The Nature of Nurture in Inclusive Religious Education

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Abstract

This paper considers whether nurture has value as a concept within plural religious education settings through a critical review of a curriculum which made belief-nurture a core aim. The findings identify areas where belief-specific nurture in a plural setting raises difficulties: curriculum design, lesson content, the position of the teacher and the role of belief communities. It is concluded that, while there are significant challenges around the concept of nurture in relation to teaching about religions and beliefs in common schools, there is some justification for its use, and a model which conceptualises nurture in a broader way is proposed.

Keywords:

Nurture; religious education; education; beliefs

Introduction

Consideration of 'nurture' has, for at least two decades, been mostly neglected as a concept in academic debate in religious education. Traditionally, nurture was associated with faith formation into one religion or even a single denomination. Groome (1981), for example, places discussion of nurture within the theological debate on the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*) between those who affirm the need for an instantaneous conversion experience in contrast to those who see salvation as a gradual process into which one grows (is *nurtured*). While he favours a nurturing approach, Groome (1981, 484) highlights the difficulty in employing the concept because of the power relation in this traditional form of nurture; he believes religious educators who pursue a nurturing approach put themselves 'in a "power-

over" and "deciding for them" position' with respect to their students. Cooling (2010) too draws attention to the nature of the discourse around nurture when connected to religion; in the UK religious nurture is usually juxtaposed with autonomy, to negative effect. And Hand (2003) in his argument for the abolition of faith schools, defines nurture in a faith as a type of religious instruction - 'teaching for belief in religious propositions'. It is probable that these and similar constructions of nurture have resulted in the concept being largely neglected in contemporary academic debates in religious education, and while Groome (2006) made an attempt to develop his own model of religious education employing a form of nurture where the teacher is a facilitator and the student a partner in the exercise of 'shared praxis', the idea of nurturing children into religion in educational settings has received little attention outside of faith schools where, in some contexts, the task of the teacher is still articulated in terms of 'evangelism' and 'mission'. (Dineen 2015; Conway 2015).

It is unsurprising then that talk of nurture has not featured in prominent formulations of religious education which aim to be inclusive, such as the *Toledo Guiding Principles on Teaching about Religions and Beliefs in Public Schools* (ODIHR Advisory Council of Experts on Freedom of Religion or Belief 2007). Nonetheless, there exists a challenge to this avoidance of nurture arising from an increasing awareness of the importance of nurture in child development (Cooper and Whitebread 2007) and from a view articulated by some educators and religious parents of children in common schools that a child's faith cannot be left at the school door. Rather, a holistic approach to education should take account of all aspects of the young person, including their beliefs (Sagberg 2014; 2012). Indeed, this paper aims to investigate an example of just such a perspective by researching a belief-nurture approach taken to education in religion and beliefs in a sector of schools, Community National (CN) schools, in Ireland.

In the 2000s CN schools were established to meet an urgent need for more Primary school places, especially for newcomer children. In a state where 96% of primary schools are run by Christian churches (Coolahan, Hussey, and Kilfeather 2012), the introduction of a new school type provided by the state attracted attention, particularly regarding how it would address religion in its curriculum and ethos. With the exception of a small group of 'multi-denominational schools' which do not offer religious education as a compulsory element of their curriculum, all schools in Ireland provide confessional forms of religious education as an integrated part of the school day (Mawhinney 2007). For the vast majority of children this is a Catholic religious education based upon a Church syllabus (Irish Episcopal Conference 2015). The aims of this Catholic religious education are to cultivate faith formation and encourage active participation in the life and mission of the church. Choosing to follow a distinct path, the CN sector provided a religious education syllabus which it hoped could be inclusive of all religions and none. The characteristic spirit of the Community National schools was designed to: be holistic; be nurturing; respect parents as primary educators; respect different beliefs; value inter-belief dialogue; be 'of the Community' (www.cns.ie). Arguably, this attempt for the state to pursue a middle road in relation to religion in schools was an attempt to accommodate the long-standing expectation in Ireland that religious and moral values should be cultivated in schools (Finlay 2007) alongside the need to take account of a changing population with a greater diversity of beliefs and a more ethnically diverse mix of children (Faas, Darmody, and Sokolowska 2015).

The characteristic spirit of the CN schools was given expression in a programme of beliefs and values, *Goodness Me Goodness You* (GMGY), that involved learning in both common

and separate belief groups. This was, however, the cause of some controversy that made national headlines (RTE News 2012; O'Brien 2017) and resulted in the schools abandoning the practice of pupil-separation by belief (Faas, Smith, and Darmody 2018). The CN schools have continued to grow (currently there are 17 CN schools) and develop their GMGY curriculum, but it is the aim of this paper to focus on what might be learnt from the initial attempt to actualise belief-nurture through a curriculum in a common school. The focus of this study will be on the first version of the Junior GMGY curriculum.

Expressions of Nurture in Education

The concept of nurture has come to increasing prominence as awareness of wellbeing in education has grown. One notable example is the emergence of nurture groups, a strategy informed by attachment theory and sociocultural theory of learning (Cooper and Whitebread 2007) developed to enhance young people's wellbeing and to support those who experience social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Bennathan and Boxall 1996). Nurture in this context is understood in psychological terms as a necessary process in the development of positive self-regard, the ability to regulate behaviour and form relationships with others (Bennathan and Boxall 1996; Burnett 1998; Goodman 1997). Classic nurture groups involve the placement of students, half a day at a time, in a setting specifically designed to meet their developmental needs and cultivate educational progress in a structured programme. It can involve informal learning as well as structured educational activities and social elements, such as eating together. Cooper and Whitebread (2007) point to two theoretical foundations that inform this view of nurture, Bowlby's (1989) attachment theory and Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory of learning, although there is also common ground shared with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. Primarily, they argue that healthy developmental outcomes in child development arise out of complex intimate interactions

between the child and his or her carers. These 'proximal processes' involve 'complex, reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects and symbols in its immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner and Cesi 1994, 572).

Empirical studies of nurture group effects have tended to employ psychological tools of diagnosis and measurement such as: the Boxall Profile (Bennathan and Boxall 1996) designed to measure emotional and behavioural functioning, including behaviour associated with academic engagement; Goodman Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman 1997) which measures hyperactivity, conduct problems, emotional symptoms, peer problems and pro-social behaviour; and the Behavioural Indicators of Self-esteem Scale (BIOS) (Burnett 1998). Across these studies the effect of nurture groups ranges but the concept of nurturing is regarded as uncontentious as the nurture in this case meets specific fundamental and universal human needs and, as such, is a legitimate and worthy aspiration within education, particularly of young children; consideration of religiousness or belief is absent. Piedmont (2009, 101), however, challenges this. In his review into psychological modes of human personality he concludes that 'any model of human behaviour *must* include numinous constructs if that model were to be comprehensive.' Warin (2017) too emphasises the need to go beyond basic concepts of attachment in relation to nurture and finds a strong connection between nurture group principles and the concept of care, which she describes as the 'close cousin' of nurture. She draws on the work of Noddings (2013) and Tronto (1993) who advocate an education based upon an 'ethic of care' and, in doing so, highlights the centrality of values to care and nurture. Noddings (2017) contrasts a teacher who cares for their pupils in a general way and the teacher who cares in a relational way. In the former case the teacher provides what they assume to be the pupils' needs, in the second case the teacher

listens and responds to the needs that are expressed. The latter is based on an ethic of care that is other-oriented, cooperative and based on receptive listening.

From a philosophical perspective, Alexander (2015) would concur that nurture cannot be considered only within a psychological domain; Alexander (2015, 168) believes 'we cannot understand what it might mean to relate to or care for someone unless the concepts are situated in a way of life that attributes meaning to these activities', such as a religious tradition, though he notes this must be balanced with 'agency', 'intelligence' and 'criticality' so that nurture into a community avoids becoming indoctrination. This critical-nurture approach reflects a liberal position adopted by some defenders of faith schooling in democratic societies (McLaughlin 1992). As noted above, Groome (1981) has applied a critical-nurturing approach to the development of a Catholic religious education curriculum where the teacher is a facilitator and the student a partner in the exercise of 'shared praxis'; the intention is to nurture each child's faith journey and serve the common good. In this view, belief-nurture in the faith-school is not to be thought of as proselytising but a natural part of child development in the journey towards autonomy. Similarly, Thiessen (1993) argues for a balanced form of nurture which recognises a child's development towards autonomy. Speaking from a Christian context, he believes children should be nurtured 'boldly' (p. 244), without embarrassment, but a religious education should also aim for them to grow into 'normal autonomy' (p. 255). He distinguishes 'normal' autonomy from 'absolute' autonomy which is completely independent choice – something which he believes is impossible. Growth towards normal autonomy requires cognitive development; where nurture does not facilitate growth to analysis, synthesis and evaluation it is 'reduced to indoctrination' (p 261).

These arguments for critical nurture may fit comfortably within a liberal conception of a faith-school however, outside of that context, they are seen to be problematic, especially where religion is involved. One way around this has been to place religious belief within a wider, more inclusive concept of spirituality. Indeed, in many national contexts, talk of belief-nurture has largely been replaced by concepts of spiritual development, care and well-being in common schools (Marianne de Souza et al. 2009), and with this has come an assumption that spirituality is a common human experience. Fraser & Grootenboer (2004), for example, report on the benefits perceived by teachers in New Zealand through the nurture of spiritual wellbeing in secular classrooms. Similarly, in the UK, Hay & Nye's (2006) research with young children, concludes by advocating that children be nurtured into 'relational consciousness' as a universal spiritual ethic. It is possible to identify in these studies something of Dewey's (1916) pragmatism in his ambition for American common schools to dissolve dualisms between the particularistic faiths of individuals and to nurture children in common values. While schools should not teach religion, Dewey believed they should cultivate the 'religious' which was, among other things, 'a sense of human nature as a co-operating part of a larger whole.' (Dewey 1934, 25). Wardekker and Miedma (2001, 85) imagine what a Dewey-inspired religious education might look like: it would 'not be conceptualised primarily or even solely in terms of knowledge or cognitions' but, rather, experiential engagement in 'practice and processes' for 'personal identity formation'.

Others are dissatisfied with this shift, rejecting the language of spiritual development in education entirely (Blake 2006) or demanding a critical approach in which spirituality is linked to religious communities or belief traditions (Wright 2000). Totterdell (2005, 173) says of Dewey that ' he erred egregiously in thinking that a sense of 'centredness' or common patterns of understandings can be achieved bereft of the particularities by which truth, belief

and knowledge of the difference between right and wrong are transmitted.' Yet, despite these objections, a challenge remains if we take seriously the assertion from theorists, like Alexander, that education cannot be value-free. Where this point is overlooked and beliefs or values are ignored, there is a worry that the default position in common schools becomes a form of secularism (Copley 2005). Cooling (2010, 61) puts this position baldly: 'Neutrality amounts to practical atheism'.

This view of neutrality as a form of assimilation corresponds with those who argue for culturally responsive education (Ladson-Billings 1995) in the face of a tendency in education systems to emphasise a dominant culture. Indeed, it was a concern that CN schools should not just be culturally responsive but 'culturally sustaining' (Paris 2012) that led this group of schools in Ireland to develop a belief-inclusive curriculum and to attempt, like Sagberg (2012) in a Norwegian context, to reclaim the concept of nurture. The founders of CN schools in Ireland were clear when formulating the principles of the schools that they wanted a curriculum capable of belief-nurturing pupils from a wide range of faiths and none without conflating their beliefs into a vague spirituality. They took seriously two ideas: first, that education of any kind cannot be value-free and inevitably involves nurture; second, that children's beliefs cannot be set aside when they step inside a classroom. The CN alternative was 'to nurture the development of the whole child, and… value all dimensions of the child's family and community life, including beliefs and religions.'(www.cns.ie). Indicating what marks the sector as different from others, the General Secretary of the body with responsibility for CNS schools stated:

A unique feature of our model is the common belief-nurturing programme encourages pupils to engage with their families and belief communities to learn more about their own faith or

secular beliefs… What is considered a private aspect of the child's life in some school types is brought into the public space in a community national school. (O'Brien 2017)

In seeking to balance the wish to be inclusive in a plural setting along with the wish to cater for separate belief-specific nurture, CN schools developed a patron's programme in beliefs and values that involved learning in both common and separate groups. In both cases the class teachers led the lessons irrespective of their personal belief. The curriculum, *Goodness Me Goodness You* (GMGY), was developed over a period of years in Junior and then Senior programmes. Guidance materials and resources were developed and made available to teachers via a dedicated website.

What follows is an investigation of the belief-nurturing approach in CN schools based on an analysis of the curricular materials used to teach about religion, beliefs and values in the schools in the Junior programme. The primary research questions were: how is the curriculum designed to facilitate belief-nurture? What conception of nurture and/or religious education informs the curriculum? What content is covered and what pedagogical approaches are adopted? And how are the participants (teacher and pupil) as well as the belief communities positioned within the curriculum?

Methodology

A documentary analysis was conducted of the lesson plans for the Junior programme of GMGY (for children aged four to eight) which, at the time of the research, was used by all CN schools. The material reviewed was the lessons for each week of the four years of lower primary education (Junior Infants to Second Class). In total 140 lessons were analysed. As the content was closer to text-book materials than traditional lesson plans, a methodology was

needed that provided a framework for the documentary analysis similar to textbook analysis. Pingel (2010, 71) provides a list of criteria for textbook evaluation under five headings: curriculum components; formal criteria; types of texts/modes of presentation; analysis of content; and perspective of presentation. The first three of these are largely descriptive and the last two analytical. Comparison with Stradling's (2001) criteria for the evaluation of History textbooks also highlights the absence of pedagogical considerations in Pingel's criteria, such as: What is the function of the student tasks? Do the materials introduce pupils to key concepts or is it largely descriptive? Do the materials encourage a constructivist or direct instruction orientation? What is the position of the student and teacher constructed through the materials?

An analytical tool that combined aspects of both Pingel and Stradling's frameworks, but was sensitive to the specific GMGY material, was therefore developed (see Table) and employed to analyse the texts. Analysis involved highlighting the elements of each data source which related to the 'data queries' in the table, then summarising these in tabular form. Following that, key themes were identified which directly related to the research questions. These were: curriculum design; lesson content; position of the teacher and role of belief communities.

Findings

The findings are set out below according to the themes noted above which arose during the data analysis.

Curriculum Design

Curriculum design was undoubtedly challenging for CN schools given the fact that, as a new school-type, they were beginning with a blank page. Initially, basic questions around content,

pedagogy and even audience were uncertain or contested. Nonetheless, the following choices were made by those responsible for religious education in CN schools.

For each school year the GMGY curriculum contained material for three terms of work. The majority of lessons were designated 'shared' but three lessons in the second term each year were 'belief specific' when pupils were separated into one group from: Catholic and Christian Orthodox; Muslim; Christian (Protestant); Hindu/Buddhist/Humanist (HBH). Pedagogically, there was an emphasis upon experiential learning. In practical terms, this meant: the use of stimulus materials such as a song or story; engaging pupils in exploratory conversations; the provision of a time for reflection or prayer; play or discovery-based activities; and home activities (usually a worksheet to be completed with parents to enable discussion about the lessons with children in a way reflective of the family beliefs). Guidance materials and resources were developed and made available to teachers via a dedicated website. In all lessons, the class teachers led the lessons irrespective of their personal belief.

It was felt that the separate belief-specific lessons and the building of strong home-school relationships would allow children's beliefs to be nurtured within the school community in an authentic way, but would also equip them to engage in the shared lessons in dialogue with their peers (Watson 2009). This is similar to a culturally responsive approach which aims to encourage pupils to draw on cultural 'funds of knowledge' (Moll and González 1994). Others oppose such an approach as it places a high burden on the families and children to know and explain beliefs and assumes a readiness for dialogue which Ackerman (1980) and Thiessen (1993) believe is not appropriate until a foundation in a 'primary culture' has been secured.

Evidence from research into the GMGY curriculum in CN schools conducted by Faas et al (2018) found, however, that children were enabled to be actively involved in shaping their religious identity through the inter-religious approach employed. Yet, despite this positive outcome, it is possible to highlight two ethical problems with the curriculum design: equality and authenticity. First, the particular groupings used within the GMGY curriculum for belief-specific lessons created a hierarchy of beliefs as well as artificial groups for minority beliefs and those of no religious faith. The grouping of Humanists with Hindus and Buddhists is particularly anomalous in this regard given their contrasting nature. Clearly, these decisions were influenced by the school populations (Faas, Smith, and Darmody 2018), but a system which seeks to accommodate belief-specific nurture for its pupils in distinct groups, separate from whole-class teaching, requires a curriculum design that allows each belief-group to be given equal status and attention. Further, it also has to acknowledge the inner diversity

Second, while the curriculum is designed to employ pedagogical methods which are in step with a social constructivist form of learning that is common in other elements of the Irish primary curriculum (NCCA 2009), the emphasis on experiential learning in respect of belief-nurture raises specific difficulties. In particular, what experiences (including those considered generic spiritual ones) are appropriate outside of a religious setting (Thompson 2004) and can they be said to be authentic experiences if they are conducted outside sacred venues, without the appropriate personnel or without key artefacts? Barnes (2006) is particularly critical of experiential RE in common schools, for the reason that it is likely to misrepresent religion. Court (2013, 261) would concur as, for her, religious education which is authentic involves experiential learning cultivated by a religious teacher who 'really believes in God, the soul and the religion he or she teaches'.

Clearly, separation of children into belief groups might address the equality issue but it would only meet Court's authenticity criteria if the children's groups were led by committed believers from the various traditions. The alternative is a curriculum design that is wholly inclusive and which draws clear boundaries around what kinds of experiential activities are appropriate in a shared environment.

Lesson content

In lessons for shared classes, the emphasis was mostly on social and emotional aspects of nurture, including caring relations like those advocated by Noddings (2017). The lessons' aims were, for example, to 'nurture children to live childhood to the full' and 'nurture the child's capacity to give and receive love, as the basis of true esteem for self and for other…'. The materials included stories (mostly with no religious connection) to encourage virtues of non-judgment, peace and sharing. And there were activities suggested for the exploration of emotions: identifying emotions, dealing with fear, worry, and sadness. For the shared sessions there was also materials provided that aimed to nurture children into the school community. It could be said that the choices about content were informed by a conception of belief that was similar to the concept of 'spirituality' noted in the literature review above – a holistic view of and an experiential view of (Hay and Nye 2006). In this view, human nature is part of a greater whole and all humans can have access to shared spiritual values and virtues which are both inside and outside of organised belief systems. These values and virtues can be cultivated through experiential learning and it is possible to develop these in plural settings without the particularistic language of religion.

At times, however, where religious stories are included in the shared lessons, the difficulty of this syncretistic conception of belief-nurture in shared classes is highlighted. In one lesson on Christmas, the teacher is provided with songs with the following lines: 'God loves you Mary, God's Word is true / Blessed Mary, Blessed are You'; 'I am a Muslim, the things I say/ In everything I do everyday/ We are Muslims, the things we say/ In everything we do every day'. The material comes with the rider: 'use as appropriate'. Arguably, the owning of beliefs in plural classrooms is healthy but it requires a clear framework in order to maintain 'core integrity' (Sahajpal 2018), otherwise the selective use of confessional material may create confusion or offence. Indeed, Osbeck and Lied (2012) have shown how teachers' hegemonic speech genre in religious education settings can have a particular impact upon how religion is valued by pupils, so in the presentation of confessional material, there is potential for teachers to exert an influence over pupils. This example highlights, therefore, how careful consideration is needed regarding the choice of lesson content in plural classrooms. More than that, it indicates that a conception of belief-nurture as generic 'spiritual development' is insufficient for plural settings and that a conception of belief is needed which acknowledges differences as well as commonalities and so helps teachers to draw limits around what can and can't be shared.

In the choice of content it is also possible to see a consistent desire to represent religion and belief as something real and engaged. In that sense, it corresponds with Jackson (2000) and Shaw's (2018) views that education about religions and beliefs should focus upon 'lived' and 'dynamic' expressions. Not only that, but the language used in the activities is often invitational, asking for responses from the children. There is an assumption therefore that

there is a connection between the exploration of beliefs and the inner world of the learner. In other words, the content presents a perspective that through education about lived religion, as well as interaction with diversity and reflection upon commonalities and differences, it is possible to have one's identity developed and enriched. This comes close to the concepts of *lebenswelt*[1] (life-world) (Heimbrock 2001; Lotz 2001) and edification (Jackson 1997) expressed in other religious education literature which connects learning about religion and beliefs with a developmental and affective model of education.

Position of the Teacher and Faith Communities

A third significant finding that came from the curriculum analysis was how a belief-nurture approach raised a range of challenges for teachers and faith communities arising from how they were positioned in the design and content of materials.

Pupils were, unsurprisingly, of paramount concern in the GMGY principles and curriculum, and the emphasis on developing awareness of self and others reflects an approach found in much literature on nurture or spiritual development in plural settings (Hyde 2009), but in the analysis of the position of the teacher in the curriculum, it was very evident that the teacher's values and beliefs were almost entirely overlooked. In Muslim lessons, for example, the teacher was expected to lead Muslim pupils in saying *La ilaha illa Allah* (There is no god but Allah); in the Catholic/Orthodox lessons the teacher recites the *Hail Mary*, the *Lord's Prayer*

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[1] Lebenswelt or 'life-world' is a concept from the phenomenological tradition of philosophy associated with Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty that understands our way of knowing about the world to be experiential and subjective, yet to contain within it the possibility of shared experience. So a young person's life-world is both their everyday life conditions and their inner life (subjective construct).

and *Glory Be to the Father*. This practice has the potential to minimise the unique truths claimed by religious believers (if they can be said without being meant) but also to compromise the integrity of the religious belief of the teacher, something Court (2013) believes is a pre-requisite for belief-nurture. Advocates of nurture groups and spiritual development both highlight the need for teachers to have sympathy with the values underpinning the curriculum they are delivering (Monchinski 2010; Kennedy and Duncan 2009), but nothing is said about what happens if this is not the case. And where some, like Cooling (2010), have considered the importance of a teacher's belief in education, he does so in isolation from pupils' beliefs. Clearly, the findings above support Ellsworth's (1989) contention that for education to be critically and culturally aware it is not enough to focus solely on the student; ethical issues of teacher identity, integrity and agency mustn't be neglected and it is essential that neither the teacher nor the pupil are put in a position where they are asked to say, do or believe things which are in conflict with their core values or beliefs.

Indeed, this study highlights that pupil-teacher relationships are at the heart of education which aspires to be nurturing and so, inevitably, their concerns are fundamentally interdependent. Going further, and following Bronffenbrenner (1979), it can be seen that this teacher-pupil relationship takes place within a wider ecology of support systems, including families and communities, and this was evident in this study through the way in which the curriculum materials included families and communities of belief. As mentioned above, there was an explicit effort to engage families in an ongoing way through the use of 'Home work sheets'. In regard to belief communities, however, there was marked inconsistency around the role they played in the belief-nurture materials. A clear preference could be seen towards building relationships with the Catholic church through cooperation over sacramental

preparation (including the publication of a CN schools' guidance document). By contrast, for all other belief groups, there were no belief-specific documents on the website and no other explicit references in the curriculum materials to clergy or community leaders' involvement in belief-specific classes. This suggests that the social status of religion can play a significant role in shaping the way a school provides belief-specific nurture and more attention is needed to issues of equality and diversity where belief-nurture is an aim. Indeed, the findings of Faas et al (2018) show this is something already acknowledged by the CN schools' sector.

Discussion

This research identifies a very important gap in both religious education literature and child development literature in relation to a conceptualisation of nurture which gives attention to the beliefs and values of children in plural classrooms. The review of literature above reminds us of the essential nurturing role of education, especially in the case of young children. This role is visible as a desire in certain schools to include belief within a conceptualisation of nurture, a desire which has legitimacy from both philosophical (Alexander 2015), psychological (Piedmont 2009) and cultural (Paris 2012) perspectives. The findings from this study point, however, to the complexities and challenges inherent in such a task, especially in developing a curricular programme of beliefs and values education which has a belief-nurturing aim. Arguably, the evidence confirms some of the concerns mentioned earlier in relation to power relations (Groome 2006) and the potential for nurture to lapse into religious instruction (Hand 2003) and so it is possible to conclude that the concept of nurture remains problematic. If it is to have legitimacy and value as a concept within religious education in plural settings, it must be conceptualised in a more comprehensive and balanced

way than currently exists. Specifically, based on the findings from this research, it is suggested that a comprehensive and balanced model of nurture should take account of three key factors: ethical, belief and care. These are shown in the diagram below (see Figure).

A Conceptual Model of Nurture in School Settings
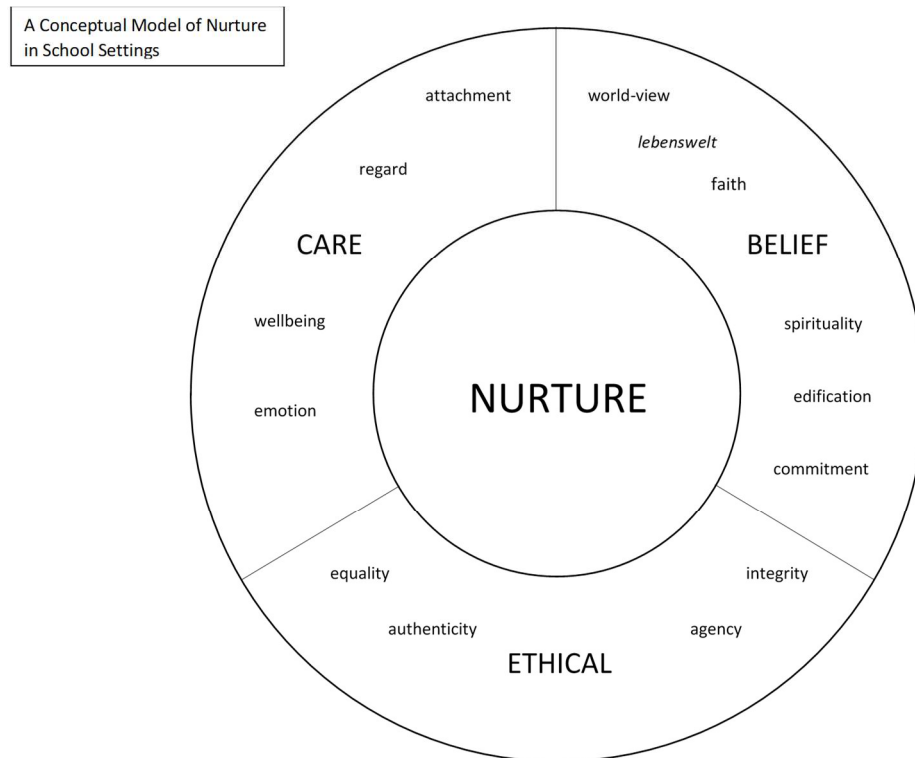
The ethical factor in a nurture setting concerns issues of integrity, agency, authenticity and equality and how they relate to both teacher and pupil. To develop an ethical approach that takes account of such issues, practical measures will be of help. These may include, for example, a code of practice (Cooling 2010), guidance on teaching styles which are appropriate or not appropriate in the different common and separate contexts (Jackson 2014) and clear roles defined for faith communities and teaching staff, with reasonable opt-outs and principles of minimum entitlement for pupils (Mawhinney et al. 2010).

In terms of belief, there is similarly a need for balance in taking account of the beliefs of both teacher and pupil and how issues of faith, commitment and spirituality are dealt with. While

there are merits to a spiritual and holistic approach (Sagberg 2014), it is important too to develop an appropriate pedagogy which is sensitive to the need for limits around belief-nurture language and practice within a shared setting. Helpfully, Jackson (1997; 2014) has identified core practices for teaching about beliefs in education in plural settings, these include developing a clear and agreed vocabulary regarding the representation of religions and beliefs; and developing learners' competence in skills of reflexivity, dialogue and interpretation of religions and beliefs. Indeed, Jackson (1997) asserts that the outcome from Interpretive RE is *edification*. Edification, like *lebenswelt*, assumes a connection between the study of beliefs and the inner world of the learner. For those wishing to reclaim nurture, therefore, they might usefully draw from the broad range of concepts already used within professional and theoretical discussions of religious education to define the possibilities and the boundaries of nurture.

In relation to the care factor, we have seen that through their emphasis on attachment theory and social constructivist theories of learning, the nurture group movement has identified the very significant role that attachment, positive self-regard, emotional balance and well-being have in relation to creating positive learning environments. They have also built a strong evidence base to demonstrate the foundational importance of teacher-pupil relationships within a conception of nurture (Cooper and Whitebread 2007). The significance of this relationship is something which Thiessen (1993) and Groome (2006) have both recognised in religious education settings, but their work has been mostly confined to single-identity faith schools; the evidence here shows that in a plural environment the importance of the teacher-pupil relationship in a nurturing context can be minimised or overlooked, especially where there are distinct differences between the beliefs of the pupils and the teacher. An inclusive conception of belief-nurture needs, therefore, to acknowledge the interdependent nature of

the teacher-pupil relationship. Moreover, to be culturally sensitive to beliefs and values, it should be understood that the teacher-pupil relationship occurs within a context of wider nurture that involves families, carers and belief communities, as well as other groups and organisations (Bronfenbrenner 1979). As noted earlier, however, this requires teachers to listen receptively and not jump to conclusions about what they consider best for others (Noddings 2017).

Conclusion

The use of the term nurture raises particular challenges in inclusive religious education settings, not least because of its historical associations with indoctrination, but also because of issues around curriculum design, lesson content, positioning of the teacher and role of belief communities, as noted above. For some, such as O'Sullivan (2005), the use of the term 'nurture' in Community National schools might be regarded as part of a transitional phase in Ireland as the country moves from a view of education as strongly moralistic to one which is more 'social' with an increased emphasis upon autonomy and diverse identities. In this view, concepts like 'nurture' lie at a fault-line of moral language in education and will eventually fall into the crack which will inevitably open between religious and secular approaches. Tuohy (2013), however, argues that increased diversity should not mean that the moral aspects of education fall away or be forgotten. Instead, he believes, the moral language of education should be reshaped and enriched by the changing environment. The evidence from this study highlights, however, that there are difficulties with this position because of assumptions and associated practices that are inherited when old concepts are adopted in a new context. So, where moral language such as nurture is employed in plural settings, it must be reshaped. Specifically, in religiously diverse settings, the nature of nurture should be

understood in ways that are both more expansive and more precise than currently exists in religious education literature. More expansive, in that nurture should include consideration of ethical, belief and care factors; more precise, in that the meaning of these factors, and their limits, is specified and clearly explained. The model above provides a foundation on which such conceptual work might be built.

Finally, this study points to key aspects of nurture in practice which require careful consideration where a nurturing approach is adopted in inclusive religious education settings: the position of the teacher, the role of belief communities and the dynamics of the teacher-pupil relationship. Not only are these specific aspects of concern to teachers and school leaders, but they are important areas for further research if the nature of nurture is to be more fully understood and developed in both theory and practice.

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