

**SURELY
THEOLOGY
CARRIES A
15 IF NOT AN 18
CERTIFICATE?**

CONCEPT CRACKING:
**EXPLORING
CHRISTIAN BELIEFS
IN SCHOOL**

TREVOR COOLING

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A Changing Emphasis in RE

Introduction

Jenny Riley is eighteen and studying for A levels in history, geography and art. She wants to be a primary school teacher. She considers herself to be a Christian, although she is not a regular church goer.

At her college interview, she is not surprised to be asked about her ideas on teaching language and maths. She is on home territory when her interviewer probes her understanding of technology and art. Then comes the RE question. Tell me, Miss Riley, how would you approach the Christian belief in incarnation with seven year olds? Panic! She vaguely understands the term, but is not at all sure that a theological doctrine like this can, or even should, be taught to this age group.

Jenny's reaction would, I am sure, be shared by thousands of experienced teachers, including the loyal brigade of Ill do the occasional lesson types who keep RE going in many schools. Even those specialists who have been appointed RE coordinator in their primary school or who are in charge of a secondary school RE department might baulk at the prospect! Surely theology carries a 15, if not an 18, certificate?

Despite these anxieties, the study of Christian beliefs has become a central aspect of recent RE syllabuses. For example:

- In 1989 the Scottish Examination Board published its new Standard Grade syllabus for Religious Studies. In the Christianity section students are required to study Incarnation, Kingdom of God and Resurrection.
- The guidelines for RE published by the Scottish Office Education Department in November 1992 recommend that Christian beliefs should be a continuous strand of study from ages 5 to 14. For example, they state that children in their final years at primary school should understand something of what it means when Christians call Jesus Son of God.

- In the national core syllabus of RE for Northern Ireland, adopted in 1992, the first attainment target is The Revelation of God. Under this, from the primary school onwards, pupils are to develop an awareness, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the key teachings about God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, about Jesus Christ and about the Bible.
- The new Independent Schools RE Syllabus published in May 1994, stipulates that Christian beliefs, for example the Trinity, should be a component in the teaching programme from age five onwards.
- In July 1994 the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority (SCAA) published two model syllabuses for RE. These are designed to offer guidance to English LEAs in the preparation of the agreed syllabuses which their schools are required, by law, to teach. Religious beliefs run as a thread throughout Model 1. For example it is suggested that junior aged children should learn about how Christians understand the Crucifixion and the Resurrection of Jesus. In the case of Model 2, its structure is built around the key beliefs of the religions. For example, in the Christianity section, beliefs such as incarnation, salvation, revelation and discipleship form the framework for teaching children from age five on.

What lies behind this new enthusiasm for the study of Christian beliefs, or theology, to use the technical term? What are its advantages? And how are teachers to cope with it in the classroom?

The Shift to Theology

Probably the most important reason for this shift is an increasing concern about what I like to call the bums in the air syndrome. I owe this phrase to a Muslim friend, who complained that most school textbook photographs of Muslims at prayer are taken from the back of mosques. Of themselves such pictures do not help children grasp the centrality in Islam of belief in submission to Allah. My friend's point illustrates a general concern that an overly descriptive approach to religion has concentrated on giving information about the world's religions at the expense of exploring its meaning for believers and of showing its relevance to modern children (1). The overall effect is often to leave children with the feeling that religion is very peculiar.

All too often children complete their study of Christianity in school knowing something about what Christians do and a few Bible stories, but have little or no conception of why Christians do these things or what significance the Bible stories have. Their overall perception of the Christian life is of a relic in a world

where religion has little part to play. The missing element for many pupils has been an encounter with the meaning of Bible stories and the significance of practices like baptism and communion. This is where theology comes in.

One of the main aims of RE is to help children understand what it is like to be a religious believer. Time and again this crops up in the syllabuses as a principal goal for the subject. In the case of Christianity, it is the beliefs which will give children access to this understanding. The early Christians were accused of cannibalism because their contemporaries heard them talking about eating the body and drinking the blood of Jesus. This is a quite understandable misconception for someone who knows nothing of the beliefs that underpin the Eucharist. To give another example, a friend of mine once met an African evangelist at Heathrow airport. The evangelist had been telling his fellow passengers that his brother was meeting him off the plane. They were quite perplexed when they were introduced to the white skinned brother. Their difficulty was that they had never encountered the idea that the church is the family of Christ. Children and adults today will have similar problems in understanding Christianity if they leave school theologically illiterate. The same point, of course, also applies to other religions.

Can Children Cope?

Talk of teaching theology in schools may conjure up visions of dreary lectures where children are bombarded with complicated, technical jargon. Such fears are, no doubt, exacerbated by the appearance of words like incarnation on a syllabus for seven year olds. Teachers training and professional instincts tell them that children are not ready for such highly abstract work; to attempt it is demanding too much. These misgivings, although understandable, are I suggest, unnecessary for three reasons.

1. There is increasing agreement that children can cope with quite difficult ideas as long as they are presented in a way that makes sense in their world of experience (2). The problem comes when abstract ideas are dumped on children in a manner that takes adult frameworks of thought for granted. What is needed is a teaching methodology which takes account of the way children learn.

2. Most subjects are taking very seriously the need to teach fundamental ideas. Concepts such as number, gravity and force are introduced into the curriculum from a very early age. The technical language will probably not be used with five year olds, but lesson planning will be done so as to ensure that children encounter the ideas in ways that make sense to them. So a concept like force will be introduced through Children's own experience of pushing and pulling objects.

This is to recognise the fact of intuitive learning, namely that, as one philosopher has expressed it, we know more than we can tell. The aim is to create a concept rich environment where the key ideas become part of the Children's world of experience. In this way pupils will build up a framework which enables them to understand a subject. As one important report put it:

'Concepts are the main focal point of any educational programme concepts help us to make, sense of what we observe and encounter in particular religions' (3).

3. Concern is sometimes expressed that if we teach difficult ideas, like religious beliefs, too early children will develop very primitive notions, which will then stick with them into adult life. An example would be the old man in the sky view of God which so many, otherwise sophisticated, adults still have. The problem here is not that they held this idea as young children, but rather that their subsequent education has not enabled them to develop a more sophisticated understanding.

Many children start with quite mistaken ideas in other subjects. For example in science they probably think that atoms are like hard billiard balls or that monkeys turned into human beings overnight. These are mistaken understandings of the structure of matter and of evolution respectively. We do not stop teaching these scientific theories to young children because they develop such primitive understandings. Instead we seek to build on their ideas to ensure children progressively develop a more sophisticated understanding as they grow older. The problem with astronauts who think they have shown that God does not exist when they travel into space and do not find him there, is not that they have been taught the concept of God too early. Rather it is that they have not experienced a progressive teaching programme which enables them to develop a deeper understanding.

The next chapter introduces a methodology for exploring Christian beliefs called concept cracking. This has been developed over the last ten years as part of the Stapleford Project run by the Association of Christian Teachers. The method is probably applicable to other religions, but that is a job which should be done by those who have a good understanding of the faiths in question.

Before turning to the methodology, let me first clarify my use of terms. The syllabuses speak of religious beliefs. Other books talk of religious concepts or ideas. Probably the most straightforward way to understand the relationship between these two terms is to say that beliefs are concepts which attract personal commitment.

CHAPTER 2

Concept Cracking: A Method for Exploring Christian Beliefs

Two Important Components

In a recent report, the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) commented that:

‘Much RE teaching is confined to a rather dull exposition of Christian beliefs’ (4).

This was not a criticism of the teaching of beliefs as such, but of the way in which it has been approached. The problem is twofold. First, there is often a lack of clarity as to which aspect of a belief is being taught. If we are not clear as to the focus of our teaching, then it is hard to achieve a worthwhile classroom experience. If we are confused, we are more likely to ramble and our teaching will lack pace and be boring. The saying a mist in the pulpit is a fog in the pew applies equally well to the classroom!

Second, however, it is not enough simply to know ones subject matter well. The OFSTED report also noted that standards were noticeably higher when work was closely linked with aspects of pupils experience (5). We need to ensure that the way in which beliefs are taught earths them in the pupils experience. Etched forever in my memory is my schoolboy experience of half hour RE lessons during which our teacher droned his way through the book of Job. They seemed to last for eternity! He was certainly an expert on the topic, but he never once gave a thought as to how it might be made relevant to a fourteen year old anxious to get onto the football pitch! Unfortunately the OFSTED report suggests that such dull exposition is still not unknown in British schools.

In concept cracking, two important components in planning a unit of work on Christian beliefs have been identified.

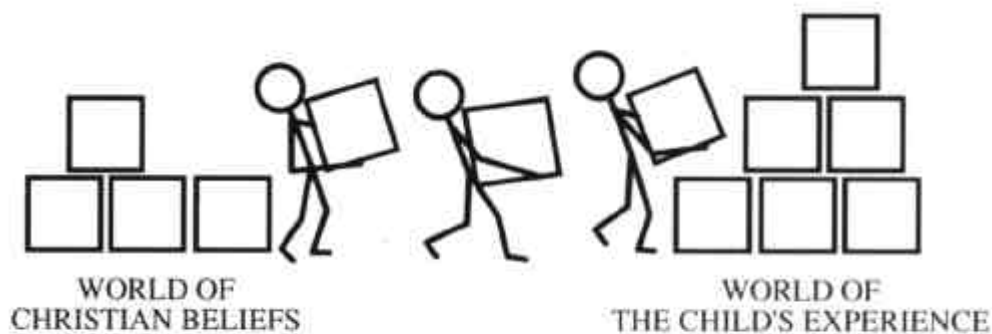
1. Identifying a Focus

One difficulty for teachers wishing to explore Christian beliefs in the classroom is that there are often many different beliefs embedded in the RE topics traditionally taught in school. For example, in a unit of work on Christmas we could be dealing with the beliefs that God gave His son, that Jesus is the Prince of Peace and that God is with us, to name but a few. Similarly in a topic on salvation, we could be dealing with ideas such as being rescued, making a new start, sacrifice and imperfection.

Whichever topic is chosen for a unit of work in RE, a focus must be identified, so that the teacher is clear as to exactly which belief or beliefs are to be taught through that unit. If the teacher is confused about the beliefs involved, it is almost certain the pupils will be. An essential preliminary step in planning lessons on a particular topic is, then, to unpack it in order to be clear about the cluster of beliefs being dealt with. The next step is to decide which of these beliefs is to be the focus of the unit of work in question. This decision will be influenced by the syllabus the school is following and the age, ability and experience of the children. The temptation is to try and include everything there is to know about a topic in one unit of work. This should be fiercely resisted.

2. Relating to Pupil Experience

The ideas involved in Christian beliefs are largely alien to children in the western world because they do not form part of their everyday experience. There is, therefore, a great challenge for RE in finding ways of relating these beliefs to



CONTENT STRUCTURED: CHILD RELATED

Children's experience so that they can begin to make sense of them. The skill is to find a way of building a bridge between the world of Christian belief and the world of Children's experience. Using story, including biography, and designing creative learning activities are important ways of achieving this. The aim is to translate the religious ideas so that they are communicated effectively to children. To do this it is necessary to take ideas from one culture (Christian) and to find the parallels in our pupils culture (in most cases western, secular) which enable them to make some sense of the Christian world.

This means that RE must have an experiential dimension and that teaching must take seriously Children's experience of the world. This will be discussed more fully in chapter 3. Here I need only point out that, in most cases, children are not going to find RE relevant if we start by teaching them the explicit Christian belief.

It should not be forgotten that Christian beliefs are, in one sense, a commentary on human life. They articulate how Christians have interpreted their experience of the world in terms of Gods presence and action. It is therefore a travesty to teach them just through dull exposition, their relevance to human experience has to be demonstrated. One of the strengths of the new SCAA syllabuses, is that Model 2 shows how the beliefs relate to specific aspects of shared human experience. For example, thirteen year olds are invited to compare and contrast Christian discipleship with the experience of peer group pressure.

Concept Cracking At Work

The process involved in concept cracking consists of four main steps. Looking at how a topic on Repentance might be developed with infants will illustrate how the method works:



Step 1: Unpack the Beliefs

The beliefs embedded in the concept of repentance include the importance attached to; saying sorry, changing our attitudes and behaviour, and receiving forgiveness.



Step 2: Select One Belief to Explore

This unit of work will focus on the belief that change in attitude and behaviour is needed and what that means.



Step 3: Relate the Belief to the Child's Experience

To begin with, explore the notion of external change, for example of clothes using the dressing-up box. Develop this by looking at the changes that take place with growth. In discussion, explore the similarities and differences between change on the outside and change on the inside. Use a story like *The Two Giants* by Michael Foreman (Hodder & Stoughton) to convey the notion of change in attitude.



Step 4: Introduce the Religious Idea and Make it Relevant

Tell the story of Zacchaeus, the crooked tax collector who returned all that he had stolen after meeting Jesus (Luke ch 19 v 1-10). Children can explore Zacchaeus before and after attitudes and behaviour using paper bag puppets. Discuss what confession means to modern Christians. Explore how saying sorry helps in human relationships.

In table 1, four other topics have been included to illustrate briefly how the method can be used on different types of subject matter namely, a story, a main belief, a festival and a practice. Clearly these examples need further elaboration if they are to be used as teaching units. The purpose here is only to show briefly how the method works.

STEPS IN CONCEPT CRACKING

	1. Unpack the cluster of ideas	2. Select one idea to explore	3. Relate it to pupils experience and reflect on that experience	4. Introduce the explicitly religious idea and make it relevant to the modern world
Bible Story eg Ruth	* Gods care in times of difficulty * Ruth's commitment to Naomi	Commitment	Commitment to friends Challenges to loyalty	* Hear and explore the story of Ruth * Marriage service * The Hiding Place (Corrie Ten Boom)
Main Belief eg Covenant	* Gods faithfulness to his promises * The people of God * Obedience	Gods Promise	Making and keeping promises	* Abraham and the promise of a son (Genesis 18v1-15) * Communion as celebration of the promise of Jesus return * Monastic vows
Festival eg Easter	* Sin * Love * Sacrifice * Forgiveness and reconciliation * New life	Forgiveness and reconciliation	Falling out with someone and then restoring the relationship with forgiveness	* Joseph and his brothers (Genesis chs. 42-49) * Jesus attitude to his persecutors Luke 23v26-49) * Coventry Cathedral reconciliation service * Corrymeela
Practice eg Adult Baptism	* Declaration of belief * Symbol of cleansing from sin	Declaration of belief	Standing up in public for what you believe	* Stephen before the Sanhedrin (Acts ch 7) * Saying of creeds * Testimony at adult baptism

TABLE 1

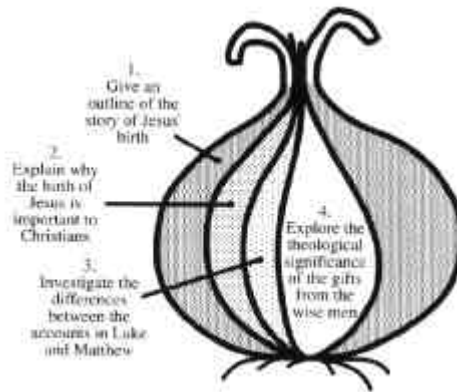
Achieving Progression in Teaching About Beliefs

In chapter 1, the point was made that children's understanding of beliefs should become increasingly sophisticated as they move through the years of compulsory schooling. Unfortunately, it seems this does not happen in practice. For example, it is not uncommon to find Christmas dealt with in virtually the same way with both five and thirteen year old pupils. Often this will amount to little more than re-telling the story. Few children realise that Ph.D theses are written on these stories! Most adolescents seem to assume that having done Christmas in the primary school, they have done it for good. To teach Christmas to fourteen year olds is therefore seen to be patronising them. We've done that, Miss is a common cry!

The only way out of this problem is to ensure that whole school planning builds progressive development into the way beliefs, like those underlying the Christmas celebrations, are taught. This can be achieved in two ways.

1. The Onion Method

In this approach, general statements of attainment (or attainment targets as they are called in Scotland) are laid down. These indicate the level of achievement that a pupil should be demonstrating at a particular age. Using them in planning ensures that children revisit the same topics at ever greater depth. The aim is to make increasing intellectual and affective demands on pupils as they progress through their years of schooling. Rather like peeling away the layers of an onion until you reach its heart, this method facilitates an ever deepening exploration of the same material.



2. The Jigsaw Method

This method depends on identifying the cluster of beliefs that underpin the main belief, practice or festival. For example, the cluster of beliefs which are integral to the concept of salvation include sin, forgiveness, atonement, rescue and a new start. These can be likened to the parts of a jigsaw, which when joined together give a reasonably comprehensive picture of the Christian belief in salvation. A



way of achieving progression is to introduce these different component beliefs at different stages of pupils education. They then, over the years, gain a more complete and coherent understanding of the main belief, festival or practice. Of course, the component beliefs vary in their complexity. The easier ideas, for example new start, will no doubt be introduced earlier in the curriculum than harder ones like atonement, which would probably be reserved for the later years of the secondary school. Table 2 (page 12), taken from the SCAA Model 2 Syllabus, illustrates this approach to progression.

The Advantages of Concept Cracking

Using beliefs as the focus for curriculum planning has four main advantages:

1. The choice of the information to be taught in any unit of work is guided by a clearly defined selection criterion.

The question which needs to be asked is, will this particular piece of information support the pupils in acquiring an understanding of the belief being taught? For example, in the Easter topic listed in table 1 (page 11) where the focus of study is forgiveness, the elements of the Easter story emphasised would probably include Jesus behaviour in the Garden when he was arrested, his reaction to those who were crucifying him and his words to one of the two thieves who were crucified with him. With older pupils, St. Pauls theological interpretation of the crucifixion, as the means whereby people receive Gods forgiveness, might be introduced. The details of the trials or the role of Simon of Cyrene, for example, would not be emphasised since they do not reinforce the focus of the unit, namely forgiveness. Focusing on a belief is, therefore, an important way of avoiding both information overload and purely information-driven units of work.

Key Beliefs	Focus at KS1	Focus at KS2	Focus at KS3	Focus at KS4
GOD - The nature and activity of God	Father and Creator	Understood by Christians as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.	Belief in God as three and one.	The debate about God.
Understanding God	Through Jesus and the Bible	Through human experience	Reason, expression & evidence. The basis of belief and how it is communicated.	
JESUS - Incarnation	Jesus - a special person for Christians.	Jesus' birth and life reflecting God's presence in the world.	The two natures of Christ - human and divine.	The Messianic Kingdom - the heralding of a new age in history.
Redemption	Jesus changed / changes people's lives.	New beginnings as a result of Jesus' death and resurrection.	The purpose for which Jesus came.	Eternal life - a new dimension experienced in relationship with Christ.
CHURCH - Body of Christ	Belonging	The Christian community finds its identity in Jesus.	Unity and diversity - a family belonging to Christ but with many branches.	The Church in the world.
Worship	Celebrating	Prayer, festival, sacrament.	The Holy Spirit in the Church - the idea of the continuing presence of God.	Forms of worship.
BIBLE - Revelation	Special book	God revealing himself through the Bible.	Functions of different genres of writing.	Interpretation of the Bible
Authority	A book used in special ways	The Bible as a source of guidance and inspiration	The central place of the Bible in the Christian tradition	Application of the Bible
WAYS OF LIFE The human condition	The worth of people	Humans as created, rebellious but redeemed.	The perfect relationship between God and humanity and its loss.	Purpose in life defined in relation to obedience to God.
Discipleship	Following a leader	Personal & corporate commitment through following Jesus.	Personal & corporate commitment through following Jesus.	Witness & mission - spreading the good news.

TABLE 2

2. Biblical material is used in a more meaningful way.

I well remember hearing a diocesan RE adviser describing a visit to one of her schools. Children were learning the story of Noah and the flood in three different classes. In each case the story was being used as part of a class topic, namely animals, colour and water. The teacher in a fourth class was following a topic on promise, but was not including the story of Noah. In the first three cases the story had been selected simply because animals, water and a rainbow appear in it, but no attention had been given to the theological themes which give the story significance and meaning. The irony is that the fourth class was actually tackling a theme which is of central significance to the story of Noah, the notion of God making a promise (or covenant) of which the rainbow was a symbol or reminder. This example illustrates a common problem, namely that biblical material is selected for inclusion in the curriculum on the basis of a rather crude word association rather than out of a concern for its theological significance. Focusing on beliefs is an important corrective to this tendency.

3. When a religion is taught as part of a multifaith theme, it is taught in a way that respects its integrity.

The validity or otherwise of teaching through themes has been a particularly controversial subject in RE teaching generally, as well as in the development of the SCAA Model Syllabuses. One of the major criticisms of the thematic approach has been that it lumps together aspects of religions which appear similar, but which actually have very different significance in each of the religions. An obvious example is where a theme on sacred texts or holy books treats the Bible, the Quran and the Guru Granth Sahib as having exactly the same significance in the religions of Christianity, Islam and Sikhism respectively. However, Muslims would argue that the Quran has a much more sacred character in Islam than either of the other two books in their respective religions. A similar point would be made by Christians when Jesus is included in a topic on founders and put alongside figures like Buddha and Abraham. This masks the uniquely Christian claim that he was the Son of God.

If the beliefs which are important within each of the religions are clear and made central in planning and teaching, there is a check against the danger that a thematic approach might distort the religions upon which it draws. For example, in a theme on role models the content of study might be stories about Jesus, Muhammad and Buddha. In discussing Jesus, emphasis ought to be given to the Christian belief in his divinity; in discussing Muhammad to the Islamic belief in his special place as the final prophet who received Allah's definitive revelation; in discussing the Buddha to the Buddhist belief that he is the Enlightened One.

Distortion would occur if the impression was given that each of these figures had the same status for their respective followers. However, an approach which takes the beliefs of the three religions seriously will emphasise that these three men operate as role models in very different ways.

4. It offers a way of overcoming the polarisation between the so called explicit and implicit dimensions of RE.

The SCAA terminology for these two dimensions is learning about and learning from religion, which form the two attainment targets adopted in its Model Syllabuses (6). In the former, the emphasis is on the pupils understanding the religion and what it means to be a believer. In the latter, the emphasis is on what the pupils learn about themselves as a result of their studies. Effective RE teaching maintains a balance between these dimensions. The danger is that one of them is overemphasised at the expense of the other. In concept cracking the greatest danger is probably that the learning from dimension is neglected in a concern to ensure the Christian belief is understood. The way to guard against this is to ensure that the beliefs taught are carefully related to the pupils experience. How this can be done is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

Taking Children's Experience Seriously

At home I have a book which claims to be a Child's easy to read book of Christian doctrine. In one sense it is very easy to read; it has large print, few words on the page and is illustrated with attractive pictures. It also includes sentences like this:

"Jesus copied His Father perfectly. He did all the work He was given to do. He works righteousness in His people."

This may be easy to read if, by that, we mean being able to repeat the words. It is certainly not easy to read if by reading we mean understanding! Teaching difficult religious ideas to children in this way is like the tourist who, seeking to communicate with one of the locals, repeats the same difficult English sentence louder and slower! As a strategy, it fails to address the communication gap. Even using technology like video, computer or other media which are attractive to children, will not help if the assumption is made that simply repeating theological words will cross this gap.

Concept cracking is based on the assumption that this gap can be crossed from the beginning of a Child's school career. For this to happen, the ideas that are embedded in Christian beliefs must be translated into a form that makes sense to a child at his or her particular stage of development.

The way in which increasing numbers of people are becoming computer literate is a useful illustration of the processes involved in concept cracking. The operating principles of computers are complex and well beyond the grasp of most people. Even just a few years ago, the manuals were incomprehensible to all but an elite. Recently, however, great progress has been made by employing user friendly symbols on the screen, including waste paper bins where unwanted files are dumped! The technical ideas have been translated into a form that makes sense in the everyday world of experience of ordinary people. The challenge for the RE teacher is to achieve the same when teaching about Christian beliefs. They need to be translated into a form that makes sense for our pupils. The way forward lies in using effective learning activities.

Regurgitation	Activity	Reprocessing
Copy out the story from the board filling in the missing words	Writing	If this story were a play, write out a cast list and a short character description for each part, indicating how each would react, their personality and the role they play in the story.
Colour in a picture of the Annunciation	Art	Handout photocopy of empty picture frame with the following title underneath "The Annunciation" by Botticelli. Explain that thieves have stolen the picture. Students are asked to draw a replacement picture within the empty frame, based on the text (Luke ch1 v26-28) which interprets the incident by, i) representing the events, ii) expressing participant's feelings and reactions and iii) exploring the relationships between the participants. Now produce a copy of Botticelli's painting. Discuss how his interpretation compares with the student's interpretations.

TABLE 3

Active Learning

Teachers know that active learning is generally more effective than pure chalk and talk. Children learn by doing, they need feels which help them to relate to the tolds of the subject content. There are, however, four important points to hear in mind when planning active learning experiences.

1. Activity of itself is not enough to promote learning.

Discussion, drama, craft, visits and a host of other active techniques can all too easily be used in ways that do not help pupils in developing insight into the meaning and significance of what they are learning. For example a visit to a church can amount to little more than an information gathering exercise, which may be of no more value than providing fodder for potential quiz game

participants. So children simply draw pictures of fonts and find out which prayer hook is used, information they could easily have gleaned from a hook. There is, of course, value in actually seeing the real thing, but the true potential of the visit has not been grasped if the symbolism of the buildings and the significance of the life of the church for its congregation has not been explored.

2. Active learning should engage pupils with the subject matter.

This means that the student is in some way required to reprocess, or interact with, the information rather than simply to regurgitate it in a different form (7). To use a biological analogy, reprocessing is like effective digestion where food becomes part of our own body. Regurgitation is, however, to vomit up the food albeit in a different form! Reprocessing makes demands of our intellect, our feelings, our imagination and of our understanding of ourselves. It requires a personal investment in an encounter with the subject matter. Regurgitation on the other hand can bypass all these. Table 3 gives two examples from the teaching of biblical material which illustrate the difference between reprocessing in active learning and activity which is little more than regurgitation.

3. Genuine active learning does not necessarily have to entail doing anything.

So-called passive activities such as reading and listening can in fact be very active if they are catalysts to an encounter with the subject content which stimulates reprocessing. Recently, I listened to a long sermon by a Ugandan bishop which unpacked the content of the chosen Bible passage in a way that made it relevant to my own life. His skill was in understanding his subject matter and my circumstances well enough to bring these two together through the use of analogy in an encounter which changed me. The key characteristic of reprocessing is that there is intellectual, emotional and imaginative activity, that our being is engaged with the subject matter. Hearing a story told well, engaging in a conversation or listening to a well-structured explanation can be very powerful active learning experiences.

4. A key characteristic of any effective active learning technique is that the teacher is clear on the purpose it is designed to serve.

Learning activities can serve at least three general categories of purpose:

Engagement: To engage the interest and to demonstrate the relevance of the topic by earthing it in human experience. These activities help build an initial

bridge between the child's world of experience and the world of Christian ideas (8).

Exploration: To encounter the subject matter, explore its meaning and promote understanding of its significance for Christians.

Expression: To encourage children to clarify what they have learnt by expressing it in some form, relating it to new contexts and reflecting on its relevance to their own experience.

For example in a unit of work on Who is Jesus? focusing on the incident where Jesus turned over the tables of the traders because he was angry at their abuse of the Temple (Mark ch 11 v 15-17), the following activities might be used:

Type	Activity	Purpose
Engagement	Discussion of times when I have been angry, why and whether I was justified.	To raise awareness of causes of anger in human experience
Exploration	Telephone call between two people present in the Temple reflecting their thoughts. Discussion : did Jesus have the right to be angry?	To explore the reasons for Jesus' anger and the idea of the holiness of God which he wished to defend.
Expression	Newspaper search to find examples of things that might make Jesus angry today. Display in montage, Reflective question : what makes me feel 'holy anger'?	Assessment of modern examples of offence to holiness.

Used together, these different types of activity create a learning environment which communicates effectively the belief being studied, in this example the notion of holy anger, and which enables children to relate that idea to their own experience. This analysis is not meant to suggest that there will always be three different activities, as one activity may serve more than one function. Nor is it

meant to deny the value of spontaneous inspiration in the classroom! Rather it stresses the importance of being clear on exactly which purpose or purposes any given learning activity will fulfil.

Spiritual Development

As with all subjects in the curriculum, RE should promote the spiritual development of pupils. This is the heart of what learning from religion means. Some teachers have interpreted this as meaning that the experience of the pupil should be the primary concern of RE. This response is rooted in a child-centred philosophy of education, which sees religion as essentially a matter of human experience and the purpose of RE as being to promote the exploration of that experience. Curriculum planning is therefore centred on pupil experience and religious material is drawn on only insofar as it illuminates that. So religion becomes the servant of the child's experience. In the extreme, this can become a form of therapy, primarily concerned with pupils' psychological well-being.

This is an understandable reaction against the depressingly widespread, didactic and irrelevant teaching, dubbed by OFSTED as dull exposition. It represents a rejection of content-centred approaches that take no account of the pupils' needs and experience, but which see the task of education as pouring information into otherwise empty vessels. In the extreme, this can represent manipulation of the child for the purposes of religion.

In fact, both the child-centred and the content-centred approaches have provided important insights. The content-centred approach focuses attention on the need for pupils to study a systematic body of knowledge. The child-centred approach focuses attention on the need to look for pupil relevance and the benefits that children can gain from their study of religion, irrespective of their own faith commitment. Concept cracking is an attempt to apply these insights to the teaching of Christianity in an approach which is content structured but child-related. In what ways, then, does it promote spiritual development? I suggest that there are four.

1. Standing in Another's Shoes

A fundamental element in healthy spiritual development is an increasing ability to form positive relationships with other people, who for whatever reason, are different from ourselves. This entails developing the ability to stand back from the stereotypes which we all so easily develop. Empathy, the skill of seeing and feeling things from someone else's perspective, is central to this. Concept

cracking puts this skill at the centre of the curriculum planning process by encouraging pupils to pursue their understanding of what beliefs mean for the believer. The task is to step inside another persons way of seeing the world, as far as that is possible, and to try and appreciate what their beliefs mean for them.

2. Reflective Approach

Another important aspect of spiritual development is to reflect on, and evaluate, beliefs and to become aware of the ways they shape attitude and behaviour. Concept cracking promotes this reflective approach by encouraging pupils to ponder the way in which their studies challenge their own thinking. For example, in the unit of work on the story where Jesus turned out the traders from the Temple (see page 21), the pupils were required to reflect on the causes of anger in their own lives and the degree to which this anger is justified and even holy. This will encourage them to think about what they value as holy in life. They have, then, learnt something of importance about themselves from Christianity without themselves having to be Christian. This has been described as religion making a non-religious gift to the child (9).

3. Changed by Knowledge

I can perhaps best describe this aspect of spiritual development by reference to our own experience. I studied physics at A level. It was a very practical subject. yet my experience was not of reprocessing but of regurgitation. What I mean by this is that I was never changed by my study. never gripped by the content. Although I passed my A level with a good grade, I simply dumped. what I had learnt as soon as my final exam was over. Physics has rarely entered my thinking since, except when I am trying to help my sons with their homework. In the end, my experience of physics had been to use the information for utilitarian ends, to pass my A level.

In contrast, my encounter with philosophy as a second year undergraduate changed my life. What I learnt then has moulded my thinking ever since. Yet the content was delivered through monologue lectures! The story illustrates how an encounter with a body of knowledge can be a life-changing experience. To promote spiritual development in the educational context means facilitating this sort of encounter with the subject matter for our pupils. It is hard to give an explanation as to how this can be done, but we can all spot a pupil who has been engaged by their studies in this way. However, it certainly requires establishing a learning environment which challenges pupils to learn from the subject matter and not just about it.

4. Promoting Conversation

Talking about something is an important way of coming to understand it better. In RE, a major problem is that talk has largely been confined to information gathering, rather than encouraging pupils to grapple with ideas (10). An important aspect of spiritual development is for our pupils to experience conversation that engages with ideas and takes them on in their understanding of the challenges presented by religious belief.

The problem is that we are not very good at this. Children asking questions such as, If Jesus died does that make him a loser? or, If God is good, where did badness come from? do not always fit into our carefully structured teaching plans. Where do you find the one line answer for pupils to write in their books?

Even in church, engaging talk is not encouraged. Most childrens addresses I have heard are designed to extract what I call passwords from children rather than to encourage them to think. So, having asked a question, the speaker passes from child to child with responses like not quite or nearly until one child gives the magic words to which the exultant response is thats right. What this teaches children about theology is that it amounts to guessing what is in an adults mind! This will not promote spiritual development.

Rather, we need to develop a style of question and response which encourages children to explore language about God. One of my sons, then aged three, once said that God punched holes in the clouds with his sharp elbows and knees to make it rain. One response would have been for me to correct him, telling him that God was not a physical being. I doubt that would have made much sense to him. An approach that encouraged spiritual development would have been for me to ask him questions which enabled him to unpack and explore his own imagery. Why does God need sharp elbows?, Cant it rain without God? and so forth. Teaching beliefs should facilitate this process of theological exploration through language (11).

CHAPTER

4

Questions Often Asked

Teaching through beliefs raises a number of questions. The purpose of this chapter is to take a brief look at some of those most frequently asked

Exploring Christian beliefs seems to imply teaching children to believe Christianity. Surely that is not allowed in schools?

Urging children to believe Christianity, or any religion, in RE lessons is not acceptable in most schools. RE should be a classroom subject which respects the needs and backgrounds of all children. Evangelism, be it Christian or otherwise, is not appropriate in this context.

Teaching about beliefs is not the same as teaching children to believe. Rather it is helping children to understand what is at the heart of the Christian faith. However in order to avoid sliding into evangelism two important strategies should be used:

a) We should use language which makes it clear to pupils that they are not required personally either to accept or reject the beliefs being taught. This is commonly called owning and grounding language and includes the use of phrases like this belief is important to Christians rather than ones like we believe. The point is that the way we speak should not create the impression that exploring a belief in school entails either believing or not believing it.

b) We should create a classroom climate in which children are free to treat the subject matter as not me, in other words as something to which they may not personally subscribe. There is a world of difference between sharing a belief and seeking to impose our beliefs on other people. One technique for creating a sharing climate is to use distancing devices (12). These enable children to stand at one step removed in their discussions of religious beliefs. For example, one device that the Stapleford Project has employed with infants is to use stories about a stuffed toy hamster called Haffertee, who lives with a Christian family called the Diamonds. All discussions about Christian beliefs are then about what Haffertee and the Diamonds believe. The pupils are free to either agree or disagree with this (13).

Many teachers use religious artifacts in the classroom, for example icons. These have religious significance for believers and might be treated as sacred by them. Certainly their use in the faith community would assume belief. When brought into the classroom this changes. True the artifacts should still be treated with respect and children should be taught to understand their significance for the faith community. However, pupils will not be expected to think that these artifacts have the same significance for them as they do for the faith community. In schools artifacts cannot enjoy the spiritual authority they have in the faith community. The same is true of religious beliefs. They should be thought of as mental rather than physical artifacts. They are on loan from the faith community and should, as such, be respected. The educational task is to understand their significance for that community. Pupils should not, however, be expected to have the same attitude to these mental artifacts as believers would.

I like to think of this as a copyright situation. In writing a book or article, I might quote directly from someone else's work. To do this I must seek their permission. In that way I respect their copyright of the quote and will use it in ways that do not misrepresent the original words. However my use may be very different from the original author's use. In the same way religious beliefs should be seen as copyright material, belonging to the faith community, but material which teachers have been granted permission to use in schools. The use will be different, albeit respectful, because a school has different purposes from a faith community.

Surely children, particularly when they are younger, learn from concrete information, not abstract ideas like beliefs?

Of course this is true, but it is only half of the story as an example from biology will illustrate. If I am teaching the concept of a mammal, I do not simply give a lecture describing what a mammal is in the abstract. Neither do I just present the pupils with endless examples of mammals in the hope that they will somehow discover the concept for themselves. If I do that, the likelihood is that they will not know whether the next animal they meet is, or is not, a mammal. Even if they do manage that, it is unlikely they will be able to give the reasons for their correct classification. Rather, in the course of a unit of work, I will both explain the abstract idea and ensure that pupils encounter carefully selected examples of mammals which enable them to grasp the abstract idea for themselves. The point is that children need both the abstract idea and the concrete examples. The former provides them with the organising principles necessary for understanding and the latter with the reinforcing examples which enable them to grasp the abstract concept. The concrete examples are the key which unlocks the abstract concept and makes it a tool the pupils can use for themselves as they get older.

The key to teaching beliefs successfully is that my grasp of the belief as teacher enables me to select the appropriate concrete examples that will help to develop my pupils understanding of that belief. My planning is, then, governed by the abstract belief, However my teaching will focus on concrete examples and, using them, I will draw out pupils understanding of the abstract belief The important point is the way in which the abstract belief governs the choice of the specific content, for example which Bible stories are told or what information on Christian practices is taught, and the way that content is used in the classroom.

Is an approach through beliefs the best way to teach RE?

This question implies that different approaches to RE are mutually exclusive and in competition with each other. The reality is that the different approaches have different strengths. In fact, concept cracking draws on insights from a number of other approaches, although it puts a particular emphasis on using beliefs as the framework for planning units of work. A well planned scheme of work would need to draw on a number of approaches in constructing a variety of units so as to ensure that the pupils experience variety and a range of emphases.

At the same time, I would also want to argue that concept cracking is important in offering a perspective that has not been adequately addressed in RE, namely the importance of a theological dimension. It redresses a balance when put alongside other approaches which have dominated the subject for the last twenty years.

Will teaching Christianity through beliefs give the mistaken impression that all Christians believe the same thing?

In one sense this is a weakness of the approach, because clearly Christians interpret the basic beliefs they hold in common, for example the Resurrection, in very different ways. There are literally thousands of Christian denominations in the modern world. It is, therefore, very important that the diversity of the modern church, including its multicultural character, should be represented through the examples used in teaching about the beliefs.

The strength of the approach is that it emphasises the central beliefs shared by all these different expressions. It does make sense to call them all Christian. The following analogy may help to clarify this point. A butcher sells many different meats, pork, beef, chicken and so on. In one sense there is no such thing as meat, because I cannot go and buy meat as opposed to, say, lamb or rabbit. Meat is a general concept, it has no independent existence apart from specific examples. That does not mean that we cannot talk about, make sense of and

meaningfully teach children the idea of meat. However, we certainly will have to do it by reference to the specific examples. The same is true of Christian beliefs, for example the meaning of baptism. There is no one doctrine of baptism, only a whole range of different specific examples. However, it still makes sense to talk about the idea of baptism in the same way that it makes sense to talk about the idea of meat. Teaching in this way can help pupils to understand both the similarities and differences between the different Christian viewpoints.

Postscript

The appearance of new national syllabuses throughout the British isles means that RE will have a renewed profile over the next five years. It is likely that considerable energy will be expended on curriculum development at national, local and school level. Central to this process will be the discerning of an identity which will carry the subject forward into the new millennium. All the indications are that the teaching of beliefs will figure significantly in this.

The idea of concept cracking is offered in the hope that it will contribute to the future health and vitality of RE and will be a stimulus in the on going debate about its nature and purpose. It has been developed in a Project where the brief was to consider the teaching of Christian beliefs. Our hope is that others may be able to develop the thinking further so that it has wider application.

NOTES

- 1) See **Religious Education and Collective Worship 1992-93** (Office for Standards in Education, 1994) for comment on the prevalence of this type of teaching.
- 2) For example, see **Childrens Minds** by Margaret Donaldson (Fontana, 1978) and **The Effective Teaching of Religious Education** by Brenda Watson (Longman, 1993) chapter 5.
- 3) **Assessing, Recording and Reporting RE** (Westhill College RE Centre, 1991) page 23.
- 4) Office for Standards in Education (1994) op cit page 40.
- 5) ibid page 13.
- 6) Here SCAA is drawing on the earlier work of Michael Grimmitt in **Religious Education and Human Development** (McCrimmons, 1987). See, for example, pages 225-6.
- 7) See Trevor Kerry The Demands Made by RE on Pupils Thinking in **British Journal of Religious Education** Vol. 3 (2) Winter 1980.
- 8) An excellent example of relating human experience to the themes of Easter is given in **Teaching RE: Easter 5-14** (Christian Education Movement, 1993) pages 8-9. The key ideas and questions arising from human experience column of Model 2 of the SCAA syllabuses is another example.
- 9) This phrase was coined by the Early Years Team in the RE Department at Birmingham University. See **A Gift to the Child** by Michael Grimmitt et al. (Simon & Schuster, 1991).
- 10) See Trevor Kerry (1980) op cit.
- 11) See **God-Talk with Young Children** by John Hull (Christian Education Movement, 1991) for an excellent discussion of this issue.
- 12) See Michael Grimmitt et al. (1991).
- 13) The resource pack based on Haffertee will be published during 1995.

The Stapleford Project

The Stapleford Project produces a range of materials for teaching about Christian beliefs. This pamphlet explains the rationale behind the *concept cracking* approach developed by the Project and gives examples of how it works in practice. The resources produced by the Project are all based on the approach and offer extensive practical materials for use in the classroom as well as many ideas for effective learning activities.

Full details of Stapleford Project resources and the INSET services offered by the Project can be found on the internet at <http://www.stapleford-centre.org> or by post from *The Stapleford Centre, Wesley Place, Stapleford, Nottingham NG9 8DP*.