

A vision with a task is the hope of the world: Towards an equality of provision for children with Learning Difficulties and Disabilities

*'A vision without a task remains a dream  
A task without a vision is drudgery  
A vision with a task is the hope of the world'<sup>1</sup>*

This essay arises from a fundamental belief that spiritual development is a vital part of personal growth. Whether or not we follow a particular faith, we are enriched by the inner, hidden, 'other' dimension to life, sometimes referred to as the numinous sense, which needs nourishing, just as our minds and bodies need nourishing. Religious Education in the context of schools and Religious Education and Catechesis in the context of a Faith Community offer distinct opportunities as we travel the path of discovering what it is to be human. We are all on this path, irrespective of the form of embodiment we inhabit or perceived hierarchies of ability which dominate our culture and deem one way of knowing and being as more valuable than another.

This essay charts a journey undertaken as a heart felt response to the need for a just and equitable provision of Religious Education and Catechesis for children with Learning Disabilities. It gives particular focus to children on the severe end of the Autism Spectrum and children with severe learning disabilities and discusses issues both in the context of Religious Education in Special schools and Religious Education, Catechesis and Sacramental Access in the context of the Catholic community. Issues are explored in the context of a developing theology of disability and current developments in disability legislation.

This is a journey of hope to assist, guide and encourage conversation and the sharing of experiences with others treading the same path. Charting the journey reveals that the fruits of working towards parity in provision for children with Learning Disabilities are manifest in more engaging and meaningful RE for all. A recurring motif which gives shape to the journey emerges in the form of *challenges*, then *opportunities* born out of responding to the challenges and then *epiphanies*; the insights and manifestations which arise. This motif then provides a structure through which to share with you the journey so far.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Reeves in Henri Nouwen's Road to Daybreak, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1989

## Inclusive RE for Special Schools

### *Challenge*

The journey began for me with the challenge of providing inclusive Religious Education within the specific context of a day and residential school for children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) and/or severe and complex learning disabilities. Many children were non-verbal, presented extremely challenging behaviour and needed much help with attention and co-operation and other pre-requisite skills to facilitate the beginning of the teaching/learning interaction. In Music sessions, I could tap into its powerful medium to relax, stimulate, secure a comfort zone, sustain joint attention and engagement, promote opportunities for communication and interaction and minimize the likelihood of challenging behaviour occurring. I was aware that with the natural affinity between Music and RE I could import much of this into RE sessions but was challenged to create other Religious Education experiences not solely reliant on Music but equally effective in creating an environment in which learning could take place so that the Locally Agreed SACRE<sup>2</sup> syllabus could be explored.

### *Opportunity*

To innovate and craft a meaningful approach to RE for these children meant identifying the distinctive individual and common sensory behaviours associated with ASD and using this information alongside the syllabus to assemble resources, experiences and activities to create a space where anxiety is reduced, motivation is enhanced and attention is engaged. For example:

*Millie's preoccupation is the pursuit of food items. She is therefore more likely to engage in RE experiences if tasting, sharing or symbolic use of food is included.*

*Shane derives comfort and stimulation from flapping a bit of plastic, he is only likely to relinquish this and engage if flappable or dangly items are included in his RE sessions*

*Claire enjoys items that provide strong visual stimulation. She has high anxiety and low-tolerance levels, but if fibre-optic or holographic*

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<sup>2</sup> Standing Advisory Council for RE

*materials are included she may remain calm enough to engage in RE experiences.*

So my *Connecting With RE*<sup>3</sup> approach was born out of a need to respect the 'worlds' experienced by the children, then move from participating and celebrating in their world to extending the amount of world they would be willing and able to explore though establishing a relationship of trust.

### *Epiphany*

Recognizing the 'culture of autism'<sup>4</sup> as a world view in itself and empathizing with different ways of experiencing the world led to a realisation that there is always something more to be learnt about what it is to be human from the unique perception of a different form of embodiment. I became aware that the children's needs had led me to a philosophy regarding the integrity of RE in the context of disability and more generally how RE should respond to the plurality of cultures or worlds which individual people inhabit. For if RE is about exploring and developing world views, offering activities and experiences through which children may develop their own world-view and their awareness and appreciation of the world-view of others, expressed for some in Religious belief or belonging to Faith Communities, it can surely only have integrity if consideration of the way the world is experienced is applied to the teaching/learning context itself. John Hull comments on this when he poses the question,

*'For how can a world create a curriculum for that other which it does not recognise as either being in a world in itself or as being included within its own world?'*

And he suggests that,

*'The teacher who can enter into several worlds will become a trans-world professional, and to that extent, a better teacher.'*<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Connecting With RE Liz O'Brien

<sup>4</sup> Gary B. Mesibov, TEACCH Project-Autism, 1994

<sup>5</sup> Teaching as a trans-world activity, John M. Hull in British Journal of Learning Support

## Inclusion in a Faith Community

### *Challenge*

In my capacity as music co-ordinator in the school, I was approached by one of our speech and language therapists who wanted to enlist my help on a special project. It had emerged that one of our students was nearing the age for Bar Mitzvah. For him and his family, the Jewish faith was a fundamental and integral part of their lives. Could we help? Would this young man, like his older brother, be able to stand up in the synagogue, intone the blessing on the Torah in Hebrew, and carefully and ceremoniously carry the Torah around the synagogue from the Ark to the reading desk? For a boy whose dyspraxia had a severe impact on his speech, motor control and developmental ability, was this a realistic, achievable possibility?

It seemed important to try. So, while I repeatedly listened to the melodic line of the blessing and broke it down into short sections which I played on the piano and sang over to him, the speech and language therapist ingeniously tapped into the visually appealing and motivating *Letterland*<sup>6</sup> characters, such as Bouncy Ben the Bunny and Annie Apple, to translate the Hebrew script into a recognizable sequence of attemptable speech sounds. When the great day arrived, nothing could have prepared us for the dignity and pride of this young man as he rose to the occasion, or for the overwhelming emotions called forth from deep within ourselves and shared with all who were there to witness this special moment. That day, in the eyes of his family and faith community, he had become a man. The boy with awkward gait stood tall as he transported the Torah radiantly and reverently. The growth in his self-esteem seemed to be visibly manifested, as if he had suddenly shot up by a good few inches! I was affected by how vital, enriching and joyous this experience was for him and his family and the Jewish community. Relating and communicating with him henceforth would forever be informed, enhanced and deepened by our sharing of this significant and wonderful event in his life.

*'We observe how the sacramental event gives people a history, a larger family, a feeling of belonging, and a future.'*<sup>7</sup>

### *Opportunity*

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<sup>6</sup> Letterland

<sup>7</sup> Archdiocese of Chicago, Access to the sacraments of initiation and reconciliation for developmentally disabled persons

There was no going back now. We had taken a step forward as a school and grown as a community. What was it about this event that had such a life-giving effect on all of us? What about all our other students and their families, and the value they placed on their faith and cultural histories? Did they too have hopes and desires for their sons and daughters, or was this yet another door they felt had been closed as a consequence of their child's disabilities? Might some of them have chosen Faith schools for their children, if things had been different? Could it be that, for some, the most important aspects of their children's lives were being neglected or omitted? As a residential and day school offering 24 hour provision for up to 52 weeks a year, we needed our curriculum to take account of the fact that, for some children we were responsible for providing their total life experience. If we did not consider the issues and implications of spiritual development and faith education for these children, who would?

Our school did not have a religious foundation, but as we progressed with our curriculum development it emerged as fundamental that we should:

- create an ethos and environment that nurtured and fostered spiritual growth;
- offer a wealth of experiences and opportunities designed to evoke and awaken a sense of the numinous and enhance the development of the 'inner life';
- make provision, as far as possible, to assist with the faith education and celebration of faith for children from different faith communities;
- assist with the preparation of children for significant events in relation to their becoming full members of their faith communities.

To invite parents to share their wishes with us, a sensitively worded questionnaire was sent out.

### *Epiphanies*

As the completed questionnaires began to arrive in school, it became apparent that we did indeed have parents with hopes and desires for the faith development of their children. In a powerful and moving piece of

writing, Emily Pearl Kingsley uses the analogy of making preparations to go on holiday to Italy and then being told by the air stewardess that she has landed in Holland, to share her experience of having a child with a disability.<sup>8</sup> It seemed that many of our parents had consigned these hopes and desires to being yet another door closed as a consequence of 'landing in Holland' until we offered to open it for them to their surprise and delight. I was moved to tears by their replies.

*'I didn't think it would be possible.'*

*'I didn't think it could ever happen for our son.'*

Determined to find a way forward, we set up an ecumenical group of children, staff, parishioners, family members and friends and endeavoured to offer meaningful experiences and opportunities that would nurture and celebrate the children's faith and prepare them for the sacraments. We became participants again in those powerfully enriching occasions, those unique and sacred moments when our severely disabled young people affirmed their interest and commitment to their own faith journeys through the sacraments of Baptism, the Eucharist and Confirmation. When we set out, we could not have anticipated how greatly inspired and blessed we would be by the unexpected, unpredicted manifestations of the children's innate spirituality. We who considered ourselves the providers and facilitators were now overwhelmingly humbled and beginning to question who was ministering to whom?

### *Inclusion in the Catholic Community*

#### *Challenge*

The next challenge was to find a way forward to ensure full belonging and participation for children in the Catholic faith community where my own belonging resided and to transfer the approaches for creating meaningful RE to the process of Catechesis and Sacramental preparation. I discovered a history of developing practice in this area, a small body of literature which offered guidance and reflection on the issues and an evolving theology of disability.<sup>9</sup> These had been generated in response to personal experiences of family members with disabilities, requests from parents, the development of disability legislation and the need within the

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<sup>8</sup> Welcome to Holland Emily Pearl Kingsley

<sup>9</sup> St. Joseph's Pastoral Centre for People with LD, Hendon had developed a range of useful resources

Church to articulate a theology of disability in relation to understanding and responding to the presence and phenomena of disability in the world in the light of Scripture and Church teaching. I was excited by the challenge of synthesizing effective methodologies from the professional field of Special education and Social Care with the pioneering work of symbolic catechesis<sup>10</sup> from within the Catholic community. Whilst the growth of writing in this area over the last decade, has been exciting and developments of good practice encouraging, still many tasks remain to realise a vision of full '*Belonging for All*'.<sup>11</sup> An example of this is a recent call from a distressed mother whose son with ASC had just been excluded from the parish First Communion Programme because 'he didn't get it.' When we had talked through her feelings of rejection, anger, sadness and bewilderment and I had reassured her that I would send some materials to make the programme more accessible and connect her with a special needs catechist in her area, I added that if God who created the universe and holds us in being each moment chooses by the power of His Spirit to give the essence of Himself to us through His son Jesus in the form of a wafer of bread, this is surely an awesome mystery! By what criteria does anybody decide who gets it? I was reminded of the observations of Mark Francis,

*'We who have been trained to value above all else the linear, logical and analytical in life often miss moments of grace that are readily apparent to our sisters and brothers with developmental disabilities...While they might have difficulty in articulating the abstract descriptions of faith, it is well within their capacity to enter into the communal symbolic language used in liturgy to express the depth of God's love for us.'*<sup>12</sup>

When these situations occur they usually arise out of the need for more disability awareness training for teachers, catechists, families and clergy who when faced with a different situation are unsure what to do.

## *Opportunity*

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<sup>10</sup> Symbolic Catechesis has its origins in the Method Vivre, pioneered in France by F Jean Mesney and Fr. Eucharist Paulhus, a Canadian, then further developed in Chicago through SPRED(Special Religious Education).

<sup>11</sup> *Belonging For All*, Audit and Research report on the inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in the life of the Church in the Archdiocese of Birmingham

<sup>12</sup> Mark.R.Francis, 'Celebrating the sacraments with those with developmental disabilities,' in Edward Foley, *Developmental Disability and Sacramental Access*, The Liturgical Press, 1994

In 1998, the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales published '*Valuing Difference*', which puts forward a vision for enabling people with disabilities to participate fully in the life and mission of the Church. Now 15 years on and in collaboration with Special Needs Advisor colleagues from other Dioceses, who come together as the Catholic Learning Disability Network (CLDN), I have had the opportunity to prepare a follow up booklet to assist in ensuring the vision of '*Valuing Difference*' is put into practice in a consistent and coherent way. The document focuses on participation in the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation for children, young people and adults with LDD (Learning Difficulties and Disabilities). The booklet gives guidance to Dioceses, schools, parishes and families as they seek to respond to the Gospel and Church teaching by creating more inclusive communities. It also takes account of the developing experience and expertise and of the changing circumstances and opportunities generated through disability legislation,<sup>13</sup> education initiatives and technological progress since '*Valuing Difference*' was published.

It sets out clearly the principles that the Sacraments are for all, that all who seek them should be offered appropriate catechesis and that where possible preparation and celebration should take place as part of the community with appropriate support. As with Religious Education, barriers to access are created when programmes are reliant on cognitive ability and the use of words and concepts. The booklet brings together the constituent generic features of models and approaches which have shown to be enabling, alongside recognition of the need to tailor programmes to accommodate individual needs and circumstances. It identifies the common essential or distinguishing features of effective approaches as:

- An emphasis on the 'relational';
- Development of the use of symbol and ritual;
- A multi-sensory approach and modification of the environment;
- Awareness of and sensitivity to non-verbal communication modes;
- An informed and selected use of both music and silence;
- Use of software to create visual resources with symbol supported text;
- Liaison with all involved in the person's life.

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<sup>13</sup> The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA 1995), The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (SEND 2001), The DDA 2005, The Disability Equality Duty (DED), Every Child Matters/Children's Plan/Removing Barriers to achievement, Equality Act 2010

These features are discussed in detail in the booklet and work has begun through the CLDN to produce user-friendly resources to enable teachers, catechists and parents to put it into practice.

### *Epiphany*

The similarities and commonalities experienced when bringing together the worlds of Special Education, Religious Education and Catechesis converge on the intrinsic worth and value of each individual human person and the importance of relatedness. Thus all the intense work to promote 'joint attention,' pre-verbal dialogue, turn-taking, awareness of self, other and environment which underpin a curriculum for children with ASC and SLD, using methodologies such as intensive interaction<sup>14</sup>, music therapy, gentle teaching and multi-sensory environments resonate fully with the theological underpinning of meaningful Catechesis.

*'God is family, is Trinity, is thus the source of all relationship, the reason for all we do.'*<sup>15</sup>

At the heart of all this is the need to recognize and celebrate each person's contributions, achievements and uniqueness, so that self-worth and self-esteem begin to grow and each person feels 'noticed, affirmed, included, valued and cherished'<sup>16</sup> in a way which is comfortable for them. Brian Kelly alludes to this centrality of relationship when he says,

*'I can bring Jesus to my friend who has a severe learning disability only by being Jesus with him. He will not know Jesus or the father unless I am Jesus.'*<sup>17</sup>

### *An Inclusive RE resource: Connecting With RE*

#### *Challenge*

I became increasingly concerned that in the contexts of both Religious Education in the Special school and Religious Education and Catechesis in Catholic and other Christian communities, as awareness of the need and value of inclusive RE was raised, practitioners urgently required training

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<sup>14</sup> Dave Hewitt and Melanie Nind, 'How to do Intensive Interaction' in Interactive Approaches to Teaching, edited by M.Collins and P.Lacey, David Fulton

<sup>15</sup> Joe Mc Clorry, SPRED Newsletter, volume 8, issue 8, 1997

<sup>16</sup> Mary Therese Harrington

<sup>17</sup> Brendan Kelly in Mental Handicap: Challenge to the Church

and resources to enable them to go forward. From monitoring the provision of RE in my own school, I knew that although teachers were confident in exploring some of the multi-sensory opportunities of feasts and festivals and visiting some of the more familiar stories from sacred texts at a sensory experience level, they were struggling to make a more comprehensive response to the SACRE syllabus in a way which would be accessible and meaningful. As I became involved in providing Continuing Professional Development for RE teachers in special schools across the country working with many different SACRE syllabuses<sup>18</sup>, the sense of frustration in trying to crack these open for children with ASD and SLD was a common and pressing issue. Programmes of study drawn up without due consideration of the differing needs and abilities of children with ASD and SLD can seem to have inherent barriers of access to inclusive RE such as:

- Reliance on cognitive, verbal and written approaches to learning
- Abstract nature of topics, themes, aims and concepts
- Insufficient opportunity for different channels, styles and modes of teaching and learning
- Lack of guidance for including children within the range and spectrum of LDD
- Lack of guidance on resources to engage children with ASD and SLD

### Opportunity

Through the courtesy of a Special Needs Fellowship awarded by the National Society,<sup>19</sup> I was given the opportunity to try and alleviate some of these frustrations by producing a book of tried and tested material for all who have responsibility for teaching, co-ordinating or advising on RE for children with such distinctive needs. '*Connecting With RE*' introduces a series of study units designed to incorporate the following features:

- Motivating, enjoyable activities and experiences, which address the suggested aims of the Local Agreed Syllabus.

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<sup>18</sup> Unlike other subjects RE is not covered in the National Curriculum but drawn up by the SACRE in each Local Authority. Suggested National Model Frameworks are now available to guide the development of the syllabus but there is no legal requirement to use them.

<sup>19</sup> The National Society for Promoting Religious Education, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3AZ

- Opportunities compatible with current Curriculum Guidance<sup>20</sup>, Equals<sup>21</sup> and 'P' Scales.<sup>22</sup>
- Weekly lesson plans grouped into half-term units.
- A repertoire of activities including group work and shared experiences designed to give focus to differentiated learning outcomes.
- Opportunities to incorporate global and wider curricular aims.
- Thematic focus to enable delivery as part of a cross-curricular topic or alternatively as a discrete unit of study
- Sign language and Symbol supported text for key words.
- Opportunities for assessment and external accreditation for all ability levels.
- Suggestions of different ways to animate biblical texts
- Guidance on how to create an effective Mediated Learning Experience

*'Connecting With RE'* advocates an eclectic approach to working with children with ASC and SLD acknowledging that they are first and foremost individuals with different personalities, circumstances and backgrounds and arrange of needs and abilities, who may respond therefore to a range or combination of approaches and interventions at different stages in their development. It also discusses two particular approaches of TEACCH<sup>23</sup> and MLE<sup>24</sup> in the context of effective RE.

### *Mediated Learning Experience*

Through the opportunity of experiencing Professor Reuven Feuerstein's approach when supporting a child in the Jerusalem based programme, I discovered in the language of Mediated Learning Experience, a way to evaluate, articulate and fine tune some of my previously instinctive approaches to teaching and learning. MLE proposes a great potential for learning in children with severe disabilities dependent on the quality of the interactions they experience and the role of mediator/teacher in

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<sup>20</sup> QCA Qualifications and curriculum alliance

<sup>21</sup> Equals curriculum guidance for children with LD

<sup>22</sup> P scales 1-8 educational progression for children with LD working below Level1

<sup>23</sup> Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication Handicapped Children originated in North Carolina with a philosophical premise of the need for empathy with the condition or 'culture' of autism and uses structure and visual clarification to provide predictability and reassurance, thus bringing order out of chaos and enabling learning to happen.

<sup>24</sup> Mediated Learning Experience: Feuerstein's work is encapsulated in the term *structural cognitive modifiability*. He demonstrates that intelligence can be changed and improved. MLE examines social, interpersonal interactions and offers principles to enhance and modify learning. Feuerstein, 1998; Feuerstein and Mintzker, 1993, Feuerstein, Rand and Rynders, 1988

selecting, presenting and controlling stimuli in order to maximise learning. MLE flavours many aspects of the *'Connecting With RE'* approach, being always mindful of the questions: *'What is it that is important to mediate here?'* and *'How can I make this a more successful mediated learning experience?'*

MLE interactions are identified by several characteristics or criteria, with the three essential characteristics being:

- Intentionality and Reciprocity
- Mediation Of Meaning
- Transcendence

When I am involved in CPD<sup>25</sup> in inclusive RE, I encourage teachers to apply the three essential characteristics to the planning, delivery and evaluation of their RE lessons to ensure motivating and enjoyable RE, which speaks into the children's daily lives. For example, as part of a topic on the seaside the children are introduced to the New Testament account of Jesus calming a storm.<sup>26</sup> The mediator/teacher pulls out all the stops in relation to knowledge of the children, approaches and methodologies and selection of resources and activities through which to animate the story and thus creates and transmits an experience of *'It's good to be here together doing this.'* Thus, intentionality and reciprocity, essential for any learning to happen, is put in place. The mediator/teacher then distils the essence of the story or theme to transmit a message which has meaning in the children's lives. For example, through animating the experience of the disciples being afraid in the boat and using songs, objects and symbols, the mediator/teacher can lead the children to a shared recognition that sometimes being afraid can be part of our experience as human beings and that we may be afraid of the same or different things. Thus, the mediation of meaning is present. To move from this to the mediation of transcendence the mediator/teacher uses whatever knowledge and resources possible to help the children to explore, *'What can I learn from this which will help me as I live my life and grow as a person?'* This may be through helping a child recall through the use of photographs, symbols or other sensory reminders, who they can trust and go to when they feel afraid and how they can develop coping strategies to reduce situations of anxiety. For instance a child with ASC who is hypersensitive to sound can be reminded to use his PECS<sup>27</sup> symbol to request his headphones if the noise level in the classroom is beginning to cause him distress.

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<sup>25</sup> Continuing Professional Development

<sup>26</sup> Matthew 8.23-27; Mark 4.35-41; Luke 8.22-25

<sup>27</sup> Picture Exchange System which enables children with communication difficulties to express needs and make choices

This MLE approach offers opportunities for the children to learn about and learn from RE, as teachers are encouraged to look before and beyond the syllabus to the ultimate questions such as 'Who am I? What am I doing here? How will I live my life?' but in ways that are meaningful and helpful to the children they teach in the reality of their daily lives. Teachers can become energized and enthusiastic about RE when they are shown how it can be the best curricular area through which to address the most vital areas of children's development which in special schools, are often identified through Individual Education Programmes as global needs or under the aims of an enabling or pre-requisite curriculum. I share with them how in my own school when we were developing the curriculum we threw all the subjects out and started with the question 'What do we want to help the children to achieve?' Then when we returned to considering which curricular areas were best pre-disposed to nurturing the hopes and dreams we had drawn up as a result of first considering their holistic development as human beings, guess what? Most of them fell under RE!

### *Epiphany*

Many revelations have unfolded, from writing '*Connecting With RE*' and the follow up experience of subsequent workshops and training days. The first was the realisation of the need for a format so that the material in the book could be presented in a way which had integrity for the differing needs and audiences. When transmitting meaningful RE to children whose ability to participate relies on intense mediation, careful thought must be given to the messages and the contexts. '*Connecting With RE*' responds to this by using an RE box and Faith box in each lesson to allow material to be used with integrity in the different contexts of RE and Catechesis. I was determined that the book should meet the needs of both audiences as they were equally desperate for material. Another insight is that although as SACRE syllabuses are being revised, more work is being done to promote inclusive RE, the lack of relevant practical material to assist RE teachers and catechists in planning meaningful and enjoyable experiences for children at the severe end of the spectrum is still an issue.

Perhaps one of the most unexpected and interesting revelations was that some teachers and catechists were happily liberated on training days from restrictions which cultural precedents seemed to have placed on them in relation to creative use of resources and approaches in RE. This appeared to stem from a sense of deference about the appropriateness

of using everyday items to mediate a 'holy' subject. On one occasion, I had to reassure some catechists who seeing an array of toys and household items instead of religious artefacts, thought they had accidentally arrived at a table top sale instead of a training session! In discovering how people can be imprisoned by notions of the sacred and profane, there was a greater need than I had anticipated, to encourage teachers and catechists to use any resources which would engage the children to bridge into an RE theme. Within the context of the Catholic community this can be grounded in a rich theology around the Sacramental Imagination.

*'Both liturgy and life are schools of the sacramental imagination. It is the specifically Catholic vision of human life that sees the divine human encounter being mediated symbolically-through people, objects, events. According to what has been called the Catholic principle of sacramentality, there is virtually nothing that cannot mediate the divine presence. For the Catholic imagination, the most ordinary in daily life can be sacramental of the extraordinary, the visible of the invisible, the tangible of the intangible. It is this Catholic imagination that needs reschooling.'*<sup>28</sup>

And Virginia Owens echoes this,  
'If we see the sacred penetrating all of reality because of the activity of God, then we can see all of our lives, all of the cosmos as filled with meaning, instead of seeing it all as just one damned thing after another. Why did we ever separate it into sacred and secular?'<sup>29</sup>

### Inclusive RE in the Catholic Educational Community

#### *Challenge*

Around the time 'Connecting With RE' was published, I took up the post of Special Needs Advisor with the RC Archdiocese of Birmingham in the Department of Religious Education and embraced the challenge of working for inclusive RE in my own Faith Community. Although there was a history of support in the Diocese for Catholic children with special needs<sup>30</sup>, the outreach was limited. The main findings of an audit and research report which I made one of my first tasks, indicated that

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<sup>28</sup> Formation in the Sacramental Imagination, Orm Rush

<sup>29</sup> Owens 1983

<sup>30</sup> SPRED New Life, derived from Chicago SPRED had been established in some parishes and a few special schools through the excellent work of the late Sr. Veronica Egglestone and other Sisters of the

*'the majority of Catholic children in special schools have no access to Catholic RE and catechesis.'*<sup>31</sup>

The report also predicted that with increasing numbers of children with special needs being included in parish schools, teachers would require assistance with differentiating materials and approaches to provide meaningful accessible RE for children working within the P levels. This is now a matter subject to legislative requirements under the Disability Equality Duty.

*'Valuing Difference'*<sup>32</sup> 1998, identified the contribution of 13 Catholic special schools in England and Wales, but it is the minority of Catholic children with learning disabilities whose needs are met in this way and a massive disparity in provision with some Dioceses having a few special schools and many Dioceses having none. Whilst Catholic children in special schools receive the RE provided though the Local SACRE syllabus, this does not take the same form and emphasis as the RE they would experience in a Catholic school, drawn from the Curriculum Directory.<sup>33</sup> Whilst within the Catholic educational community, distinctions are made between Religious Education and Catechesis,<sup>34</sup> shared responsibility for these complimentary enterprises is encouraged through good relationships between homes, schools and parishes. In the Archdiocese of Birmingham, preparation for the sacraments takes place mainly in the parish schools and there is no Catholic Special school, which means that for the great number of Catholic children in LA special schools<sup>35</sup>, unless other local arrangements are made, Catholic Children become separated and excluded from their Eucharistic communities and from the distinctive nature of RE experienced by their 'able' peers in Catholic schools.

### *Opportunity*

The recommendations of 'Belonging For All' proposed a strategic planning approach to move the Diocese to a position where all Catholic children

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Poor Child Jesus supported by volunteers and there was an active Handicapped Children's Fellowship and HCPT (Handicapped Children's Pilgrimage Trust)

<sup>31</sup> Unpublished report 'Belonging For All' Liz O'Brien 2003

<sup>32</sup> Valuing Difference 1998

<sup>33</sup> RE Curriculum Directory Revised 2012

<sup>34</sup> Circular Letter from the Congregation for Catholic Education, Rome, addressed to the President of Bishops' Conferences 2009 identifies the distinction, 'Religious Education is different from and complimentary to, catechesis, as it is school education that does not require the assent of faith, but conveys knowledge on the identity of Christianity and Christian life.' 'Catechesis aims at fostering personal adherence to Christ and the development of Christian life in its different aspects.'

<sup>35</sup> A recent audit identified 283 in Birmingham LA, the Archdiocese of Birmingham stretches from Stoke to Reading and encompasses a further 12 LA's

with disabilities whether in LA special schools or included in parish schools, could be guaranteed access to meaningful RE, Catechesis and Sacramental life. This was to be accomplished through partnerships between Catholic Primary and Secondary schools and their neighbouring special schools with training provided to enable effective outreach provision and resources to support teachers in delivering the Diocesan RE Strategy<sup>36</sup> to children in parish schools working within P Levels. Just before Archbishop Vincent Nicholls left to be installed as the new Archbishop of Westminster, I sought his help with this initiative and he wrote to the Director of Children's Services in the Birmingham LA to endorse this partnership. Archbishop Vincent's last pastoral letter to the Archdiocese of Birmingham was to seek support for this project.

*'A new effort is being made to try to ensure that Catholic children attending special schools receive regular religious education and preparation for the sacraments. We need to reach out to these children who are often forgotten or hidden. They need to be brought into our Eucharistic communities, together with their families.'*<sup>37</sup>

Opportunities to work towards inclusive RE at a national level have arisen through participation in the association of National Board of Religious Inspectors and Advisors.<sup>38</sup> Representing the Diocesan Special Needs advisors on the NBRIA executive and collaborating in working groups, has created an opportunity to further the commitment already established within the partnership of NBRIA of working towards inclusive Catholic RE. For example, joining the working group to produce revised Levels of Attainment in Catholic RE has resulted in a publication that gives due attention to assessment in RE for children working within the P scales. The publication provides guidance on how to use the P scales and checklists, customised for RE in Catholic schools which break down the P scale levels still further, identifying the very small incremental steps that LDD pupils make, often with prompts and support. Here is an example of a checklist at level 6 on the P scales. Checklists for all levels can be downloaded from the CESEW website.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Birmingham uses its own resource, Learning and Growing as the People of God, written by Jonathan Veasey and associates of the RE department, based on the RE Curriculum Directory. Some Dioceses use National Project Publication 'Here I am' currently under revision.

<sup>37</sup> Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Birmingham, The Most Reverend Vincent Nichols on Disability given at Birmingham on the 28<sup>th</sup> February 2009 and appointed to be read in all Churches and Chapels of the Diocese on the Fourth Sunday of Lent, 21/22 March 2009

<sup>38</sup> NBRIA aims to promote sound religious education and formation at all levels through members who are based in the different dioceses of England and Wales.

<sup>39</sup> [www.cesew.org.uk](http://www.cesew.org.uk) website of the Catholic education Service for England and Wales

## Checklist

## P Scale Religious Education attainment

Pupil name	Started	Completed
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### Level P6

Pupils express and communicate their feelings in different ways. They respond to others in group situations and co-operate when working in small groups. Pupils listen to, and begin to respond to, familiar religious stories, poems and music, and make their own contributions to celebrations and festivals. They carry out ritualised actions in familiar circumstances. They show concern and sympathy for others in distress, for example, through gestures, facial expressions or by offering comfort. They start to be aware of their own influence on events and other people.

- 1 Watches with interest the involvement of others within a religious activity E PP GP VP AI M\*
- 2 Expresses own feelings by action/response within a religious activity
- 3 Communicates own feelings by word, sign, symbol etc. within a religious activity
- 4 Responds co-operatively with a partner in a religious activity
- 5 Responds co-operatively to others when working in a small group
- 6 Listens to familiar religious stories/poems/songs
- 7 Begins to recognize/respond appropriately to familiar religious activities eg., stories/poems/songs/play
- 8 Makes a personal contribution to a religious celebration/festival, eg., has a role in a play
- 9 Carries out a ritualised action in familiar circumstances, eg., lighting a candle/incense
- 10 Shows concern/sympathy for others who are in distress through word, symbol, sign or action, eg., comforting a friend who is upset
- 11 Begins to have an awareness of the influence they can have on an event, Eg., being part of a group play
- 12 Begins to have an awareness of the influence they can have upon other people

#### # Key to colour coding of targets and strands

- AT1i** beliefs, teachings & sources  
**AT1ii** celebration and ritual  
**AT1 iii** social and moral practices and way of life  
**AT2i** own and others' belief and values  
**AT2ii** questions of meaning and purpose  
**R & C** progression in reflection and contemplation  
**Generic** pre-requisite and on-going skill for all strands

#### \*key to level of assistance

- E** Experienced  
**PP** Physical prompt  
**GP** Gestural prompt  
**VP** Verbal Prompt  
**AI** Achieved independently  
**M** Mastered

In addition to the checklists the publication provides examples of progression linked to particular RE activities and cross-referenced to Curriculum strands. Here is an example of progression based on Advent.

### Context

Pupils are introduced to and encouraged to explore symbols related to Advent as they prepare for and participate in Advent liturgies. AT1(ii) Celebration and Ritual

### Evidence of progression

Range of pupil responses based on Advent

P1	Pupil explores items/symbols related to Advent theme fully prompted and shows simple reflex responses, eg., uses senses to investigate Advent wreath, experiences Advent song/music
P2	Pupil begins to engage in co-active multi-sensory exploration of items/artefacts, which have a symbolic place in liturgy, eg., explores Advent wreath co-actively & with interest. Tracks lit candle across the mid -line when wreath is moved in front of him/her.
P3	Pupil begins to follow familiar ritual and respond appropriately, eg., gives attention to counting and lighting of candles on wreath, responds to invitation to blow candles out, uses musical instrument appropriately to participate in candle/Advent song
P4	Pupil begins to recognize/use words, gestures, Makaton signs, symbols associated with key vocabulary used in liturgy and celebration and begins to be aware of others, eg., imitates words/signs/gestures for Advent/candle song, is aware of turn-taking with others for playing instruments and blowing out candles.
P5	Pupil begins to respond to simple questions connected with familiar liturgical events and engages in activity cooperating with up to two others, eg., uses word/ sign/ symbol when participating with others in Advent lotto game to answer questions such as ' Whose birthday are we getting ready for?'
P6	Pupil begins to make a personal contribution to celebration and liturgy and cooperates with partner or small group to participate, eg., selects prayer from an array of symbol cards and shares it with group through sign/words, undertakes role in Advent play with support
P7	Pupil evaluates own behaviour and work in simple terms as right/wrong, good/bad, eg., engages meaningfully with being good/doing wrong symbol lotto and sentence - makers, selects from array of sorry symbol cards during Advent liturgy.
P8	Pupil begins to recognize the significance of the Advent wreath as a symbol and uses correct signs/symbols/words to show understanding and communicate ideas related to Advent stories/themes, eg., retells advent stories using felt-board, props, symbols, communicates ideas related to 'getting ready' for other special events in own life

Several more examples of progression within RE activities across the different strands are included in the publication and are available from the website.<sup>40</sup> The checklists and exemplars have elicited positive feedback when piloted in some Catholic Special schools and some LA special schools.

Further opportunities for inclusive Catholic RE have arisen from agreement by the NBRIA executive to appoint a special needs

<sup>40</sup> With acknowledgement to John McManus, Kath Stead, Adrian Dempsey, Fr. Joseph Quigley and other NBRIA colleagues who helped ensure the inclusive nature of this publication.

representative to the National Project.<sup>41</sup> In response to a recent review of National Project publications a new resource is has been created for Catholic children not attending Catholic schools. Working with the writing group has helped ensure that the resource includes guidance, experiences and activities which can be made accessible to all children and in partnership with Widgit Symbol Software,<sup>42</sup> I have created a supplementary resource of symbol lotto games to support inclusive use of the material in the books. The work on this publication should set a precedent for an inclusive approach to all other resources from the National Project.

### *Epiphanies*

The more involved I have become in advocating for inclusive RE for Catholic children the more aware I am of the rich resource of disability theology in the Catholic tradition which underpins and provides a mandate for all we do. The Gospels tell us that Jesus spent much of His time amongst people with disabilities, removing the barriers and shifting the margins to restore them to the hearts of their communities. The Gospels show us how Jesus uses people with disabilities to reveal who He is and that prophetic role which the most severely disabled can have in leading others to the truth about themselves and about life continues to be remarked on today by those who become their friends.

*' Here is the man who more than anyone else connected me with my inner self, my community and my God. Here is the man I was asked to care for, but who took me into his life and his heart in such an incredibly deep way. Here is my counsellor, my teacher, my guide, who could never say a word to me but taught me more than any book, professor or spiritual director.'<sup>43</sup>*

Perhaps this was what was in the mind of St. Paul when he pointed out that

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<sup>41</sup> The National Project works in partnership with NBRIA and with the Bishops' Conference and its agencies to produce materials and resources which are rooted in developments in RE and Catechesis since Vatican II. It was established to support the partnership of home, parish and school in their different but intimately related role in the religious development of children and young people.

<sup>42</sup> Widgit Symbol Software's Communicate in Print Programme enables the making of resources in symbol supported text. Used in special schools and regarded by Diocesan special needs advisors as an essential tool for inclusive RE and Catechesis [www.widgit.com](http://www.widgit.com)

<sup>43</sup> Adam, God's Beloved, Henri Nouwen

*'those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable.'*<sup>44</sup> And it is precisely this that is revealed in the journey towards inclusive RE. The search for effective ways to bring meaningful RE to those with severe disabilities leads to a more enriching approach for all. The most significant document at present in relation to the future development of Catholic Religious Education and Catechesis in England and Wales is the interpretive essay, *'On the Way to Life'*,<sup>45</sup> which is a critical analysis of the significant features in contemporary culture that may have a bearing on the context of Catholic religious education and catechesis. The authors identify a *'crisis of transmission'* and suggests ways forward for the Catholic community. On behalf of the CLDN, I have submitted a detailed response, urging the community to draw on the methodologies and approaches we have been led to by those with severe learning disabilities as this resonates so clearly with the vision put forward in *'OTWTL'*.

*'For those of us whose work involves mediating the Good News of the Gospel to people, particularly with intellectual disabilities, out of necessity, we have developed alternative modes of transmission, which do not rely on the cognitive, literate or verbal. OTWTL 2.1 pg.59 recognizes that transmission 'requires an ecclesial life and faith that is affective and relational as well as cognitive and conceptual.' Developing methodologies to find a language for transmission has always been at the heart of our work and this challenge has led to many innovations in approaches and resources: An increased emphasis on the affective and relational; optimum use of multi-sensory modes; recognition of the contribution of music, movement and the other arts therapies; the emergence of a symbolic catechesis which has at its centre the nurturing of a sacramental imagination as it brings together the human experience, the created world, the Word of God, regularly in a small community of faith experience through a process of accompaniment.'*<sup>46</sup>

The word 'Catholic' comes from *Katha Holos* and means 'All are welcome,' so it is essential for Catholic communities to become pro-active in taking steps to ensure that their schools become more accessible and that outreach programmes are in place for those children in LA special schools. Where this is happening, RE and catechesis for all children has been

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<sup>44</sup> 1 Corinthians 12.22

<sup>45</sup> Commissioned by the Bishops' Conference Department for Education and Formation and written by Frs James Hanvey SJ and Tony Carroll SJ of the Heythrop Institute for Religion, Ethics and Public Life

<sup>46</sup> Pg 16 in *On the Way To Life: Disability Advisors Response*, Liz O'Brien on behalf of CLDN(unpublished document)

enriched. John Paul II who left a legacy and challenge by the witness of his own disability drew attention to this in his address in Southwark cathedral in 1982.

*'Let us keep the disabled at the centre of our lives. Let us treasure them and recognise with gratitude the debt we owe them. We begin by imagining that we are giving to them; we end by realising that they have enriched us.'*

### Spirituality and Learning Disability

#### *Challenge*

'On the way To Life' identifies an emergence in our culture of a 'new spirituality' and Adrian Smith in his book, 'The God Shift' sees humanity moving on in its journey towards a 'post-secular' age in which the unseen eternal aspects of people are being brought ever more into focus. The establishment of a Centre for Spirituality and Health at Staffordshire University and the sponsorship by the National Foundation for Learning Disabilities of research projects on meeting the religious and spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities is encouraging. Some of the children who first challenged me to provide meaningful, enjoyable RE, have become adults living in residential provision and so a new challenge arises around how to offer with integrity, opportunities to nurture their spiritual growth.

#### *Opportunity*

There is an opportunity here to listen to the wisdom coming from communities who have for a long time realised that fostering spiritual growth is essential in helping us become the people we are created to be and for the wider community to learn these truths. Introducing a new book on the spirituality of the L'Arche Communities, their founder Jean Vanier speaks of 'giving life to each other and helping each other to become more fully human' and in a profoundly moving chapter, *Faith by Candlelight*, the author explores through observation and interviews with the participants, what is happening in the regular candle ritual.

*'Regardless of whether one believes in God, essential identification of self and other as beloved makes compassionate love the single most important priority in relationships. L' Arche members know that before*

*religious background or mental ability they are beloved. This fact is ratified to the group through meaning ascribed to the candle, but also through the manner by which core members and assistants strive to treat one another.*<sup>47</sup>

There are also opportunities to contribute to and learn from new research. John Swinton's work which has provided people with learning disabilities with ' *A space to Listen*<sup>48</sup> resulted in a series of definitions of spirituality all centred on relationships,

*'Spirituality is a relational concept that concerns a person, experience or relationship and which provides people with a sense of value, hope, meaning, direction and belonging.'*

*' Spirituality can manifest itself in meaningful relationships with God or others, in a sense of awe and wonder, as a hidden personal value, as a sense of responsibility that extends beyond oneself and in a sense of compassion for the world.'*

In a current action research project, people with Learning disabilities have taken the role of research partners helping to explore and develop a practical resource to enable religious and secular communities to recognize and meet the spiritual needs of people with learning disabilities. The research has been based around focus groups in different contexts and settings and is now available as a training programme and resource from the recently launched Kairos Forum.

### *Epiphany*

Those participating in the project have been surprised by the depth of discovery in their learning about and relating with each other and by the depth of knowledge and awareness displayed by those with learning disabilities when given the appropriate tools to access and express the stories of their inner lives and selves.<sup>49</sup>

So it becomes increasingly more apparent that in the different contexts and settings, whether creating opportunities for inclusive Religious Education, Catechesis, Sacramental Preparation or spiritual development, at the heart of all of it is a call to relate, to find and use whatever

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<sup>47</sup> Pg 50 Living L'Arche Kevin S. Reimer 2009

<sup>48</sup> A space to Listen, John Swinton, University of Aberdeen

<sup>49</sup> Gangemi/Swinton University of Aberdeen research completion see website

motivates and animates the 'other' to mediate an invitation to them to explore their place in the world and so become the person they are meant to be.

*'Abstract, conceptual thought may not be possible, but there are other ways of knowing, such as symbolic or intuitive thought and response. Religion is neither fundamentally abstract nor purely conceptual. It is primarily relational, and, for that reason, the developmentally disabled person can be educated in faith.'*<sup>50</sup>

### *Challenge*

John Swinton challenges us to consider how we construct our understanding of what it is to be human and observes that

*'In a culture where such things as friendships, relationships, compassion, dependency were perceived as primary social goods, there would be no such thing as intellectual disability. It simply wouldn't exist, because it wouldn't matter.'*<sup>51</sup>

Let us learn from our friends with disabilities how to create more meaningful RE, Faith development and spiritual accompaniment and travel the journey towards just and equitable provision for all, until we arrive at that place where it doesn't matter. That is the vision.

Liz O'Brien Updated May 2013

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<sup>50</sup> Archdiocese of Chicago, Access to the sacraments of initiation and reconciliation for developmentally disabled persons, 1985

<sup>51</sup> John Swinton speech given at HCPT conference, Lourdes, 2008