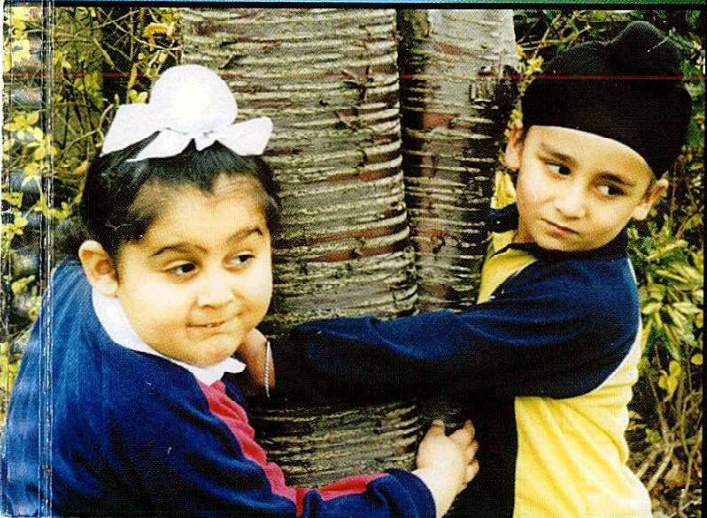




Solihull
METROPOLITAN
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HANDBOOK for Religious Education in the Foundation Stage



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Education Department
PO Box 20
Council House
Solihull
West Midlands
B91 3QU
Tel: 0121 704 6636

Other publications: *Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education 2000*
Handbook for Religious Education in Key Stage 1
Handbook for Religious Education in Key Stage 2
Handbook for Religious Education in Key Stage 3
Primary Religious Education: Planning and Assessment
Thoughts for the Day: Tutor Group Collective Worship in the Secondary School
Promoting Pupils' Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural Development through
Collective Worship in the Primary School
Talk a Walk Around: A Directory of Places of Worship in the Solihull Area

Foreword

I am pleased and proud to introduce this handbook which has been written to enable teachers to use religious education to help children in the Foundation Stage meet Early Learning Goals.

Whilst the agreed syllabus gives a helpful and coherent view of the 'territory' to be covered in RE at various stages, it does not address the critical issues of how this may be accomplished by busy teachers who daily face competing claims upon their time and professional expertise. This handbook has been written for practitioners by practitioners, all of whom are well aware of these pressures upon their colleagues. The ideas have been tried and tested and are commended as being workable and worthwhile.

I know that they would wish me to emphasise that the suggestions are exemplary rather than prescriptive. They would wish wholeheartedly to affirm the colleague who says ' I can achieve the same learning objectives but I should like to use an alternative story or area of experience or to accommodate the learning strategies within my own learning programme'.

At all stages 'good' RE is focussed upon the spiritual element within the 'person building' aspect of education. Young children possess a delightfully natural sense of spirituality and a capacity to respond at their own level to many of the experiences which are the wellsprings of our religious traditions. Whilst the influences of family and community are equally vital, 'schools' can create unique opportunities for enhancing and enriching this dimension of understanding.

Colleagues on SACRE join me in thanking Julie Grove for her leadership and all of the team for the time, skill and dedication that they have invested in this publication. By the same token we urge colleagues to use the ideas and the material to enhance the quality of their work in this vital dimension of our professional calling.

C G Knight CBE, BD, M Ed, FRSA
Chairman
Solihull SACRE

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Members of the Writing Group:

Jane Martin, Cranmore Infant School
Jenny Moir, Valley Infant School, Solihull SACRE
Louise Tellam
Ros Venus, Daylesford Infant School, Solihull SACRE
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Introduction

If learning is about looking to new horizons, then young children run towards them with enthusiasm and joy; if it is about having new experiences and encounters, then these are greeted with curiosity and wonder; if it involves asking the most important questions, then these arise naturally from children's curiosity; it is about imagining, then the young child enters this world with fascination and laughter; if it is about finding out about themselves and those with whom they live and those they meet, then the young do it with openness and trust and if it is about exploring what is held to be precious, then the child can do so with great intensity, honesty and love.

Young children have the capacity and desire to ask the most searching questions, to persist until they have a satisfactory response and to view ideas and experiences with simplicity and directness. They are largely without prejudice. They have lively imaginations that can encompass the world and go beyond it. Perhaps in some ways, they are closer to the essence of themselves than those with greater experience. It is in this context of natural energy, imagination and passion to explore, understand and enjoy that education for the very young has to be set.

This book has been written with this context in mind. It seeks to equip early years' practitioners with some of the necessary skills to enable them to enrich children's learning experiences through the use of religion. It sets out an approach that enables the child to access the world of religion, with its variety of traditions, in ways that will benefit the child's development.

The religious world can only be accessed through the faith of believers, which is not appropriate in this context, or through the imagination. It is not confined by the laws of cause and effect. It frequently defies logical explanation. It speaks rather of the mysteries which puzzle people; it reflects the deepest areas of human experience and concern; it sets out and explores the relationship which humanity has with the transcendent whom some people call God.

The main purpose of religious education at every key stage is to promote the human development of the individual. This is the philosophy that underpins all the Solihull handbooks previously published, but it is nowhere more appropriate or important than in the early, particularly formative years. In this respect, RE in the Foundation Stage could be said to be more congruent with the rest of the curriculum than elsewhere. It exists principally to promote children's development as part of their early encounters with the world.

This book sets out to identify ways of capturing the potential of religious material and use it to inspire teachers and excite, affirm and challenge young children.



How to use this book

This book is designed to be a resource to support children's learning in the Foundation Stage. It is also intended to be a support for teachers to help them make effective and imaginative use of religious material to enrich that learning and respond to children's needs. It has been written by teachers and trialled in nursery and reception classrooms across the borough.

The learning experiences created by this material are designed to promote children's progress through the Stepping Stones towards meeting Early Learning Goals (ELGs), whilst bearing in mind transition into Key Stage 1 and the requirements of the agreed syllabus. For that reason the organisational structure of the book is informed by the areas of knowledge from the Key Stage 1 section of the agreed syllabus.

Most of the material presented here is new. However, it was felt by the writing team that some of the existing lessons written for nursery and reception classes and previously published in the *Handbook for Religious Education in Key Stage 1*, were worthy of being rewritten in this format, with a specific focus on meeting Early Learning Goals. Similarly, some material previously published in *A Gift to the Child* (Simon and Schuster 1991) is reused, with the authors' permission. These items are asterisked in the contents page. The philosophy which underpins this publication is also based, as are all the other Solihull handbooks for religious education, on the learning strategy from *A Gift to the Child*.

The material is intended to be used with maximum flexibility by teachers. None of it is age specific, although some of the ideas are particularly appropriate for either nursery or reception aged children and where this is the case, it is indicated as a guide. In general the material is intended to be used inclusively, although the focused teaching on Hanuman is particularly appropriate for challenging more able children. There are no time allocations either. Some of the material could resource up to six weeks' worth of RE time in reception, for example: *The Kara* or *Ganesha*, whilst other material

might only be one session in nursery, maybe only fifteen minutes long. Alternatively it might provide the stimulus for a whole day's activity. The intention has been throughout to create a resource that blesses the teacher and the child with riches from a diversity of cultures and beliefs.

All the learning opportunities are linked to suggested themes. The focus of the work has been to use explicitly religious material to contribute to an integrated and inter-related curriculum, thus preserving the integrity of both the religious education and the Foundation Stage philosophies. The links are mapped on page 18. When beginning to use the book, this would be a good place to start because it is expected that the teacher will work initially from the learning theme and then identify possible RE material.

As the practitioner becomes familiar with the material there will be opportunities for making personal choices and links with learning themes. For example the story of Guru Nanak found in the material on *The Kara* (Focused Teaching 5) has been used successfully with Nursery children during a unit of work on 'People who help us'.

In offering suggestions here for learning experiences in both years of the Foundation Stage, the intention is to contribute to children's learning developmentally and progressively so that it is coherent and purposeful, through nursery and reception and into Key Stage 1. It is, however, acknowledged that RE is statutory only in the reception classes, with an assumption that it occupies 5% of curriculum time overall.

The book begins with a rationale for the approach to RE in this key stage and then sets it into the context of the agreed syllabus to create the sense of coherence that will benefit children's learning and ease transition.

JEG

RE in the Foundation Stage

The Curriculum

The Foundation Stage curriculum is designed around the learning needs of the child and informed by teachers' understanding of the interests and capacities of their children. That curriculum is served by subject areas rather than organised by them. There is a clear relationship between subjects and the areas of learning which categorise the early years' curriculum. RE is part of that relationship, contributing to the integrated and interrelated curriculum. The areas of learning to which RE contributes principally are:

- personal, social and emotional development;
- knowledge and understanding of the world;
- communication, language and literacy;
- creative development.

The specific contribution of RE to these areas of learning is identified in each piece of material in this book.

The Choice of Material

The material has all been chosen because of its potential to engage children's interest and imagination. It is explicitly religious. It brings children into direct contact with the religious world, providing them with the tools to use in their exploration. Visual images and religious language are particularly useful among those tools. The approach seeks to teach children ways of questioning and reflecting on the material to stimulate their understanding of themselves, other people and the world.

While learning may need to proceed in a step like manner, building on the child's obvious knowledge, experiences and understanding, there are times when it is necessary to introduce something completely new and apparently beyond their experience. This is often the case in RE when some children have no experience of the religious world at all, or if they have, they have no vocabulary with

which to describe it. It is therefore necessary for the teacher to introduce concrete religious material to the child and to talk directly about God and religious beliefs and practices. It is the nature of the encounter that enables the child to make sense of the material, to relate to it personally and to learn. This encounter is part of a carefully planned approach in the classroom.

As in all learning, the most vital consideration when choosing material is where the child is in relation to the ideas or concepts being taught. In the context of RE, this may mean drawing on knowledge or experience the child already has or upon the teacher's understanding of the child's social, emotional, moral and spiritual development. However, to give children insights into their own or a different culture or belief system, or to reflect upon their own feelings and views, it is sometimes appropriate to use material that does not immediately fit within the child's apparent framework of knowledge or experience.



For many children, the word *God* will not naturally have any religious meaning; indeed, it will probably have very different connotations. If children are to benefit from the world that RE can open up for them, it is important to introduce and explore a multiplicity of ideas, in this case to do with the word *God*, that are new to them. Otherwise, the learning opportunities are weakened and could even be lost altogether.

This may seem initially to fly in the face of accepted early years' practice. However it is simply using the most direct and powerful route to seek out the learning goals. It is essential to engage firstly with the imagination. This is done most effectively through the senses. Then, by using appropriate language, children can be helped to make use of the material for themselves to develop their understanding, in ways that are appropriate to them at that age and stage. The key to this process is the questioning, out of which the child is encouraged to form a relationship with the material.

Questions are based on the teacher's knowledge of the child's spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and his or her interests. For example, when using material about a festival such as Diwali, the child may be captivated by the colours, smells, lights and exciting stories of the festival. The imagination is richly stimulated, but that is not enough. The learning experiences and the questions used in the process need to help children go beyond what is done at the festival, to give them opportunities to reflect upon their own celebrations and to think about how, for example, they see good and evil fighting in their own lives.

It is crucial that the child has ample opportunity to root what has been learned about, and from, the festival within her or his own understanding. It needs to find a resonance in his or her own world, otherwise what is presented remains irrelevant, or even alien. This would hardly develop respect or understanding or promote positive learning.

Even a focus on what may be the more culturally familiar celebration of Christmas can have little long-term impact if the purpose of activities and possible outcomes are not clear within the activity. For example when sharing the Nativity story, children need opportunities to explore, through role-play and discussion, key elements of the story. If well used, the material invites them to explore the emotions to do with being homeless, anxious, relieved, excited, delighted, amazed, overwhelmed, frightened, fascinated, and then to reflect upon the importance the story has for some people who believe in God.

The Learning Process

This approach demands the teacher's understanding of a specific pedagogy which is written into the material. Initially the child is engaged with the religious item in ways that stimulate interest and capture the imagination. This is done directly and with maximum impact and is the beginning of an open process in which the child begins to relate to something which may be unfamiliar and yet is fascinating.





The next step in the learning process is to invite children to explore the material further through story, play, music, art and any other appropriate activity. Threaded through all of these activities, the questioning and wondering is modelled by the teacher, seeking to develop qualities of curiosity and reflection in the child. The religious material, full of mystery in itself, is enabled, through the carefully crafted learning process, to encourage children to develop the habit of asking their own questions and wondering for themselves.

The process has to be educational. The child's interaction with explicit religious material in this process of discovery does not imply crossing into faith. Indeed the boundaries need to be carefully delineated and the integrity of young children and their families protected. This is safeguarded by rooting the material clearly within the faith tradition, by contextualising it: Sandeep goes to visit the Golden Temple because he is a Sikh and this place is sacred to him and his family; some young children go to Sunday School because they believe in Jesus and they like to sing to him.

This approach brings children into the religious world and encourages them to become familiar with particular aspects of it. A particularly effective way of achieving this is through story. Children are invited to come into the story and be part of it through the use of a device that sets up a threshold for children to cross.

The process identifies the religious emphasis of a story, distinguishing it from other stories that are shared in the classroom environment. Lighting a candle or ringing a bell can be effective ways of creating such a threshold. A hoop covered in colourful material becomes a story ring which each member of the group can hold as the story is shared. Objects or pictures from the story can be placed in the ring. For a larger group, lengths of ribbon can be tied to the ring so that each member of the group can hold a ribbon. It is possible to make this device specific to the story. For example in the story of Joseph, ribbons might be attached to a cloak, perhaps worn by the practitioner, with each of the children holding a coloured ribbon during the telling of the Old Testament story.

It is equally important that having 'entered' and established a relationship with the religious story, the children are subsequently 'distanced' from it. The extinguishing of the candle, or the removal of the story ring signals the end of the relationship. This enables children to understand that the material has special significance for some children but not necessarily for them.

In this approach, the religious material is used instrumentally. The purpose is not to develop a systematic understanding of any tradition, but rather to empower the material to enrich children's thinking. The emphasis here is on the quality of the learning experiences rather than the quantity of them. There is no specification laid down as to the amount of time that should be devoted to RE in the Foundation Stage on a weekly or termly basis. There is, of course, the requirement for children in Reception to have the equivalent of 5% of curriculum time.

Matching Early Learning Goals to the Agreed Syllabus

The table which follows is designed to be read from left to right, working from agreed syllabus objectives, linked to ELGs, to outcomes in the form of expectations of pupils at the end of the Foundation Stage, leading into the KS1 expectations. This framework has been used to generate learning objectives which provide the context for assessment. Evaluation of learning will be through observation of children's interaction with the material and their reflections about it and themselves. Conversations with individual children, sometimes outside the focused sessions altogether, will indicate the success of the approach, but there are also likely to be opportunities built into the process for reflections on learning. The following conversation between the practitioner in one of our nursery classes and a three year old boy, who is a Hindu, illustrates the point. This was early in the autumn term and the children had just encountered the Muslim prayer beads.

What have we learned today?

Child: Some people like to keep these in their pocket.

Why?

Child: To help them think about God.

The practitioner, not an RE specialist, was delighted...and so she should be!



Making it Work - A Journey from Scepticism to Enthusiasm

At the heart of Early Years education is an absolute commitment to the right of each child to her or his childhood, with a right to play, to make choices and to be active learners. A young child's curriculum should begin where the child is assessed to be and should aim to open doors to new learning by finding exciting ways of leading the child to the next step on their learning ladder. Early Years practitioners see each child's learning holistically, both in terms of their physical, emotional and intellectual development and in terms of an inter-related, interdependent curriculum.

Religious education has its roots in a legalistic framework and is often taught in isolated, subject based islands of time, introducing children to concepts such as 'God' which do not seem related to children's knowledge or understanding. As a Nursery teacher and therefore not subject to the requirement of any current legal framework, it seemed easier to justify RE teaching in terms of learning respect for each other, developing emotional intelligence during circle time activities and retelling some favourite stories such as the Christmas Nativity story, but without too much talk of God.

Then I began to listen to those who have a commitment to introducing children to explicit religious material. Children were to be led in and out of this material using techniques which allowed children to participate in the experience without experiencing any need to acknowledge personal belief. If personal or family faith was brought to the material then this would be valued on an individual basis. So I became aware of ways of introducing children to active, first hand experiences of what may be characterised as the religious dimension of human experience. Alongside this new understanding it continued to seem right that such experiences should not sit in isolation but rather be integrated into a holistic approach to teaching and learning.

So I was encouraged to try out what I had learnt within the Nursery. My first use of a story candle was to tell the story of Noah and the Rainbow. I explained that this was to be a story about God and so was important to many people. We would light a candle to help us to listen quietly. As the candle was lit an air of quiet expectation fell. I told the story in my own words and felt the children's wonder and rapt engagement. A little girl from a Greek Orthodox family listened transfixed. I felt I was part of a shared experience which left us with a sense of quietude and respect. As the talk of God, Noah and the Rainbow ended, I blew out the candle and we moved on to consider what we could do to look after our world. Learning continued and the secular was re-engaged.

Through this and similar activities, I have learnt that to introduce children to explicit religious material in this special way is to offer them a first hand, active and meaningful experience in the very best tradition of early years practice. The concepts have not been understood in a formalised, intellectual sense but they have been engaged within a manner that no other area of the curriculum opens up in quite the same way. I have come to believe that we do not have the right to ignore or omit this area of human experience. Some children, I suspect only a few, may never engage with religious material, but some children do not engage easily with dance or paint for example. Hesitation on the part of individuals is insufficient justification for failing to plan such opportunities for learning for the many.

What follows in this curriculum guidance are ways in which RE can be planned for in the Foundation Stage. By adapting the ideas to suit your children, RE can be taught within the framework for the Early Learning Goals and within a philosophy of meeting the child where she is and providing her with experiences that will help her to develop and grow. The ensuing personal and professional satisfaction is an unexpected bonus.

Jenny Moir

