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Miss E Rawson
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Dear Miss Rawson

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 11 November 2008 to look at work in religious education (RE).

As outlined in my initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had a 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 yourself and your subject co-ordinator, discussions with pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work, and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory with good features.

Achievement and standards

The standards reached by pupils in RE are broadly in line with the expectations of the agreed syllabus and their achievement is satisfactory.

- The pupils have a reasonable knowledge and understanding of the religions studied in the school and they appreciate the importance which religion and belief plays in many people's lives. They are also able to offer thoughtful personal reflections about a range of important concepts linked to religion and belief. Their ability to deploy higher level skills of enquiry is less secure.

- While overall the pupils' achievement in RE is satisfactory, it is variable across different areas of the work and different classes. Where teachers are confident in teaching the subject, progress is good; where this is not the case, progress is satisfactory. In some groups the learning activities linked to the study of non-Christian religions are not challenging enough. In other areas of their work, related to learning about Christianity, the pupils' ability to draw threads together to understand links between different aspects of the faith are less well developed.
- The personal development of pupils in the context of RE is good. Pupils usually enjoy the subject and most have positive attitudes to their learning. The subject helps pupils to develop positive attitudes towards diversity and to counter stereotyping and prejudice. The subject is supported in this by the commitment in the school to expand pupils' cultural horizons. In some lessons pupils have opportunities to discuss ideas and think for themselves although there is scope to develop these opportunities more widely across all classes.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- The quality of teaching and learning in RE varies and this variability is usually related to the strength of teachers' understanding of the subject and the effectiveness of the medium term planning. Some pupils said that they would welcome opportunities to take more responsibility for their learning in RE.
- In the best cases, teachers plan effectively providing clear and appropriate learning objectives and sequencing activities to enable pupils to make good progress. Imaginative and challenging activities are built into the lessons which extend pupils' thinking and encourage them to become actively involved in their learning. In one Year 4 lesson on the Beatitudes, for example, pupils were challenged to consider which of the qualities referred to might be reflected in the work of a key contemporary figure. The work was very carefully differentiated to ensure all pupils could make good progress. In another lesson in Year 6 on the work of Jackie Pullinger, very effective use was made of active story-telling and role play to explore the decisions and beliefs which influenced her life.
- In other cases, while lessons are orderly and tasks well-organised, the progress of the pupils is less effective. In these cases the purpose and structure of the lessons are not always clear or effectively sequenced. On occasions, the RE focus of the learning can get lost in the tasks or the tasks themselves can lack challenge.
- Pupils' work in RE is usually marked regularly and teachers often offer them useful comments on their progress. On occasions, however, rather narrow tasks are marked with comments which have limited meaning in relation to the progress made.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The RE curriculum is supported by a comprehensive and often detailed scheme of work which has been carefully tracked against the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. As a result there is a sound balance between different religions and between the two broad areas of attainment; 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion. A helpful practice is the use made of a simple summary sheet for pupils explaining what they will be covering in each topic - although these could be reviewed to ensure they are clear enough.
- The quality of the long term planning is limited by the inclusion of too many short topics which do not always ensure progression and continuity in pupils' learning. The selection, focus and ordering of topics related to the study of Christianity are particularly unclear.
- The quality of the medium term planning is very variable. In some cases plans are very well-conceived and support good teaching and learning. In other cases the plans are less well-constructed because the topic is not well-matched to the pupils' age or because the links between activities and the purpose of the learning are not clear.
- The school is keen to explore ways RE might be incorporated within plans to introduce aspects of the International Primary Curriculum (IPC). This has the potential to help address some of the planning issues in the subject.
- At present no use is being made of levels to support planning. However, the school has tried to introduce some assessment ideas developed at local authority level. This is starting to help the school understand the notion using levels but the pattern of assessments which have been developed are of very variable quality and effectiveness.
- There is a good programme of enrichment activities to support learning with use made of a number of visits and visitors. An RE focus day in 2005 was used to promote links with local religious communities and these have been sustained and extended subsequently.

Leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory with good features.

- The subject benefits from an experienced co-ordinator who has good subject knowledge and a clear commitment to improvement and who makes good use of the pattern of RE support available in the local authority.
- The curriculum meets statutory requirements including reporting RE to parents. Some basic but reasonably effective mechanisms have been put in place to monitor planning and pupils' work although, to date, there has been little quality assurance of the teaching of RE. A thorough RE improvement plan is in place linked to a clear evaluation of the subject's needs which are themselves placed in the context of

wider whole school priorities. The plans to link RE to the introduction of the IPC are positive and provide potential for further development.

- There have been few opportunities for subject-based professional development of staff teaching RE, including the higher level teaching assistant and her colleague. While monitoring is taking place this has not yet resolved some of the issues about inconsistency in teaching and learning in the subject.

Creative thinking in RE

The use made of creative thinking in RE is generally satisfactory and sometimes good. Teachers often ask challenging questions to encourage pupils to think for themselves and come up with their own ideas. Some links are forged with more creative areas of the curriculum including drama and art to support learning in RE. However, on occasions, weaknesses in planning mean the creative thinking or activity does not relate to clear and well-defined subject learning objectives. Some of the written tasks do not challenge pupils enough or encourage them to handle information in creative ways. Currently RE is delivered on a relatively standard weekly basis in half-term units. Consideration is now being given to developing a more flexible and imaginative approach linked to the introduction of IPC. The school has begun to explore the implications of this move in terms of staffing and meeting the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- securing greater consistency in the quality of teaching and learning in RE
- reviewing the curriculum planning in the context of proposals to introduce the IPC, to secure greater coherence and progression in pupils' learning
- developing the use made of levels to inform planning and support more effective assessment.

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

As I explained in my previous letter, a copy of this letter will be sent to your local authority and SACRE and 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