

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.



A starting point

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
- a name/ a memory of someone (or an animal) who I remember

Making connections

Anne Krisman encourages 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.



Anne says 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 syllabus. 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

Anne’s planning structure for special school RE gained a Hockerill Foundation Award for Innovative RE in 2011.

Her five keys for planning are:

Connection – what links can we make with our pupils’ lives?

Creating a bridge between pupils’ experiences and the religious theme

Knowledge – what is the burning core of the faith?

Selecting what really matters in a religious theme, cutting out peripheral information

Senses – what sensory elements are in the religion?

Looking for a range of authentic sensory experiences that link with the theme

Symbols – what are the symbols that are most accessible?

Choosing symbols that will encapsulate the theme

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 the agreed syllabus as a source of information for religious themes and concepts, but then to plan RE so that pupils can explore and respond, promoting their personal development by making connections with core religious concepts and their own experiences.

Some creative responses

Active, creative strategies use dance, ritual, art and craft, music, photography, words and video, e.g. dance to meditate on how Mary felt during the crucifixion, and exploring the theme of looking for love; the idea of a healing ceremony after the 2004 tsunami, rituals that might signal welcoming or farewells, remembrance or resurrection.



Making a simple model of the Dalai Lama, using silver foil to beautify images of Jesus and Mary lending the effect of an icon, creating paper water-lilies that open in a bowl of water...



Meditation

Meditation is a way of helping special school children to practise mindfulness, to relax and experience calm and focus. The value of meditation for children is in controlling anger or irritation and in focusing the mind. Consider the posture for meditation, thinking about spines, shoulders and neck, keeping eyes only half closed to prevent sleepiness, touching tongues on the roof of the mouth. Spend some time considering a raisin – holding it before putting it in the mouth to focus on the sensation, fully experiencing the raisin... then try a breathing meditation or a guided meditation on a religious theme.



Anne Krisman teaches at Little Heath School, Redbridge, and can be contacted via email annetevka@aol.com 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>