

The Burning Core

Getting to the heart of RE with special school pupils

If you were asked to choose an object that holds special memories, or a photo of someone you love, or describe a smell that reminds you of something special, or a piece of nature, or some words that you love, what would you choose?

For one group of special school teachers, these include a book of poems, wooden witchetty grubs, a hand-made box, a tube of Cuticare, a giraffe: all of these evoke treasured memories, of family members or past travels; of caring for aged relatives or the deep-seated desire to be taller... The objects and their description awake ideas of growth, love and hope, pain, loss and grief, moments of happiness, anger and reconciliation. They make deep connections with things that really matter.



Making connections

This was the starting-point of a day of training with special school teachers, set up and funded by Gloucestershire and Herefordshire SACREs, held on 10th October 2012. Leader Anne Krisman encouraged teachers to see that these kinds of connections are at the heart of our lives. It is therefore vital to recognise the kinds of experiences that are at the heart of the lives of special school pupils too – to understand what matters to them and then fashion our teaching to this, making genuine connections. Given the legal requirement that special school pupils will receive RE “as far as is practicable”, instead of wasting time doing things that the children will never access, we should do the things that will speak to our pupils.



Twelve teachers from special schools in the two counties gathered to consider the impact of the recently revised agreed syllabuses on their RE planning, teaching and learning. Anne Krisman, teacher at Little Heath School, Redbridge, showed that we should avoid a “deficit model” of planning, where the syllabus is watered down, adapting a few units of work, or teaching units for 4-6 year olds to 7-11s or 11-14s. Instead, we should draw on the key ideas of “exploring and responding” from the syllabuses. Special school RE should explore authentic and central concepts from religions, on the basis of what will connect with children’s experiences and enable them to respond.

Five Keys into RE

In 2011, Anne’s planning structure for special school RE gained a Hockerill Foundation Award for Innovative RE. Her five keys for planning are:

1. Connection – what links can we make with our pupils’ lives?
Creating a bridge between pupils’ experiences and the religious theme.
2. Knowledge – What is the burning core of the faith?
Selecting what really matters in a religious theme, cutting out peripheral information.
3. Senses – What sensory elements are in the religion?
Looking for a range of authentic sensory experiences that link with the theme.
4. Symbols – What are the symbols that are most accessible?
Choosing symbols that will encapsulate the theme.
5. Values – What are the values in the religion that speak to us?
Making links between the values of the religious theme and the children’s lives.

This simple but profound approach enables teachers to use agreed syllabuses as sources of information for religious themes and concepts, but then to plan RE so that pupils could explore and respond, promoting their personal development by making connections with core religious concepts and their own experiences.

Creative responses

Teachers explored a dozen active, creative strategies using dance, ritual, art and craft, music, photography, words and video. We watched clips of Anne's pupils using dance to meditate on how Mary felt during the crucifixion, and to explore the theme of looking for love. Following her pupils' idea of a healing ceremony after the 2004 tsunami, teachers talked about rituals that might signal welcoming or farewells, remembrance or resurrection with their pupils.



Making a simple model of the Dalai Lama, using silver foil to beautify images of Jesus and Mary, lending them the appearance of an icon, creating paper water-lilies that open in a bowl of water... just some of the delights that stimulated the thinking and sharing among the teachers.



Meditation

In the middle of the day, we spent a time in meditation. Led by Tibetan nun, Ani-la Choesang, we experienced some moments of calm and focus, hearing about ways of helping special school children to practise mindfulness. She modelled the best posture for meditation, encouraging us to think about our spine, shoulders and neck, to keep our eyes only half closed to prevent sleepiness, and to touch our tongue on the roof of our mouths, before leading us in a meditation to focus on our breathing. We then spent some time considering a raisin – holding it before we put it in our mouths to focus on the sensation, experiencing the raisin... We talked about the value of meditation for children, with relaxation, calming, controlling anger or irritation, or focusing the mind.



Energised

It is rare to attend training sessions for RE teachers in special schools, led by experienced practitioners, and this day was greatly appreciated by the teachers present. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet with other specialists, sharing ideas and experiences. The variety of practical examples were valued, stimulating further thinking. Anne's training approach was welcomed – calm, warm, professional and rooted in genuine experience. Teachers voiced their intention to make good use of the Five Keys planning tool as they revise the teaching of RE in their schools to support the learning of their pupils. And they expressed their gratitude to Gloucestershire and Herefordshire SACREs for setting up and supporting the day.

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Her book, *Growing in RE*, is available from RE Today. Little Heath school's RE features in Ofsted's good practice resources, which give more details of the Five Keys approach, and some examples of pupil responses. <http://tinyurl.com/ao4ey4q>

The Venerable Tsultrim Tenzin Choesang (Ani-la Choesang) can be contacted at Choesang@the-hermit-online.co.uk

Flo's list, based on an idea by Flo Longhorn: all teachers were asked to bring along to share

- a photo of someone I love
- a beautiful small object which hold memories for me
- a piece of nature
- a smell that delights me or reminds me of something special
- words I love, maybe a poem or a pop song, a prayer or
- a name/ a memory of someone(or an animal) who I remember