified and labelled as such in schools and, can often be seen as incidental. Teachers experience a degree of uncertainty regarding spiritual development in Catholic

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schools, particularly where a plurality of spiritual expressions exists. The historically embedded position of religion in education in Ireland has resulted in a conflation of religious education and spiritual development in discourse which has contributed to this uncertainty, particularly in an ever-changing, increasingly diverse Ireland. This research recommends that clearer guidance be given to teachers so that they can attend to every child's right to spiritual development. The spiritual development of the child should not be subsumed into generic policy documents, where it is mentioned in passing in relation to other curricular areas or educational issues. Rather, children's spirituality is of such importance that it should have an explicit and stand-alone focus in the policy context. This research reveals that teachers face uncertainty with regard to the spiritual development of the child and there is teacher uncertainty about what educational activity constitutes spiritual development, particularly in classrooms where pluralistic expressions of spirituality are present. Teachers need further guidance and support, not only in relation to the spiritual development of the child, but on the spirituality of the teacher within initial teacher education programmes and through continued professional development opportunities. While there may be confusion and conflation around diverse understandings of spirituality, the research found that there is also a need for further research on spirituality and education in Ireland. Interestingly, in Ireland there is very little existing research on the spirituality of the teacher and this needs to be addressed since teachers are key in addressing the child's right to spiritual development in primary schools.

**Fear.** Fear is a God given emotion that alerts us to possible dangers while energising us either to flee or fight. But we have to be careful not to let fear get out of control in such a way that instead of enhancing the quality of our lives, it diminishes it. Over the years I have found that two things help me to keep my realistic fears in check, firstly, trust in the providence of God, and secondly, the gift of a God-granted courage.

– PAT COLLINS, CM, *Freedom from Evil Spirits* (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 54.