Support for Teaching Children with Different Learning Needs

The developmental approach of Awareness, Mystery and Value should provide a broad, balanced and relevant religious education curriculum for all pupils, including those with a special educational need. SACRE understands that teachers will wish to create appropriate experiences by differentiating learning tasks, teaching materials and outcomes and by considering issues of access.

By following the arrangement of study units in Key Stages, opportunities for age appropriate work are created. The recommendations of the Dearing Final Report provide schools and teachers with the scope to deliver an age appropriate curriculum while making assessment of attainment at earlier levels. Thus, teachers can follow the Key Stage study units in Awareness, Mystery and Value while relating attainment to the earlier learning and assessment objectives provided (see pages 44-50).

Further support for pupils with learning difficulties is now being provided by the LA SACREs in the form of sample activities for pupils with learning difficulties linked to the Awareness Mystery and Value (AMV) scheme of work. These have been made available on the LA AMV websites .

Although it is important to consider every pupil's needs in their own right, the following general strategies are recommended in relation to certain types of difficulty:

For pupils with **cognition and learning difficulties** the learning opportunities in the AMV programmes of study may be covered in less depth and may need revisiting to reinforce learning.

For pupils with **physical or sensory difficulties** maximum access to the RE programmes of study should be provided through alternative activities as listed in the more specific guidance below or in the sample activities for pupils with learning difficulties on the LEA AMV websites.

For pupils with **behaviour, emotional and social difficulties** SACRE recommends that differentiated activities be provided which make connections with pupils' own concerns and interests. This may best be done by focusing first on the 'Examples of Links with Human Experience' in the 'Examples of Work at Each Key Stage' section of the agreed syllabus.

For some pupils with **very severe or profound communication and interaction difficulties** planning for and assessing progress in religious education may present particular challenges. The Dearing Final Report recognised that generally these pupils do make significant progress in their own terms, but nationally prescribed assessment levels are often too wide to chart progress satisfactorily. SACRE recognises the difficulty this presents some teachers, and that is why sample activities for pupils with severe learning difficulties have been produced and made available on the LEA AMV websites. Although the samples do not provide comprehensive coverage of the study units, it is hoped that teachers will be able to use the samples as models for developing their own ideas.

The wide range of special educational need is only superficially covered in the descriptors: 'cognition and learning, physical and sensory, behaviour, emotional and social, communication and interaction', and cannot capture the range of complexity, degree or individuality of each child's needs. It is beyond the scope of the advice that can be offered here to examine such a range in detail, but guidance may be obtained from Somerset and North Somerset LEA Advisers in Religious Education and Special Educational Needs / Inclusion. In Somerset, there are Special Needs Learning Support Centres in Bridgwater, Frome, Street and Yeovil. In North Somerset, further information and support is available via the website:

Responding to pupils' needs when teaching religious education

Religious Education is a subject which lends itself to many avenues of exploration, methods of teaching and styles of learning. The individual pupil's response to the two attainment targets in the agreed syllabus will depend in part on how ideas are experienced. Teachers of children with learning difficulties will be looking in particular at pupils' ability to retain such experiences and the degree to which pupils can offer a response and / or explanation of such experiences. All work, including homework, should be differentiated to take account of these abilities.

Teachers can, through Annual Review and in more detailed planning, adapt the school's scheme of work to produce targets that match the individual needs of pupils.

The principles of good teaching apply equally to all pupils. It is important that teachers consider pupils as individuals rather than in terms of any 'label' that may result from a particular need or learning difficulty. Nevertheless, it is necessary to identify pupils' specific learning difficulties in order that teachers may employ an appropriate range of learning support strategies.

The following strategies are recommended for supporting individual pupils' learning in religious education in relation to specific learning difficulties, though, of course, individual pupils' difficulties may range across two or more of these categories:

a) Cognition and learning difficulties

- Present information visually where possible using diagrams, pictures, video and film.
- Break work down into small chunks, reinforced with visual clues, followed by checking for understanding.
- Provide opportunities to reinforce learning.
- Use role-play, drama or 'freeze frame' activities.
- Use real objects / artefacts and ask pupils to match with the right label.
- Help pupils to use a CD-ROM in small groups.
- Use peer support to help pupils understand complex text.
- Provide a variety of ways of recording work such as video, audio-cassette, diagrams, sequencing exercises, charts or paintings.
- Use writing frames and mind maps to support written work.
- Provide access to a laptop to complete all free written work.
- Produce individual 'survival pack' for topic being studied.

b) Physical and sensory impairments

i) Visual

- Ensure that written materials, worksheets, religious texts and pictures are of sufficient size and clarity. Be aware of the minimum print size required for individual pupils.
- Use the Widget Software 'Writing with symbols.'
- Seat appropriately to ensure that the pupil can see clearly and avoid light glare.
- Produce worksheets on suitable colour according to pupils' needs.
- Use bold colour pens when writing on white boards.
- Make use of tactile and audio materials, e.g., artefacts, religious music.
- Produce individual materials, especially if using whiteboard or OHP.
- When using video programmes with text produce a transcript for the individual pupil.

- Encourage oral participation, especially useful when discussing moral issues.
- Encourage use of magnifying word processor to complete all free written work.
- Provide large electric magnifier for use in the classroom.

ii) Hearing

- Seat appropriately to ensure that the pupil can hear accurately.
- Explore possibility of using microphone but remember not to use raised voice.
- Provide transcript of video programmes being used.
- Produce key vocabulary lists for pupil.
- Provide the pupil with a variety of ways to express understanding.
- Use peer support when on school visits.
- Present information visually to assist with the learning.

iii) Physical

- Provide a suitable, safe environment.
- Ensure easy access to the learning environment.
- When organising a visit to, e.g., church, synagogue, check accessibility.
- Adapt materials for creative work, e.g. spring loaded scissors, jumbo pencils.
- Provide alternative ways of recording information, e.g., audio tape.
- Encourage use of computers, if appropriate.

c)   Difficulties with communication and interaction

- Use movement, mime, dance to develop and express a theme, e.g., using the natural environment to illustrate a religious theme such as the conflict between good and evil or creation.
- Use games or creative tasks to enable pupils to show understanding.
- Encourage pupils to draw religious artefacts or symbols or create their own symbols or pictures.
- Use the Widget Software 'Writing with symbols.'
- Use the signs, symbols and photos etc contained in the 'Somerset Total Communication' (STC) programme (details available from speech therapy advisers at Resources For Learning, Parkway, Bridgwater, TA6 4RL, or email stc@somerset.gov.uk).
- Encourage pupils to make/cook food to celebrate a religious festival.
- Use music, candles, pictures, video, to support guided reflection.

d) Autism

- Ensure repetition and routine.
- Use Picture Exchange Communication System (PECs).
- Ensure materials and tasks are visually clear.
- Use the Widget Software 'Writing with symbols.'
- Prepare carefully for new situations. e.g. visit to a place of religion .
- Provide a quiet, reflective environment.
- Be aware of individual needs and cultivate their strengths and interests.
- Produce structured tasks as abstract tasks can increase anxiety.
- Use the signs, symbols and photos etc contained in the 'Somerset Total Communication' (STC) programme (details available as above).

- Allow for one to one activities rather than group activities
- Use computers to record information.
- Make use of research published by the University of North Carolina at http://www.psychiatry.unc.edu/research.

e) Behaviour, emotional and social difficulties

i) Low self-esteem

- Raise self-esteem through helping pupils to become more aware of their own beliefs and values.
- Use pupils' interests to encourage participation in activities.
- Provide opportunities for small group discussion and relaying views into whole class discussion.
- Encourage maximum participation through, e.g., role-play, art, music, reflection exercises.
- Use visualisation techniques to encourage feelings of self-worth and self-acceptance.
- Offer meaningful praise, reassurance and encouragement as often as possible to encourage self-esteem.
- Allow time for pupils to engage with learning and gradually increase the range of activities and demands.

ii) Challenging behaviour

(a) Create a positive atmosphere.

(b) Select tasks and materials sensitively to avoid unnecessary stress for pupils.

(c) Encourage an awareness of self and others.

(d) Establish a set of rules amongst the group establishing positive examples rather than negatives.

(e) Use exercises which encourage empathy with others' situations.

(f) Focus discussions away from the individual by using, e.g., video, drama, role-play, 'third person' viewpoint activities.

(g) Explore values and beliefs that impact on people's responses to each other.

(h) Where appropriate, use 'time out' techniques which could involve moving about, e.g., take a book to a shelf, etc.

iii) Disaffected

- Encourage involvement in pupils' own learning, through, e.g., self-assessment activities.
- Use pupil feedback from small group activities to help in planning future lessons and activities.
- Use pupils' own interests and link them to specific RE topics, e.g., the issue of sufficient facilities for young people could be planned into units on 'friends, belonging and the community'.
- Actively involve pupils in discussions by focusing on the issues that matter to them, e.g., rules, bullying, fairness, treatment of animals, etc.

- Concentrate on the positive aspects of RE via role-play, creative activities and use of ICT.
- Encourage the learning of useful skills that will benefit them in the world outside the classroom, such as being able to identify, interpret and show respect for different religious symbols, beliefs and other forms of expression.
- Use 'buddies' to help them process information and respond positively to their learning.
- Encourage an awareness of self and others within society, e.g., by exploring what it means to be part of a group and how to share with each other.
- Offer meaningful praise, reassurance and encouragement as often as possible to encourage self-esteem.
- Provide alternative methods of recording responses, e.g., inviting pupils to produce their own video programme, art, drama, rap, etc.
- Provide opportunities for cross curricular activities linking with favourite areas, e.g., drama, music, art, ICT, etc.

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[1]Information about LEA websites supporting the agreed syllabus should be obtained from the Standing Advisory Council on Religious Education (SACRE) of the LEAs concerned.

[2]See advice published by Somerset and North Somerset SACREs: 'A Code of Conduct for Representatives of Religious Communities Working with Children and Young People'.