

## Guidance Paper A

# RE AND INCLUSION: Special Educational Needs

## BACKGROUND

RE is for all pupils. Inclusion policy must reflect this.

The government has stated its determination to try to ensure that all pupils are enabled to gain as high standards as possible, and that disaffection is reduced. The RE Agreed Syllabus will contribute to a more inclusive education for all learners.

It is important that RE, although not a subject in the national curriculum, plays a full part in addressing these issues. RE is a core subject of the basic curriculum and is taught to all pupils who are not withdrawn by their parents for the whole of their period of compulsory education. It has a clear, important and positive contribution to make to all the concerns mentioned above. Whilst special educational needs are usefully defined in technical terms, teachers of RE will recognise that all pupils have particular or special needs related to their individual experience and lives. Good teaching takes account of the individual.

### POSITIVE ROLE OF RE

There is consistent and clear evidence that RE already makes some distinctive and positive contributions to the achievement of high standards by many pupils, both nationally and in Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. OFSTED inspection reports show that RE plays the most successful role among all subjects in promoting the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. This is important in affirming and supporting the educational development of pupils in all ethnic and cultural groups. RE deals with issues which promote concern for the well-being of all pupils and enhances their self-esteem of particular groups of pupils. The subject often focuses on equality of opportunity and on the intrinsic value, rights and responsibilities of all pupils. RE promotes the values and attitudes needed for life in a diverse society, where similarities and differences are recognised and valued for the common good.

### MORE TO DO

Teaching and learning in RE among pupils with SEN is inconsistent, sometimes inadequate, and under-developed. There are specific issues of cultural, religious and ethnic diversity which require further attention, and the overall imbalance of achievement needs to be addressed. This guidance is based upon a national paper from QCA for LEAs, SACREs, schools and others. It is designed to stimulate, support and promote best practice and high standards of achievement in RE for all pupils in Nottingham City and County schools. It focuses on teaching and learning in RE among pupils with a range of special educational needs

## RE AND PUPILS WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

### 1. Introduction

RE can make a powerful contribution to the learning of children with special educational needs. They can develop a conceptual understanding of religious and life issues that they are not always able to reflect in their written work. RE offers many opportunities to explore religious concepts through discussion and the creative arts. For example, an eleven year old girl within a special school for pupils with moderate learning difficulties, despite great problems with literacy, was able to express her hopes for the world in a class discussion, "There would be no more bullying, no more war and everyone would be happy. There would be no more crying and no more dying." A group of Year 9 pupils were able to act out the Buddhist story of the Four Sights, despite many

pupils having speech and communication difficulties. What follows is guidance on how RE may be made more accessible for such pupils.

## **2. Principles for RE and pupils with special educational needs**

- **Valuing the importance of RE for pupils with special needs.**

A positive approach should be adopted to RE and SEN, not a deficit model. RE is an entitlement for all pupils and should be taught with the same educational purposes, validity and integrity to all pupils. In special schools, for example, the law requires the Agreed Syllabus to be taught as far as is practicable. RE is part of the core curriculum for all pupils, and good quality teaching will tailor the syllabus carefully to the special needs of all pupils.

The positive effect may be that in RE pupils with difficulties, problems or tragedies in their young lives find the most space to explore and seek to resolve their own conflicts.

- **Using pupils' experience of difficulty to develop their capacity to understand searching themes in RE.**

There are areas in which pupils with special educational needs may show particular strengths. A child's experience of difficulties or suffering could lead to a heightened awareness of searching themes in RE. A fourteen year old boy from a special school for pupils with general learning difficulties, who had experienced serious illness, was able to express great empathy towards St Francis' attitudes towards suffering people. Taking the part of St Francis in a role play, he stated, "There is no such thing as lepers, they are human beings. You can't throw them in a dark alley". A class in a school for pupils with general learning difficulties were interested in the story of Bernadette of Lourdes. Their interest was sparked when they discovered she had suffered from asthma and had difficulties learning her catechism. This led to a long class discussion about belief. Sometimes small group work with pupils with special needs is particularly important in making space for reflection on experience and meaning.

- **Building on pupils' interest in people and what they do**

Some children with special educational needs may show heightened awareness of people's feelings and a curiosity about what people do. This may lead to an interest in the effect of religious belief on people and an interest in how individual religious people lead their lives. This may involve attainment target two (learning from religion and responding to human experience) alongside a traditional 'learning about religions' approach. A teacher told the story of the Exodus dramatically, but did not test whether the children had learned the outline of the story. Instead she asked children to draw their own picture of a 'promised land', aiming to help pupils to express their own sense of vision and hope.

- **Valuing pupils' use of religious language**

Some pupils with special needs may show a lack of inhibitions in using religious and spiritual language, such as 'soul', 'heart' and 'spirit'. This leads them into a spiritual perception of religion and human experience and an engagement with the symbolic. One Jewish boy with general learning difficulties stated "It's in my heart ... The heart is happy to learn about other religions, instead of being Jewish all the time." This ability to use a religious and spiritual vocabulary could mean that some pupils are able to access, for example, Guru Nanak's devotional hymns; "You are the light of all light. In every heart you are hid. In every heart burns your light..." (Raga Sorath) as well as understanding what the 5Ks mean to Sikhs.

- **Being sensitive to the variety of pupils' understanding of religious concepts**

It is difficult to generalise about the appropriateness of introducing certain religious concepts to pupils with special needs owing to the wide range of their needs. The concept of miracles, for example, occurs in most religions. Some pupils may not be able to differentiate between the wonder of a miracle and everyday occurrence, while others may be drawn to stories of awesome events, such as Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea. Teachers need to judge the appropriateness of the lesson content for the pupils they teach. The story of Bernadette at Lourdes or Jesus' healing miracles may be perceived differently by a child with a physical disability than by an able-bodied pupil. Equally, a pupil from a religious background may respond to certain concepts more strongly. A young Hindu boy with communication difficulties was able to use concepts of right action, right speech and right conduct to consider his behaviour towards others. RE seeks to develop sensitive and respectful attitudes. These can be exemplified by teaching which is itself sensitive and respectful.

- **Allowing pupils to engage with explicit religious material**

A religious education which lets the emotion and power of explicit religious materials loose in the classroom, and welcomes personal responses can provide powerful opportunities for spiritual development for pupils with a variety of special educational needs. An over-emphasis on seeing special needs pupils as concrete thinkers, who need a 'small step' approach, may block the development of a vital and dynamic form of RE. Some pupils may respond to the 'burning core' of questions that engage the imagination and often lead from the spiritual into 'explicit RE.' A teacher within a special school for pupils with general learning difficulties, when asking for examples of journeys, was surprised to receive the response "The journey between life and death" and "The journey the soul takes out of the body" as well as examples of everyday trips to shops and to visit family. Such flashes of inspiration can trigger responses in a whole class, and quality teaching will seize the moment.

- **Promoting pupils' use of the arts as a way of expressing themselves**

Like most pupils, pupils with special needs may have an enjoyment and engagement with art, music, dance and drama. 13 year old pupils, many with speech and communication difficulties, were able to share their knowledge of gestures and postures used in prayer. These movements were brought together in a class dance piece. A younger class of pupils in a special school were able to convey the wonder of the First Revelation of the Qur'an to the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through art work. They devised their own creative way of communicating the power of God without representing the prophet, the angel or Allah in human form.

- **Recognising pupils' intuitive responses to religious issues**

Pupils with special educational needs may show a more intuitive approach to religion and human experience, and this may be expressed through questions ("Why do religions tell the same stories? It's like they've been talking to each other?") or insights ("Whenever a baby is born, the world changes"), or through gesture (a Sikh boy responding to Chanukah candles by using the same gesture of prayer as in the arti ceremony). These intuitive moments can display leaps of understanding or profundity which are at odds with their understanding of other concepts. Some pupils with special educational needs will show a willingness to share a spiritual response. It is appropriate for such achievements to be celebrated and noted by the teacher, but often no written product of such achievement is necessary. Some of the best RE in SEN settings is not, cannot be, and should not be recorded for inspection!

- **Valuing pupils' achievement through creative forms of assessment and recording**

These forms need to be developed in order to reflect moments of intuition, insight and response. Methods could include a Wall of Wisdom, where pupils' deep comments and questions about religion and human experience are written and displayed in the classroom, a photographic or video record of significant events, or a running record in the teachers' notes.

### **3. Educational contexts**

The principles set out above apply to pupils with special needs in all settings. These include SEN pupils in mainstream schools, units attached to mainstream schools, PRUs, Hospital schools and special schools. Children have a wide range of backgrounds and needs including learning, emotional, behavioural difficulties. In RE these may be accentuated by differences of home and faith backgrounds. Whatever the context it is important to recognise that all pupils can achieve in and through RE. The teaching task is to unlock that potential and facilitate that achievement.

### **4. An Access Statement for Religious Education.**

As with all other subjects of the curriculum, pupils are entitled to have access to religious education and the opportunities and learning which it presents irrespective of their starting points. Schools have a responsibility to meet this entitlement with regard to all pupils, taking account of the range of special needs of particular pupils, including talented and gifted pupils. Good quality RE provision is based upon the careful consideration of the needs of pupils, their prior learning and experience, differences of, for example, gender, ethnicity or culture and awareness of the place of religion in family life.

## 5. Differentiation in Religious Education

The 1996 Education Act provides for an entitlement for all children to a broad and balanced curriculum. A wide range of ability and experiences exists within any group of pupils. Teachers need to be able to provide equal opportunities in learning through a flexible approach and skills which differentiate teaching and learning, matching the challenge of RE work to individual learners' needs.

Differentiation within Religious Education is about meeting the individual needs of pupils in ways which are relevant to their life experiences. Successful differentiation is dependent on planning, teaching and learning methods and assessment. This requires.

- an understanding by teachers of the ways in which children learn
- matching work to children's previous experience
- an understanding of factors which may hinder or prevent children learning
- careful analysis of the knowledge and skills which comprise a particular learning task
- structured teaching and learning which will help children to achieve and to demonstrate their learning outcomes.
- providing imaginative learning experiences which arouse and sustain children's interest
- supporting the learning which takes place in RE by what is taught in other curriculum areas.

Colleagues in special schools have much to offer from their experiences and expertise in facilitating competence and achievement for individual pupils. But individual education programmes (IEPS) are not the same as differentiated learning. Differentiation strives to help all children to learn together through providing a variety of tasks within the classroom at any one time. Responsibility for differentiation should not rest with the teacher alone. Children should be given some choice over what and how they learn so that their learning reflects their interests and needs.

**The ethos of a school, and of the work of individual teachers is very influential in RE. A positive ethos in school or classroom facilitates differentiated teaching through excellence in relationships based on mutual respect between all those who learn and work in the school. Two factors make an important contribution:**

- **attitudes to learning** - a philosophy which encourages purposeful learning and celebrates effort alongside success, as well as helping children to take responsibility for their own engagement in tasks.
- **a safe, stimulating environment** which recognises the individual needs of pupils and their families, sets appropriate challenges and builds on a positive, praising classroom culture.

## 6. Planning from Programmes of Study in Agreed Syllabuses

Once schools are familiar with the requirements of this Agreed Syllabus and have made all the relevant choices which their syllabus allows (e.g. which religions are to be studied in which Key Stage) long, medium and short term planning should include teaching and learning for pupils with SEN.

For special schools there is the additional flexibility to modify the requirements of the Agreed Syllabus to meet the needs of their pupils. This may be by selecting materials from an earlier key stage or by planning learning from just two religions.

Schemes of work form the foundation for schools' medium term planning and can be tailored to suit individual circumstances. The development of pupils' IEPs is an important opportunity to provide RE according to pupils' needs. These may require a focus on communication, social, sensory or other skills to which RE can make a significant contribution. Some pupils may need additional experiences to consolidate or extend their understanding of particular concepts so timing needs to be flexible enough to allow for this. The specific skills of reflection, expression and discernment will not be neglected where teaching is good.

**Planning should provide for:**

- the range of pupil ability in the group, with differentiated activities to teach the scheme of work appropriately
- the past and present experience of pupils
- the family background of pupils
- the individual needs of pupils, including their special educational needs
- a range of opportunities to assess progress and to report to parents.

**7. Teaching and learning approaches for pupils with special educational needs**

A wide variety of approaches can succeed. These may include: use of artefacts, video, visits and visitors, reflection, stilling and experiential activities, classroom assistants, the widest possible range of sensory and experiential approaches, and use of ICT including internet, CDROMs, a digital camera and scanner, big mac switches, concept key boards and overlays.

**8. Recording pupils' achievement**

SEN pupils want to be able to show their achievement. Teachers will need to enable pupils to demonstrate statements of achievement and learning outcomes. For children who have greatest difficulty in learning this might be supported by special use of the eight level scale. A particular level could be broken down into a number of smaller elements and steps to work on and celebrate achievements. These could include children's responses to:

- experiencing an activity
- sharing an awareness of the activity
- using the senses in different ways
- exploring artefacts, experiences, stories, music or other stimulus materials
- participation in the activity

The use of the eight level scale may provide an important tool in enabling teachers to:

- plan future work with objectives, tasks and learning experiences appropriate to pupils' ability and development
- ensure continuity and progression to the next stage.
- Set appropriate RE targets for children's personal IEPs
- recognise pupils' levels of engagement and response

**9. Accreditation of RE**

The National Qualifications framework provides for entry level qualifications to accredit the achievement of students at 16 whose achievement is below that of GCSE. Entry level qualifications in RE / RS are available from several awarding bodies. These accreditation routes award grades of pass, merit and distinction roughly equivalent to National Curriculum levels 1, 2 and 3. These qualifications may allow appropriate forms of assessments for pupils with special needs. Local collaboration between special schools and other schools can provide support for the use of such accreditation.

**Note**

Teachers who wish to develop better practice with regard to access and provision for pupils with SEN in RE may find it stimulating to read 'Religious Education For All' by Erica Brown, pub. David Fulton, 1996, ISBN: 1 85346 392 2. There is a useful booklet on RE and SEN free from the RE today website as well.

## Special Schools and Pupils

Special Schools are required to teach the Agreed Syllabus as far as it is practicable. Curriculum entitlement for pupils in special schools means that they should be encouraged to use the syllabus as a resource and select work from the Programmes of Study that is appropriate and practicable.

Teachers in special schools should modify and adapt the Programmes of Study to meet the range of needs of the pupils which will include profound and multiple learning difficulties, moderate and severe learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, and physical disabilities.

Expectations of attainment in religious education for pupils in special schools and for those pupils identified with special educational needs in mainstream schools will be different.

In order to support teachers to incorporate the principles of inclusion in their planning, 'P' levels are identified in the Agreed Syllabus, based upon work from the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority. These performance descriptions outline early learning and attainment before level 1 in eight levels from P1 to P8. They are as follows:

- P levels 1-3: **early development** expected across the curriculum
- P levels 4-8: development specifically **related to religious education**

### Early Development (P levels 1-3)

- P1** Pupils are beginning to show sensory awareness in relation to a range of people, objects and materials in everyday contexts. They show reflex responses to sensory stimuli, *e.g. startling at sudden noises or movements.*
- P2** Pupils begin to respond to familiar people, events and objects, *e.g. reaching and holding objects, smiling and turning to familiar voices.* They make sounds or gestures to express simple needs, wants or feelings in response to their immediate environment, *e.g. protesting or requesting, using facial expressions to enhance meaning.*
- P3** Pupils begin to communicate intentionally. They show anticipation in response to familiar people, routines, activities and actions and respond appropriately to them. They explore or manipulate objects, toys, artefacts or other equipment. They are able to communicate simple choices, likes and dislikes. They can communicate, using different tones and sounds and use some vocalisations and/or gestures to communicate.

### Performance descriptions in RE (P levels 4-8)

Levels P4 to P8 describe pupils' performance in terms of the development of skills, knowledge and understanding in religious education. The descriptions provide an example of how this can be done.

- P4** Pupils use single elements of communication, *for example, words, gestures, signs or symbols,* to express their feelings. They begin to respond to the feelings of others, *for example, matching their emotions and laughing when another pupil is laughing.* They join in with activities by initiating ritual actions or sounds. They may demonstrate an appreciation of stillness and quietness.

- P5** Pupils respond appropriately to simple questions about familiar religious events or experiences and communicate simple meanings. They respond to a variety of new religious experiences, *for example, involving music, drama, colour, lights, food or tactile objects*. They take part in activities involving two or three other learners. They may also engage in moments of individual reflection.
- P6** Pupils express and communicate their feelings in different ways. They respond to others in group situations and co-operate when working in small groups. Pupils listen to, and begin to respond to, familiar religious stories, poems and music, and make their own contribution to celebrations and festivals. They carry out ritualised actions in familiar circumstances. They show concern and sympathy for others in distress, *for example, through gestures, facial expressions or by offering comfort*. They start to be aware of their own influence on events and other people.
- P7** Pupils listen to and follow religious stories. They communicate their ideas about religion, life events and experiences in simple phases. They evaluate their own work and behaviour in simple ways, beginning to identify some actions as right or wrong on the basis of consequences. They find out about aspects of religion through stories, music or drama, answer questions and communicate their responses. They may begin to understand that other people have needs and to respect these. They make purposeful relationships with others in group activity.
- P8** Pupils listen attentively to religious stories or to people talking about religion. They begin to understand that religious and other stories carry moral and religious meaning. They are increasingly able to communicate ideas, feelings or responses to experiences or to retell religious stories. They communicate simple facts about religions and important people in religions. They begin to realise the significance of religious artefacts, symbols and places. They reflect on what makes them happy, sad, excited or lonely. They demonstrate a basic understanding of what is right and wrong in familiar situations. They are often sensitive to the needs and feelings of others and show respect for themselves and others. They treat living things and their environment with care and concern.

## Gifted and Talented pupils in RE

### RE and the gifted and talented pupil

In speaking of the gifted and talented pupil in RE, we are concerned both with children who have particular gifts or talents in RE and those who are very 'bright' and capable in a more general sense. The guidance identifies issues for teachers to consider concerning gifted, talented and most able pupils.

#### Recognising the gifted and talented in RE

The identification of the most able pupils in RE should be approached on the basis of distinct RE ability, skills, competencies and insight.

RE is centrally concerned with ultimate questions, critical thinking, analysis and interpretation and with very complex and multifaceted phenomena and concepts. This provides interest and motivation for the most able. Truth seeking in uncertain fields is hard work, and should stimulate the best in the best young minds! Able children in RE can quickly, at an expert level, develop and apply knowledge, understanding, skills and processes of RE (e.g. critical thinking, interpretation, insight, reflection, and synthesis). Talented and most able pupils have the potential to demonstrate high levels of understanding, insight, discernment, achievement and maturity.

**RE provides many opportunities for engagement with story, symbolism, metaphor and analogy in its approaches to human meaning making. Links between RE and philosophy with primary and secondary aged pupils (and older ones) are relevant, and should attract the interest of many RE specialists. Thinking skills associated with argument, reasoning and logical analysis have a key place in RE achievements.**

All these skills often involve the use of language and require bringing higher order language skills into the service of RE objectives. Strategies to challenge the most able language users are part of enabling the highest achievement of the talented pupil.

Professor John Hull has a useful insight into the concept of giftedness in RE and has written about primary aged children's engagement with the highest levels of religious discourse.

*"A child in religious education may be thought of as being gifted when that child responds with high interest and outstanding attainment in the areas which are the aims and objectives of RE considered as an educational activity. The giftedness of the child will be as specific to RE as the attainment targets and so on are specific to RE..."*

*In the more direct, first order sense, there may also be children who have religious or spiritual gifts, whether these derive from the environment outside school, or whether they represent some kind of original vision. The RE teachers should be aware of such children, and may learn a great deal from them, but it is not the purpose of RE to nurture such children more than the rest..."*

**Professor John Hull, Resource, The Journal of PCFRE, 17.3, page 6, 1995**

Giftedness in RE might be distinguished from high attainment scoring in other subjects. For example, the child who is gifted with regard to RE might show particular skills of insight, application and discernment, making sense and drawing meaning from religious symbols, metaphors and sacred writing at a high level. A non-religious pupil might also have a gift for RE, showing a high level of skill in religious questioning or arguing.

While the idea of a child gifted in RE may often be related to the educational concept of spiritual development, the concept of 'giftedness' in RE isn't the same as being religiously gifted, as a particular faith community might recognise a child's gifts. Teachers may find it fruitful to consider how giftedness in RE might be similar to giftedness in sport, music, mathematics or poetry, and how it might differ from these.

The concept of the teacher's professional judgement in RE is crucial. Teachers who know their pupils and their work and bring professional talent, expertise and awareness to RE are best placed to identify the most able, the gifted and the talented and then to make appropriate and challenging provision for them.

### **Provision and Progression**

The willingness and capacity to take up opportunities for spiritual and moral development is a central aspect of the best work in RE. Teachers need to use their professional judgement sensitively in weighing up pupils' responses to these opportunities. Some of the most effective models for differentiation in the RE curriculum envisage a spiral of revisited concepts, attitudes and skills. These are understood, applied, linked and evaluated in increasing depth by learners. Such models offer a fruitful avenue for further exploration of how to provide for the most able in RE. Extension, top end differentiation, working beyond age related expectations, acceleration and provision for the most able are all issues here.

### **14 ideas for pedagogy and classroom development**

## A Guidance and Support for the Nottinghamshire RE Agreed Syllabus 2009

The needs of the most able, gifted and talented pupils in RE require particular pedagogic skills from teachers in RE. Teachers might consider the place of the fourteen strategies given below in their own practice. Are there some which could usefully be developed in your school?

1. Use a variety of challenging questioning strategies to enable pupils to explore religious phenomena and questions deeply.
2. Set extension tasks that avoid mere repetition, or 'extra' work, but pursue instead the depth of understanding or reflection.
3. Use authentic material from inside a faith (e.g. prayer, sacred text, possibly music, argument or artefacts) to provide complex stimulus to learning.
4. Use carefully planned self-assessment instruments with gifted and talented pupils to involve them in identifying their own learning needs. Such work is most useful if it includes a focus on spiritual development.
5. Encourage ambitious work by the most able pupils, using target-setting strategies to open their eyes to 'distant horizons'.
6. Focus on the interpretation of symbol, metaphor, text or story and the ways in which these stimulate reflection on meaning and discernment.
7. Take strategies that challenge the most able, gifted and talented pupil's use of language, both spoken and written, from the general literature and apply these in RE.
8. Give pupils access to terminology and a language for the sophisticated handling of religious, spiritual, ethical and philosophical questions, ideas and materials, and giving them opportunities to develop and use that language.
9. Focus on application of ideas and learning in new or unfamiliar contexts: 'You've learned about how Christian monks live out their vows. Now compare the example of a Buddhist monk, who chooses to live by the Five Precepts...'
10. Use the ultimate or fundamental questions that lie below the surface of religious practice to open up for learners the ways in which they might learn from religion.
11. Provide particular challenges for most able, gifted and talented pupils with regard to learning from religion (see recent QCA non-statutory guidance on religious education).
12. Be willing to use questions and tasks from key stages beyond the age of the talented pupil, and to stimulate responses through difficult tasks, e.g. involving argument, analysis, prediction.
13. Model RE problem solving / problem centered activities from the 'world class tests' for use with talented pupils, e.g. using inter faith issues or arguments about the value of prayer, or questions about God.
14. Encourage expert learners to make connections between their work in RE and other subjects of the curriculum (e.g. with cosmology in physics, worship in music, ethics in PSHE or inequality in geography). Connections with learning beyond the school are a valuable extension to RE learning as well.