

# Critique of the religious observance assembly resource “Light Dispels Darkness”

By Veronica Wikman

The Light Dispels Darkness assembly resource was originally created by the Church of Scotland under the name “Light Dispels Dark” and was submitted to Learning and Teaching Scotland in 2007 (Learning and Teaching Scotland was re-named Education Scotland in 2010.) An almost identical version was subsequently approved and published by Learning and Teaching Scotland and is available to download from the Education Scotland website. This resource is categorized as an “advice and information resource” and is intended to be used in the curricular area religious and moral education in the first, second, third, fourth level and senior phase, i.e. from P2 onwards in every year of primary and secondary education. The duration of this assembly is 30 minutes.

The rationale for this resource is described as:

*“It is about how light dispels darkness. Light and dark have connotations of good and evil. At many levels, we face light and dark every day. A confident, optimistic, energising attitude requires hope. Hope is born when we recognise that light dispels darkness.”*

According to its learning intentions, the resource aims to make children:

*“recognise that darkness can feel uncomfortable; that it feels more comfortable when light appears”*

*“understand that darkness can no longer exist in the presence of light”*

*“recognise that darkness is often used to represent bad whilst light is used to represent good”*

*“recognise that light and dark exist throughout our universe”*

And finally, it also intends to make children:

*“begin to understand that light is extremely powerful in some forms”*

The result of the practical application of these intentions is that children are conditioned to fear darkness and to feel relief, awe and reverence in the presence of light. This is achieved by using spoken and written words, music, chants, screen images and film clips that stimulate this response and by creating an ambience in the assembly hall that is conducive to this purpose.

An example of how this ambience is achieved is illustrated in the assembly running order, where:

*“Classes enter assembly hall in single file to find a darkened room, Each class teacher brings a lighted candle...”*

And by the resources used:

*“One central church candle, recorded Taize chant with words on screen”*

Children are instilled with the idea that darkness represents negative attributes and that light represents positive attributes. According to the guided reflection, children will be shown a PowerPoint presentation of “dark words” versus “light words”:

*“PowerPoint of dark words (for example hate, war, cruelty, poverty, sickness, despair) superimposed over video of lone lighted candle. The dark words are then dispelled by light words such as love, peace, compassion, giving, medicine, hope.”*

Young children’s natural propensity for thinking in terms of opposites (“black-or -white thinking”) is exploited, encouraging the development of a rigid, dogmatic mind-set that refuses to recognise and accept a “middle ground”. How this is carried out is demonstrated by the learning intentions which seek to make children:

*"recognise that darkness can feel uncomfortable; that it feels more comfortable when light appears",*

*"recognise that darkness is often used to represent bad whilst light is used to represent good"*

and to instil the idea that:

*"Light and dark have connotations of good and evil."*

It is suggested that this simplistic dichotomy is further reinforced by classroom activities:

*"In class prepare 2 x A2 collage panels (using magazine photos, colours, newspaper headlines, printed and hand-drawn words), one for light/good, one for dark/bad. Display these panels in assembly hall."*

The learning intentions and rationale behind this resource raises a number of questions that have clearly been overlooked or ignored by Education Scotland. It is also clear that the harmful and adverse effects that this resource will generate have not been considered.

### Fear of darkness – fear of the unknown

Fear of darkness is a common fear in young children. As humans it is natural for us to fear what we cannot see, and to speculate about what the darkness might harbour. Fear of darkness can thus be interpreted as a fear of the unknown:

*"...fear of dark may not be fear of the absence of light, but fear of the absence of knowledge". From "The cognitive and evaluative aspects of emotion" by William Lyons. Cambridge University Press. 1980.*

It makes no sense at all to encourage children to fear the unknown. On the contrary, schools should do their utmost to encourage children to become intrepid and enthusiastic explorers and investigators of the unknown. It is only through exploring and mining the unknown that new discoveries can be made and new knowledge can be added to the human bank of knowledge. Conditioning children to fear the unknown is quintessentially anathema to the very purpose of education.

### Fear of darkness – psychological and physical effects

It is well-known that children and adults develop specific fears as a result of learning; this is a subject of study in psychology known as "fear conditioning":

*"Fear conditioning represents the process by which a neutral stimulus comes to evoke fear following its repeated pairing with an aversive stimulus" From: "Classical fear conditioning in the anxiety disorders" Behaviour Research and Therapy 43 (2005)*

Fear conditioning in children can lead to lifelong phobias and anxiety disorders that are often very difficult to treat in adulthood. Fear of darkness is a common phobia, not only among children but also among adults. The medical term for this type of phobia is nyctophobia:

*"Nyctophobia is a phobia generally related to children but, according to J. Adrian Williams' article titled, Indirect Hypnotic Therapy of Nyctophobia: A Case Report, many clinics with paediatric patients have a great chance of having adults who have nyctophobia. The same article states that "the phobia has been known to be extremely disruptive to adult patients and... incapacitating"."*

The centre of the brain that processes fear and responds to fear conditioning is called the amygdala:

*"The amygdala is a "almond shaped" mass of nuclei that is located deep in the brain's medial temporal lobe, which processes the events associated with fear, as well as being linked to anxiety disorders and social phobias. The amygdala's ability to respond to fearful stimuli occurs through the process of fear conditioning. Similar to classical conditioning, the amygdala learns to associate a conditioned stimulus with a negative or avoidant stimulus, creating a conditioned fear response that is often seen in phobic individuals."*

Unsurprisingly, fear of darkness often causes insomnia and disruptive sleep patterns for children, which may last into adulthood. According to a recent study carried out at Ryerson University (Toronto, Canada) in 2012, there is a clear link between insomnia and nyctophobia:

*"Adults who have insomnia may simply be afraid of the dark, according to a Ryerson University study."*

*The research, conducted at the school's Sleep and Depression Lab, involved a small sample of college students. Nearly half of the 93 participants who reported having poor sleep also reported a fear of the dark. They were also more easily startled in the dark than the so-called good sleepers.*

*"We assume that poor sleepers become tense when the lights go out because they associate the bed with being unable to sleep," said the study's lead author, Taryn Moss. "Now we're wondering how many people actually have an active and untreated phobia." (<http://www.torontosun.com/2012/06/11/fear-of-the-dark-to-blame-for-insomnia>)*

The relationship between sleep deprivation and poor learning ability is well established, and the importance of sleep for children's overall healthy development cannot be underestimated. It is believed that it may even contribute to the development of neurological conditions, including ADHD:

*"Scientific evidence shows that adequate night-time sleep is just as important as healthy eating and regular exercise for children to develop. It is believed that sleep deprivation may harm neurological development and can contribute to behavioural problems including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)." (news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/2991087.stm)*

Sleep loss or sleep disruption in children can even lead to retarded growth:

*"A classic example includes the effect of sleep loss or disruption in children and the impact on growth. Growth hormone is secreted during slow-wave sleep, which is more common in the early part of the night in children. When this sleep is disrupted, either through inadequate sleep or from disorders such as sleep apnoea, the amount of growth hormone released is compromised. As a result, children may not reach their full growth potential, becoming shorter than they otherwise would have been." (Kryger, MH et al. "Principles and Practice of Sleep Medicine." Elsevier, 5th edition, pp. 502-503.)*

It is shocking and deeply worrying that the above mentioned evidence of the harmful effects of inducing a fear of darkness in children, could have escaped the notice of Education Scotland. One does not have to be a child psychologist or a sleep scientist to be able to comprehend and predict these effects. The fact that this resource has been approved for use in all schools in Scotland demonstrates a staggering degree of incompetence and/or wilful negligence. It is clear that there is no process for evaluating and approving assembly resources used for RME/RO, or this resource could never have been approved. Clearly, there can be no defence for continuing with this practice. A full investigation into this matter and a review of the current practices at Education Scotland must be carried out as a matter of urgency. It is also beyond doubt that a policy against religious indoctrination in education must be devised urgently in order to protect children from the unscrupulous methods used by the Church of Scotland and other organisations in order to proselytise the children at all costs.

### Fear of darkness and racism

The notion that darkness represents evil has obvious racist overtones and implications. It should be noted that the Church of Scotland shares this notion with the Ku Klux Klan, as well as rituals that express a reverence for light. As an article about Christian terrorism, published on Wikipedia, explains:

*"They were explicitly Christian terrorist in ideology, basing their beliefs on a "religious foundation" in Christianity. The goals of the KKK included, from an early time on, an intent to "re-establish Protestant Christian values in America by any means possible," and believe that "Jesus was the first Klansman." Their cross-burnings were conducted not only to intimidate targets, but to demonstrate their respect and*

*reverence for Jesus Christ, and the lighting ritual was steeped in Christian symbolism, including the saying of prayers and singing of Christian hymns."*

The horrific atrocities that have been perpetrated by this infamous organisation against black Americans in the southern states of America, in relatively recent history, as a result of this idea, are very well known and documented. It is therefore reasonable to expect that an awareness of this should inform the judgement of Education Scotland in the selection and approval of learning resources. It is difficult to understand how this could have escaped the notice of Education Scotland and it demonstrates a staggering insensitivity and a shocking level of incompetence.

What exactly are black or dark-skinned children meant to make of the message that they are essentially bad/evil by nature? How will it help them to develop as confident individuals?

For reasons which can only be known to the Church of Scotland, this resource claims to support the Curriculum for Excellence emphasis on producing confident individuals. This is a claim that is beyond ridiculous, as it evidently will have the very opposite effect.

The very real damage that the notion that darkness is evil can also create in white children was demonstrated in the documentary series "Living with the Amish" that was broadcast on Channel 4 in 2012. In one of the episodes, Siana Bangara, a black British teenager, can be seen experiencing racist behaviour and comments from an Amish girl. Siana Bangara posted this comment on Facebook:

*"The little girl sang songs about us all being equal in the eyes of 'God', but earlier on that day she asked me bizarre questions about why I was black and used parts of the Bible to suggest that I was somehow not quite the same as everyone else and that all black people are essentially bad. She equated us with darkness and negativity." (facebook.com/livingwiththeamish/posts/270427686348883)*

All this violates and contradicts the sentiments expressed in the document Curriculum for Excellence: religious and moral education, principles and practice, which states that:

*"Through developing awareness and appreciation of the value of each individual in a diverse society, religious and moral education engenders responsible attitudes to other people. This awareness and appreciation will assist in counteracting prejudice and intolerance as children and young people consider issues such as sectarianism and discrimination more broadly."*

It is deeply worrying to consider the kind of attitudes and the type of thinking (or rather, absence thereof) that must prevail at the top of the Scottish Government's education establishment, in order for this assembly resource to have been approved!

## Summary

Children are being conditioned to fear darkness by a range of stimuli designed to evoke this response. Fear of darkness is linked to insomnia. It is well established that sleep is as pivotal to children's development as healthy eating and exercise.

Instilling the idea that darkness represents evil and bad things in general will harm self-esteem and confidence in black children and could lead to racial prejudice in white children.

The philosophical interpretation of fear of darkness is fear of the unknown. Fear of the unknown is anathema to the very purpose of education. It is problematic, to say the least, to encourage children to fear the unknown in an educational setting...

Children are taught to associate positive attributes with light and negative attributes with darkness. By using church candles and by mimicking the chanting rituals of a church service, children are conditioned to associate light with "church", and by extension, "religion". The fact that children are taught the concept of opposites during their early learning years in nursery, means that they are now, in primary school, ready to automatically

associate darkness with “non-religion” as this is the cognitive opposite of “religion”. This is a clear example of religious indoctrination. This also demonstrates that religious indoctrination is taking place in the publicly funded non-denominational schools in Scotland and that it is endorsed by Education Scotland.

### Conclusion

It is clear that the only interest this resource seeks to serve is the interest of the Church of Scotland, at the expense of the best interests of the children of Scotland. It is also clear that the methods used to achieve this aim have been used without any regard for their detrimental effects on children’s physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.

The contempt and disregard shown for children’s rights and CRC legislation is truly staggering.

The fact that this resource has been approved, demonstrates a shocking level of incompetence and/or wilful negligence. It is imperative that a thorough investigation into the management of Education Scotland and its working practices, is carried out as a matter of urgency.

It is also clear that a policy against religious indoctrination in education must be developed without delay, in order to protect children’s physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing.