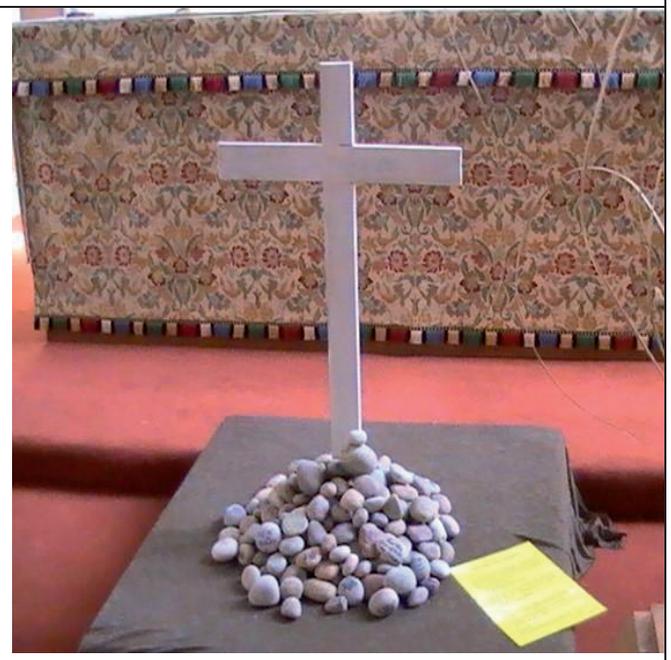


# The Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education in Northamptonshire

## Support Materials



## Guidance on Catering for Special Educational Needs in Religious Education



## **RE AND INCLUSION: Catering for Special Educational Needs**

### **Background**

RE is for all pupils. The Inclusion policy in a school 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 Northamptonshire Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education 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 RE is a core subject of the basic curriculum and is taught to all pupils who are not withdrawn by their parents, for the whole of their period of compulsory education.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 Northamptonshire. 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 the 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 QCDA 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 Northamptonshire 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 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 educational needs**

A positive approach to RE and SEN should be adopted, 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 ten year old boy 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 group of 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 belief and responding to human experience) alongside a traditional 'learning about religion' 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 educational 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 educational 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, whilst 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**

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, when asking for examples of journeys, was surprised to receive the following responses from two pupils with special needs: "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. A group of 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 with SEN pupils 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. However, 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 the Agreed Syllabus

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 make RE more accessible for pupils with special educational needs. These may include:

- Using sensory materials and resources through sight, touch, sound, taste or smell. For example, use of music, tactile artefacts, plants in a sensory garden;
- Organising a range of activities to give personal experiences. For example, dance, drama, visits to a range of environments;
- First hand experience such as visits to places of worship, visitors to schools and involvement in festivals and celebrations;
- Opportunities for reflection, stilling and other such experiential activities;
- Using the widest possible range of interactive / sensory stimuli, ICT including internet, CD ROMs, a digital camera and scanner, Big Mac switches, Concept Key boards and overlays;
- Adapting tasks or environments and providing alternative activities where necessary. For example, tactile story books, puppets, role play, music making;
- Providing support from other adults when necessary, while allowing pupils space, time and freedom to develop skills for themselves.

## 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. ( [www.retoday.org.uk](http://www.retoday.org.uk) )