

13 October 2008

Mrs D Rigby  
Headteacher  
Valewood Primary School  
Sherwood Avenue  
Liverpool  
Merseyside  
L23 7YG

Dear Mrs Rigby

Ofsted 2008-09 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE)

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 08 October 2008 to look at work in RE.

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of the subject, the visit had particular focus on creative thinking in RE.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text. All feedback letters will be published on the Ofsted website at the end of each half-term.

The evidence used to inform the judgements made included interviews with staff, discussions with pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be outstanding.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of pupils in RE is outstanding.

- By the end of both Key Stages 1 and 2, many pupils reach standards in RE which are above the expectations in the locally agreed syllabuses. This represents outstanding overall achievement. This pattern of high standards is sustained across a wide range of aspects of the subject.
- During the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, pupils quickly acquire confidence in talking about religion and beliefs using a range of appropriate subject terminology. For example, pupils in Year 2 were able to explain why the Torah is important to the Jewish tradition, what it contains, and how its importance is expressed. Similarly, some pupils in the Reception class were able to recognise some of the simple features of the festival of Succoth.
- Throughout Key Stage 2, pupils develop their understanding to cover a wider range of religions and beliefs. Most significant to the outstanding achievement is the way the pupils develop their skills of investigating and enquiring into

different traditions and ideas. They discuss and debate religious questions with confidence and enthusiasm and many are able to grasp and explain some of the more complex issues underpinning those questions. For example, some pupils in Year 4 were able to identify and offer thoughtful ideas on a series of challenging key questions posed about creation stories.

- Particularly notable is the way pupils are able to link their learning about religion to their own experience. Year 2 pupils understood how the Jewish understanding of the Torah related to their own grasp of the importance of personal rules for life. Similarly, pupils in Year 5 were able to link their exploration of symbolism in Christianity to ways of expressing ideas about their own identity and the key qualities of a number of important contemporary figures, such as Nelson Mandela.
- The pattern of outstanding progress applies across the whole ability range because very good planning ensures all pupils' needs are met; the more able are challenged to think critically and analytically about religion, while those with learning difficulties and/or disabilities are able to develop their ability to engage with religious material effectively.
- RE makes a very positive contribution to the pupils' wider personal development. It makes the obvious but nevertheless very considerable contribution to their understanding of, and respect for, diversity. However, it goes much further by supporting the development of a wide range of learning skills. Throughout work in RE, pupils are able to exercise responsibility for their own learning; they extend their ability to work well independently and in groups; they develop their ability to think for themselves and come to personal judgements about matters being investigated; and, they develop the confidence to express themselves both orally and in writing. Pupils enjoy the subject and respond with enthusiasm to the opportunities it provides to participate in some challenging and engaging activities. Behaviour and attitudes to learning in RE sessions are exemplary.

## Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is outstanding.

- The teaching of RE in the lessons seen was never less than good and often outstanding. It has a number of important strengths. Teachers are clear about the purpose and direction of the pupils' learning and this clarity is based on a good understanding of the subject. As a result, lessons maintain a high level of challenge and clarity of focus throughout. Explanations and the design of tasks are well-considered ensuring that learning is skilfully structured to meet lesson objectives. For example, in one Year 3 lesson on the Hindu festival of Divali, the teacher used video coupled with freeze frame drama techniques to enable pupils to identify and then explain the importance of key features of the celebration.
- Teaching is based on a very clear appreciation of the need for open, investigative learning within an ethos of respect for others. Teachers use great sensitivity when dealing with issues related to stereotyping helping pupils recognise and deal with their own misconceptions or prejudices. Good use is also made of opportunities for reflection.
- Effective use is made of a wide range of resources and tasks to secure the involvement of all pupils and bring a sense of fun to the learning. For example, in the Year 1 class good use was made of role play to explore the

celebration of baptism; similarly in one Year 6 class pupils were invited to re-construct and role play aspects of Sikh and Christian worship to explore similarities and differences. In both cases the role plays were handled appropriately. Discussion and oral work are well-handled and some good use is made of independent writing to extend pupils' learning.

- All lessons proceed at a good pace and are skilfully managed. In-class support is used effectively to support all learners and the activities are carefully adapted to ensure all pupils' learning needs are met.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is outstanding.

- The high quality of the medium term curriculum planning in RE is a key factor in securing the outstanding achievement and teaching. The subject leader has used, adapted and extended materials from the QCA schemes of work for RE in order to provide a clear, balanced and progressive curriculum. It embraces a blend of wide coverage with appropriate depth of study by focusing carefully on specific key questions and concepts. There is also a skilful use of levels to help ensure work is pitched correctly.
- The schemes of work have been carefully mapped against the requirements of the recently published Sefton agreed syllabus. The two areas of attainment 'learning about' and 'learning from' are well-represented and are interwoven effectively. The agreed syllabus has proved helpful in securing this balance between the two attainment targets.
- A significant strength of the provision is the flexible and thoughtful approach to the way the subject is timetabled. A range of approaches is adopted depending on the nature of the topic, the opportunities for cross-curricular links, and the pattern of learning. As appropriate, use is made of blocked units; work is sometimes strongly integrated with other subjects; and, some use is made of short more intensive patterns of learning on occasions.
- Another major strength in the provision is the high quality enrichment activities to support learning in RE. The school has been very active in seeking out contacts locally and further afield to provide pupils with first hand experience of religion. The link with a Bolton school with pupils from a largely Asian-heritage background is a particular success story and pupils talk animatedly about the value of the visits to, and contact with, the school. Links with local Christian and Jewish communities provide further opportunities for pupils to explore religion at first hand.
- The school has established a straightforward, manageable approach to assessment in RE. The RE subject leader has rightly identified the need to review the way level expectations are defined in order to make these more straightforward, reliable and relevant to the learning. At present there is a slight danger that the school under-estimates the high achievement of the pupils in RE.

## Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are outstanding.

- RE benefits from the outstanding leadership of the experienced, well-informed and effective subject leader. She is very well-supported by the senior

leadership team. The subject has high profile in the school. Its quality and character is reflective of, and embedded in, the wider values of the school with its emphasis on pupils' spiritual, social and emotional development, inclusion, respect for all and encouraging independent learning.

- While monitoring arrangements are fairly informal, they are generally effective and, as a result, the school has produced a well-judged self-assessment of the subject and a related action plan. Opportunities for staff training in RE are also fairly informal. However, good team working, effective leadership and the involvement of staff in a range of enrichment activities have ensured teachers have a good understanding of the subject. Resources for RE are good with positive use made of Information and Communication Technology to support learning and teaching.
- A distinctive strength is the very sensitive way in which the school engages with the small number of parents who wish to withdraw their children from RE. By building confidence with the relevant local community, a carefully negotiated pattern of engagement is in place to ensure the needs of all the children are respected and met.

### Creative thinking in RE

The quality of creative thinking in the context of RE is a strength and a key factor promoting the outstanding effectiveness of the subject. Pupils are encouraged to develop their ability to think openly and critically about religious ideas. A wide range of creative activities, including drama, role play, writing and art work, are used to support pupils' ability to reflect on and extend their understanding of key ideas of religion and belief. Additionally, the school uses a range of different ways of organising RE within the curriculum and has thought creatively about the most effective models of delivery.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the definition of level expectations for each unit of work to ensure these are more meaningful, reliable and relevant.

We hope these observations are useful as you continue to develop RE in the school.

As explained in our previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE. The letter will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Alan Brine  
Her Majesty's Inspector