

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

# GIFTED IN RE



**What can you do with those young people that have a real flair for RE? The most important thing to remember is that what is good RE for very able young people is often good RE for all young people. That said, here are some suggestions for activities at which all young people could shine.**

### An RE Debate

Link up with another school and have an RE debate. Secondary and top primary young people can debate. The format could be that each school provides a team of four.

Agree on a motion and have one team from one school speak for the motion and the other school team speak against. Limit speeches to no more than 3 minutes. After the main speeches invite contributions from everyone.

A whole morning could be booked for this with three or four different motions being debated. A good idea is to find out if you can use the local authority's Council Chambers. If they are available, use them as it can add real *gravitas* to the occasion.

Possible topics that could be debated include:  
This House believes:

- 'People have forgotten the meaning of Christmas'
- 'To live a good life the only rule we need is, 'Do no harm''
- 'Religious symbols should be private and kept out of sight'
- 'Religion has brought humankind more peace than war'
- 'People must look after their family before they worry about the poor'

Investigate faiths that have fasts and feasts and identify some important questions you could ask.

### An RE writing competition

Being gifted in RE isn't about necessarily about being quick. If you have a tendency to see in a religious issue not just the black and white answers, but also the grey 'iffy' answers in-between, the last thing you would want to do is commit yourself to some glib instant response.



Some really able young people need time, space and privacy to work through to their considered responses.

An RE writing competition where entries might be between 300 – 500 words and which may be written over a period of some four or five weeks, enables young people to think seriously about their views, research information, change their minds and give careful consideration to some opposing arguments. Have an assembly, rather like an Oscar ceremony, where the best examples of writing are celebrated. Put together the best entries into a school booklet or try to get them published on a G&T young person's website like 'Publishing House Me' [www.publishinghouse.me.uk](http://www.publishinghouse.me.uk)

### Raise questions

Encourage young people to raise their questions about religion. All too often RE takes the form of the teacher presenting a resource, e.g. a video, an artefact, an image, or a piece of text, and this is followed by a series of questions. The pattern is that teachers ask the questions which pupils try to answer. Invert this format by encouraging young people to ask their questions about religion. For example, before telling a religious story, like *The Feeding of the Five Thousand* tell the pupils that when the story is over you are going to ask them

to write down one really good question that the story raises for them. When the story is over give pupils thinking time to compose their question. The genuine questions which young people ask about religion, and which they wish to discuss, are often much more ambitious than the questions adult teachers of RE are prepared to ask. Make sure you follow up on at least some of these questions. Very able young people, in fact all young people, are much more likely to be interested in RE if they feel they are being listened to and if they are trying to tackle the questions they want answered.

## Challenging Writing

Display around the school and invite young people to consider some really challenging examples of writing about religion. This doesn't have to be writing intended for children. Very able young people are often flattered if given demanding material which was originally intended for adults.

Selected extracts, with some adaptation, may be taken from books like William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, Jackie Pullinger's *Chasing the Dragon*, Malcolm X's *Autobiography* or Jonathan Sachs' book *The Dignity of Difference*.

Also, don't ignore the splendidly clear writing of a robust and often impolite critic of religion like Richard Dawkins. For example, his comments in *The God Delusion* on the idea that religion is a 'non-overlapping magisterium' (NOMA) can really get young people talking, as can extracts from *Unweaving the Rainbow* in

which, as an atheist, he expresses his feeling that there is much to celebrate in the extraordinary and glorious fact that we are actually alive.



## Community of Enquiry

If you have never yet done so, try 'Community of Enquiry' during the month of the National Celebration. This strategy is for both primary and secondary RE. The simplest form of Community of Enquiry is to show pupils a piece of stimulus material. This may, for example, be a photograph of a family celebrating a religious festival, or it may

show the joy on the faces of a rescue team that is pulling a woman from the rubble of an earthquake. Pupils are asked to think of an interesting question which the image raises for them. The best of these questions are selected and then, from the best, the pupils can decide for themselves which question they should enquire into. Pupils then discuss the question they have settled on.



However, to undertake Community of Enquiry properly pupils can't remain sitting in groups or in rows facing the teacher. A large circle must be created so everyone can see and hear each other. The teacher should join the circle but the discussion must belong to the pupils and so the teacher should listen actively but not join in. Community of Enquiry however is not a free for all. There are rules about listening, using courteous language and not interrupting. The technique is a remarkably powerful way of engaging young people in 'ratter-tat-tat', reciprocal discussion. It often results in pupils continuing the discussion as they leave the classroom or thinking hours later about how they could have made their argument more strongly or their point with greater clarity.

## Hopping

Descriptive and recall tasks require lower order skills compared to activities which involve interpreting, explaining or analysing. However, time and energy in RE is often given over to recall or descriptive tasks. For example, it is not untypical to find that when learning about a religious story, like the creation story found in the Bible, time is spent dividing a page into six, drawing six pictures each representing a day of creation, and writing a caption for each drawing. The caption activity is often claimed to be an 'explaining' task but frequently it is little more than a copying task as the words are likely to have been lifted from the text which is provided. At the end of all this drawing, colouring and labelling, time spent on actually discussing, exploring, interpreting or explaining the story is all too often rather limited. Hopping deliberately involves cutting out these lengthy descriptive activities.

Hopping involves briefly reminding young people of the essence of a story which they are likely to have heard many times before. It involves hopping over the minutiae of the story and giving more serious time to the question, 'Taken as a whole, what is this story telling us?' Instead of just recalling the facts of the story, for example, recalling what was created on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day, or what it says God did on the 5<sup>th</sup> day, RE can celebrate the tackling of much more interesting and important questions like, 'What does this story mean?' 'How do different people interpret it?' 'What interpretation of the story appeals to you most?' Collect the most interesting interpretations and publish them on the school's website.



## Question time

'Question Time' is based on the BBC programme. Contact four or five local leaders of faith to serve as the expert panel. They could be leaders of faith – priests, ministers, rabbis, imams - but they could also be lay members for whom faith is important.

The audience is made up of young people who both prepare and ask their questions. This will need some preparation. Install a 'Question Box' in the classroom and encourage the pupils to post their questions in this box. Arrange a pencil and a notepad by the 'Question Box' and ask the pupils not to forget, or let a good question go, but to capture it and post it in the box. Some questions may need a little working on. It is also a good idea to have the pupils anticipate what sort of answers members of the panel might give and for them to prepare one, or several, supplementary questions. Record the whole event on film.

## An RE Quiz

Being gifted in RE is more than just recall but it should come as no surprise to find that young people that have an ability in RE often also have a very sound body of religious knowledge. An RE Quiz can celebrate this. An RE Quiz can be an in-house school affair or schools might link up with other schools for a competition.

Pupils could compete in teams of four. Rounds of ten questions with feedback on answers and team positions will help keep up the interest.

Rounds could take as their topics traditional areas like festivals, places of worship, rites of passage, holy books, leaders of religion. But it often helps to mix in more novel rounds like a movie, TV or music round which have a religious theme, e.g. What 1975 Queen rock Rhapsody repeats the phrase from the Qur'an 'Bismillah' which means, 'In the name of God'? Quizzes are best kept light hearted. There is nothing wrong with a display of factual knowledge about religion but a healthy perspective on this should be maintained. The knowledge of facts is after all a puny gift compared to the gift of understanding, insight, analysis and empathy, but a quiz offers the opportunity to combine factual recall with fun.



## Parent Online Info

Gifted and talented education places great store on schools working closely with parents to help their very able children to be the best they can be. Strengthening the relationship between schools and parents of young people gifted in RE may be given a particular emphasis during the National Celebration of RE.

To do this, put online information, which parents of gifted young people can access, giving details about what exactly their child will be studying in RE. Information given online might include the next six or ten RE lessons coming up, what sort of ideas or issues their child will be asked to consider, what specific activities, questions, homework or assignments they will be asked to undertake. Parents might be invited to study the same topic along with their child – after all, learning shouldn't

be seen as a chore which is fortunately inflicted only on the young. Parents might be invited into lessons or encouraged to go on a RE visit. If parents are seen to be also interested in learning, if they too are students, they provide a great role model for their children. But even more than this, parents are also placed in a much better position to discuss with their child the issues which their child is being asked to think about in RE. Instead of the rather aimless question, 'How are you getting on at school?' parents can ask their child much more searching questions over the Coco Pops about their RE in school.

## The Faith Interview

People of faith are all around us. Celebrate this by having your able young people interview individuals about their faith. The people to be interviewed do not have to be official representatives of a religion, such as priests, rabbis or imams. They could be a friend, an uncle, a classroom assistant, a governor or a lab assistant. With proper child protection measures in place it could be a volunteer from the local Help the Aged shop or a midwife who has returned from VSO work in Sierra Leone.



A Faith Interview is not so much about a specific religion as about an individual and their personal spiritual journey. Many people have a fascinating spiritual journey to tell. Questions should focus on their life history: 'What were your early beliefs?' 'What memories do you have of religion?' 'When did your views start to change?' 'Was there something specific that made you change your mind?'

Faith Interviews enables young people to understand religion close up, to understand that faith is often not very straightforward but may be full of doubts and uncertainties, ups and downs. Faith may stand still like a rock, it may make small, incremental changes over years, or faith may unexpectedly arrive, disappear or change in dramatic and sudden ways.

## What is RE? website

Gifted young people might be asked to celebrate RE by designing and producing a series of web pages which explore the question 'What is RE?' The 'pages' might contain the vox pop views of people in or out of the school answering the question, 'What is RE?' The production team should know that a vox pop survey is not a serious sounding of popular opinion. Most vox pops are closely edited to raise an important issue, generate interest or convey an impression.



Young people might have a go producing a more lengthy and thoughtful documentary film recorded in the local community entitled, 'Why is RE important?' A taped discussion on 'How can you learn from religion?' could be included. Or the site might contain pop up thought bubbles of individuals describing what they have learnt from religion.

The site might also have a chat room discussion area in which the buzz topic of conversation might be subjects like, 'Teaching people to be religious and teaching RE – what's the difference?' or 'What I like most about RE'.

Clearly, the site will need close monitoring – after all young people should understand the brief for the site, but it should be upbeat, positive and thought provoking.

