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Community National Schools – an Irish experiment in nurturing beliefs and values

James Nelson, Queen's University Belfast

Abstract

Community National Schools (CNS) emerged in the 2000s to meet a particular and urgent need for more Primary school places in Ireland, especially for newcomer children. The characteristic spirit of the school system is inclusive, child-centred and respectful of diversity; CNS also aim to nurture each child within the belief-specific tradition of their family. A beliefs and values curriculum, Goodness Me Goodness You (GMGY), was developed to meet these aims but has since its inception drawn criticism and caused some controversy.

Through a documentary analysis which employs an adapted version of Pingel's textbook evaluation method, this paper provides a critical review of the GMGY Junior curriculum and identifies three areas where belief-specific nurture in a plural setting raises particular difficulties – curriculum design, lesson content and the position of the teacher and belief communities.

With reference to debates on nurture and religious education, it is argued that important lessons can be learned from the CNS experiment, primarily regarding the need for a framework which conceptualises nurture in a more comprehensive way than currently exists in plural education settings.

Introduction

This paper aims to investigate a belief-nurture approach taken to education in religion and beliefs in Community National Schools (CNS) in Ireland. In the 2000's these 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 et al. 2012), the introduction of a new school type attracted attention, particularly regarding how it would address religion through its curriculum and ethos. In an attempt to be inclusive of all religions and none the characteristic spirit of the school system 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).

These aims were 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). As a result a curriculum review was initiated by the national curriculum body (NCCA). The evidence considered in this paper was conducted as part of that review. The focus here is on the concept of belief-nurture and the attempts made to actualise it through a curriculum in a common school.

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 & Whitebread 2007) developed to enhance young people's wellbeing and to support those who experience social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Bennathan & 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 & Boxall 1996; Burnett 1998; Goodman 1997). Nurturing is regarded as uncontentious and concerned with universal human needs; consideration of religiousness or belief is absent. Piedmont (2009, p.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.'

From a philosophical perspective, Alexander (2015, p.168) would concur as he 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). Groome (1981) has also 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 (Thiessen 1993).

In common schools, talk of belief-nurture has largely been replaced by concepts of spiritual development, care and well-being (de Souza et al. 2009) and with this has come an assumption that spirituality is a common human experience. 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).

The founders of CNS in Ireland in formulating the principles of the schools were clear too 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. If overlooked, and beliefs are ignored, some worry the default position becomes a form of nurture into secularism (Copley 2005; Cooling 2010). The CNS 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.' (Community National Schools (CNS) n.d.)

What follows is an investigation of the belief-nurturing approach in CNS based on an analysis of the curricular materials used to teach about religion, beliefs and values in the schools.

Methodology

An analysis was conducted of the lesson plans for the Junior programme of *GMGY* (for children aged 4-8) using an adapted form of textbook-analysis. Both Pingel (2010, p.71) and Stradling (2001) provide criteria for textbook evaluation and an analytical tool that combined aspects of both, but was sensitive to the specific *GMGY* material, was developed (see Figure 1) to analyse the texts. Selected findings from the analysis which relate to belief-nurture are set out below.

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Curriculum components <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum context (educational system; school type) • Accompanying guidelines 2. Formal criteria <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source (online location) and availability • Target group 3. Types of texts/mode of presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Author's descriptive text • Activities/tasks • Third party sources/materials (stories, videos, lyrics) • Online links 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Analysis of content <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accuracy • Up-to-date portrayal • Topic selection/balance/representativeness • Proportion of facts and views/interpretations 5. Pedagogical Approaches <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Function of tasks • Direct instruction or constructivist • Conceptual or descriptive • Position of the student • Position of the teacher 6. Perspective of presentation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Author's assumptions • Single or multiple perspectives • Cognitive or affective orientation
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Figure 1

Findings and discussion

Curriculum Design and Pedagogical Approach

Curriculum design was undoubtedly challenging for CNS given the fact that, initially, basic questions around content, pedagogy and even audience were uncertain or contested. Nonetheless, the following choices were made by CNS:

For each school year the *GMGY* curriculum would contain 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 would be separated into one of: 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 of plural 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). Overall, however, the curriculum design creates three inherent difficulties. First, 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. Second, the particular groupings used within the *GMGY* curriculum for belief-specific lessons create a hierarchy of beliefs as well as artificial groups. The grouping of Humanists with Hindus and Buddhists is particularly anomalous and raises major questions around fairness of treatment and could well undermine the provision of belief-specific nurture. Third, while the pedagogical methods 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 of what experiences (including those considered generic spiritual ones) are appropriate outside of a religious setting (Thompson 2004).

Lesson content and conception of belief-nurture

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 aim 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...'. Children are given stories (mostly with no religious connection) to encourage virtues of non-judgment, peace and sharing. And there are explorations of emotions: identifying emotions, dealing with fear, worry, and sadness. In the shared sessions there is also an effort to nurture children into the school community.

There are times, however, where religious stories are used in the shared lessons and the difficulty 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.

This example highlights how belief-nurture is not just an abstract concept and careful consideration is needed regarding how it is actualised in lesson content. More than that, however, if, as Piedmont (2009) sees it, belief is an integrated part of human development, a way of conceptualising belief, care and spirituality alongside more established concepts of social and emotional nurture, (self-regard, behaviour regulation and relations with others) is needed.

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). In regard to belief communities, however, there was marked inconsistency around the role they played in belief-nurture. A clear preference could be seen towards building relationships with the Catholic church through cooperation over sacramental preparation (including the publication of a CNS guidance document). By contrast, for all other belief groups, there were no belief-specific documents on the website and no other explicit reference 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.

Finally, 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* 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 & 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 show that ethical issues of teacher identity, integrity and agency mustn't be neglected where belief-nurture is concerned.

Conclusion

The literature above reminds us of the essential nurturing role of education, especially of young children, but it also highlights the neglect of belief in most models of nurture in religiously plural settings. Yet, our investigation has shown the significant challenge of including belief within a conceptualisation of nurture, especially when attempting to actualise it in a curricular programme in a religiously plural setting. The findings here point to the need to conceptualise nurture in a more comprehensive way than currently exists in plural education settings through a framework that: encompasses three main conceptual domains (belief, care, ethics); which takes account of faith/belief communities; and which puts the teacher and pupil, and the relation between them, at the heart of the nurture process (Figure 2: Framework of Nurture). Finally, as well as conceptual clarity, practical measures are needed to respond to these challenges. These may include, for example, a code of practice, guidance on teaching styles which are appropriate or not appropriate in the different common and separate contexts and clear roles defined for faith communities and teaching staff, with reasonable opt-outs and principles of minimum entitlement for pupils.

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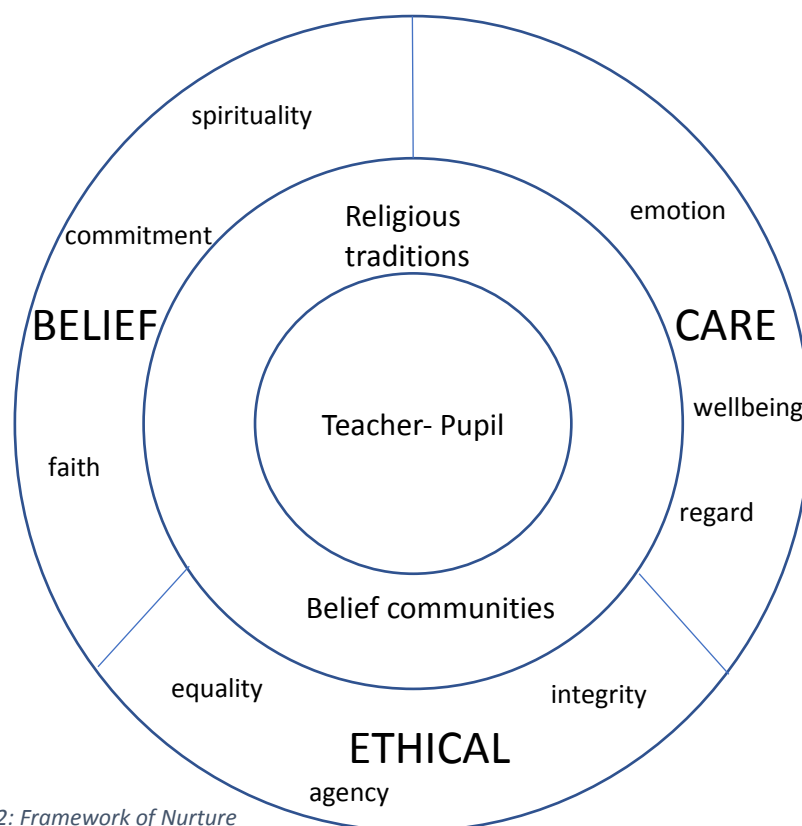


Figure 2: Framework of Nurture

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