

16 February 2009

Mr S Ash
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Ash

Ofsted 2008-9 subject survey inspection programme: religious education (RE).

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff and students, during my visit on 04-05 February 2009 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 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 staff, discussions with students, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of students' work, and observation of lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

The achievement of students in RE is good.

- In the GCSE full course results in 2008 over 60% gained an A*-C grade in a provision which is effectively the combination of two short courses with virtually a full cohort entry. The proportion of students gaining the highest A*-A grades is broadly in line with the national average. These impressive results reflect a rising trend in performance in RE at GCSE over recent years and represent good achievement by the students. While girls outperform boys, the gap between them is narrowing. The progress of students in the current Year 11 is also good and clear strategies are in place to track their performance and support those in danger of underachieving.
- Standards at the end of Key Stage 3 are broadly average and reflect satisfactory but uneven achievement by the students. Students develop a reasonable knowledge and some understanding of the key features of the

religions studied. They have good opportunities to offer personal reflections on some aspects of their learning, for example, in Year 9 work in responses to the Holocaust. At the outset of Year 7, students show a good understanding of some key concepts and questions related to religion, spirituality and arguments for and against the existence of God. However, students do not have enough opportunities to develop higher order skills related to the investigation, interpretation and evaluation of religion and belief in a systematic and progressive way across the key stage.

- Students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities make good progress as the result of the very good support they receive.
- The contribution of RE to students wider personal development is good. Attitudes towards learning are generally positive and students demonstrate a sensitivity towards, and enthusiasm to explore, matters related to cultural and religious diversity. They welcome the chances provided in RE to discuss and debate a range of philosophical, moral and social issues. A strength of the teaching in RE is the focus on exploring feelings and personal responses towards a range of aspects of human experience. The scope for students to develop their skills as independent learners in RE is more constrained.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- The pattern of teaching and learning in RE across the school varies significantly but is good overall. The strengths of all teaching include the very positive ethos of respect engendered in lessons; class management is good; and, lessons are always very carefully prepared. Teachers use some very high quality resource materials. Excellent use is made of praise to maintain students' confidence. In the best lessons, and particularly in Years 10 and 11, good use is made of well-structured discussion and investigative work to promote learning. In these cases, students are encouraged to take a very active part in the lessons sharing their opinions and developing the ability to structure argument effectively.
- Elsewhere, and particularly in Key Stage 3, lessons can become dominated by the teacher. This restricts opportunities for students to be actively involved in their learning. In these circumstances, tasks are not always challenging enough and students tend to become quite passive. The structure of learning is not always designed to ensure students develop their investigative skills in a sequential way. For example, there are occasions where students are asked to offer a personal response to material which they have not fully understood, interpreted or analysed.
- The use made of writing is another area where there is variable practice. In some lessons, much of the written work is focused on students recording information with not enough opportunities for more independent writing.
- Work is marked regularly and carefully and the department is devising some manageable systems for using levels and setting targets. On some occasions the targets relate to work already completed instead of guiding students in relation to the next area of learning.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The provision for RE meets statutory requirements in full and the arrangements at Key Stage 4 are very good. Almost all students follow the full course GCSE delivered on one period a week across the key stage. The RE curriculum is very carefully and effectively adjusted to ensure it meets the needs of students with moderate and complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities in the school's Enhanced Resource provision and good use is also made of in-class support.
- Progress has been made in the last few years to establish a fully documented and orderly Key Stage 3 curriculum. The school is aware that its quality is variable and more needs to be done to ensure challenge, progression and continuity are built into students' learning. Significant attention has been paid to planning very detailed lessons and some imaginative resources and tasks. However, individual units do not always ensure there is a clear process of enquiry running through the work linking the two areas of attainment: 'learning about' and 'learning from' religion and building in a structured development of skills. Links between units are not always clear or progressive and limited use is made of levels in planning learning outcomes.
- A range of further activities are in place to enrich students' learning including a variety of visitors from local religious communities and performances by visiting drama groups. Most recently a twinning arrangement with a Rochdale school has included a focus on sharing experiences about religious and cultural life as part of the school's wider commitment to promoting community cohesion. Opportunities for students to visit local places of worship are limited.
- The department is currently extending a range of cross-curricular links based on a pattern of enrichment days including Year 9 work related to the Holocaust and a India project in Year 7. They are aware that these initiatives need to be carefully evaluated to gauge their impact and ensure subject contributions are effective.
- Assessment arrangements are in place in line with whole school procedures. Some aspects of these procedures are not entirely appropriate to the subject; in particular, the expectation that the subject should regularly report sub-levels at Key Stage 3 is not proving particularly helpful.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject leader, with good support from the senior leadership team, has made positive progress in re-establishing RE in the life of the school. Her hard work and commitment has raised the profile of the subject and this is reflected in the strong provision for RE at Key Stage 4. She has a clear focus on improvement and an enthusiasm to innovate and try new ideas. The main RE teaching room is a model of good practice with excellent displays and a very positive ethos for learning. Much energy has been devoted to developing the resource provision for the subject which is now good.
- Day to day management of the subject is exemplary. Documentation is thorough and school procedures are followed scrupulously. An effective process of monitoring, review, self-evaluation and action planning is in place.
- The current Key Stage 3 curriculum has been audited against the new 2008 Derbyshire agreed syllabus. The need for revisions and improvement has been recognised but the school has found it difficult to access training to support the interpretation and implementation of the syllabus.

- A number of non-specialists contribute to the teaching of RE. While this does not appear to dilute the quality of the provision, more formal opportunities for the teaching team to plan and review together are limited.

Creative thinking in RE

The subject leader has made 'creativity' a focus for development in the subject. There are a number of good opportunities for students to use a variety of creative activities to express their responses to aspects of their learning in RE including poetry and puppet making. Occasionally, however, these do not contribute particularly well to students' progress in the subject. There is a tendency to relate creativity primarily to the more affective dimension of the subject and to the process of 'learning from' religion. It will be important to ensure the interpretation of creativity embraces the use of critical thinking in relation to the key concepts and questions of the subject and to 'learning about' religion.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing and improving the Key Stage 3 curriculum to establish a more enquiry-based approach to the subject and secure greater progression in students' learning
- extending the range of strategies to ensure students are more actively involved in, and take more responsibility for, their learning
- providing more opportunities for the RE teaching team to plan together and share effective practice.

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