

FAITH IN THE NEXUS



Pupil Spiritual Leadership In School

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Recognising children as spiritual leaders in school

The Faith in the Nexus research project.

In the Faith in the Nexus research project the term nexus refers to the connections between home, church school and the local church community.

The Faith in the Nexus project investigated the ways church primary schools, working in collaboration with churches and interested key groups, facilitated opportunities for children's exploration of faith and spiritual life in the home.

The project involved 20 church primary schools, a cross-section of Church of England and Catholic primary schools. Focus group interviews were held with 187 pupils and 267 adults (parents, staff, local clergy, and other interested key groups) and an online survey was completed by 1002 people; 730 pupils and 272 adults.

Key questions raised by the research:

How can we encourage others to recognise children's role as initiators and provide a climate where children's interest in faith and the spiritual dimension of life can flourish?

Where are the opportunities in school and church that enable children to develop as leaders in faith?

Key findings from the research:

Children are often the initiators of talk about faith or spirituality in the home.

The stimulus for these conversations includes activities, curriculum, and worship in school.

Leadership opportunities in school, formal or informal, give pupils confidence to develop and take ownership of their spiritual development.



A theme that emerges across all aspects of our research is that children are active agents in religious socialisation, and spiritual development. They are not passive recipients of a faith transmitted through school, church or home.

Primary schools often recognise and encourage this role for the child. The findings from our research reveal that pupils were involved in leadership programmes in most schools. However, children in all schools had an active role in instigating faith-related activities in the home, whether or not they were involved in leadership roles.

Recognition that children are active agents is woven into every aspect of our report, and a picture emerges of confident, articulate young people offering leadership and insights, as they seek meaning on faith-related matters.

There was little evidence seen of this rippling into the church environment.



Watch

View our animation explainer at nicer.org.uk

Conversation Starters.

What children said:

I wasn't really the helpful sort of person but then in year 6 I was just helping more people because of the Archbishop of York Award.

We created a group because we thought we needed to show that collective worship and celebrating God was important. I'm part of it because I go to Church and I know quite a lot about God.

It makes me feel better knowing that I've helped some people and that I've done all I can.



One of my favourite things is the easiest... put a smile on someone's face. If you are walking around you can just put a smile on someone's face by doing the smallest thing but you can make the biggest smile.

PUPIL SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN SCHOOL

Children are instigators of faith-talk in the home

The traditional understanding of faith-talk in the home is in the transmission from parent to child.

Our report revealed that, more often than not, talking about faith was instigated by the child.

The child's questions often sparked a conversation between parent and child.



I have some conversations with my Dad about God and Jesus, but we put it in different perspectives like the Crucifixion from the Roman perspective and the God and Jesus perspective. (Pupil)



Our report findings call into question the traditional understanding of the parental role in transmission of faith. Many children are not passive recipients, but actively seeking meaning.

Worship committees

- About half the participant schools in our research had a distinct spiritual leadership role for pupils. These teams had a wide variety of names from prayer pals to worship leaders.
- The groups had a variety of aims, but usually there was a focus on organising or participating in collective worship or liturgies, supporting the prayer of other pupils, or creating and sustaining places for prayer and reflection.

When we are preparing the Liturgy, anyone can prepare a liturgy, there's prayers and there's words that you can base it around and to keep a general flow. (Pupil)

Last week we asked people to stand up on stools and say the mission statement and say what they thought about it. (Pupil)

There were clearly staff guiding the work in the background; but the pupils relished opportunities for independence and autonomy, using their ideas and vision.

Confident leaders and peer leadership

- Young people were keen to volunteer for spiritual leadership roles within school.
- They also provided a range of motivations encouraging their peers to join these leadership teams, from their own faith stories, to a desire to encourage others to think about God.

It's an opportunity to do fun things in and out of school, to help other people in your community. (Pupil)

Developing Confidence

- Pupils spoke fluently about the Christian values in their school, how they understood these and how they were trying to recreate them in everyday life.
- Our research revealed confident, articulate young people offering leadership and insights, as they seek meaning on faith-related matters.

Through the children and their understanding [of Christian values], the parents gain a better understanding. (Staff)



Adults as facilitators

Our report findings reveal that although adults support and guide the various pupil-led initiatives, they take a facilitating role so that pupils are truly enabled as leaders.

Where pupil leadership is encouraged, it is important for adults to step back and allow some independent, creative thinking from the pupils.



It was so good because our teachers were not telling us what to do. (Pupil)

Pupil ownership of reflection space

- A theme that emerged – particularly in schools with reflection spaces, was how pupils expressed ownership of these spaces.
- In many schools, pupils volunteered to be responsible for overseeing reflection areas.
- The pupils approached their responsibility for developing these reflection spaces for pupils with great seriousness and concern.

The collective worship committee from last year came up with that idea to make the reflective station outside. (Pupil)

There's some wind chimes... there's some flowers, there's a mirror, there's a chalk board, there's a couple of prayers up. (Pupil)

God, He made all of our senses to be used for every single different task so why let them go to waste when we could use them to loop back to God. (Pupil)



Children's desire for solitude, for time to think is perhaps not sufficiently recognised in home, school or church. Adult-led initiatives for children emphasise providing activities, rather than facilitating opportunities for wondering and silence.

Caring for others

One example of activities that schools had in place to encourage pupil leaders and to put faith into action was the Archbishop of York Young Leaders Award (AYYLA).

This AYYLA leadership and character award seeks to empower young leaders to change society and inspire others.

Pupils identified that it was encouraging them to think of others, but also it was developing leadership skills.

Pupils said that participating in the award had made a difference to them.

It encourages you to do things that are not things you would do in your everyday life. So you would, like, clean the town. You wouldn't do that every day. (Pupil)

It made me more confident to do more things. (Pupil)



Questions for discussion

How do children come to learn and understand what Christian leadership involves?

How do you support and encourage opportunities for leadership amongst the more vulnerable and disadvantaged children?

How are parents and families included in supporting their children as active agents in their faith?

What resources and support could help support you in empowering children as leaders and initiators of faith?

FURTHER READING

For the full Faith in the Nexus report and to watch our animation go to nicer.org.uk

Report references:

Child as initiator. pp. 30-32

Pupil leadership. pp. 55, 80-81; Conclusion. pp.84-91

