

07 January 2009

Mr R Rymer
Headteacher
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Dear Mr Rymer

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co operation, and that of your staff and children, during my visit on 03 December 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, you deputy and the subject co-ordinator, discussions with pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work, and observation of an assembly and three lessons.

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

Achievement and standards

Pupils' achievement in RE is satisfactory overall and some aspects of progress are good.

- While standards at the end of Key Stage 1 are below the expectations of the Barnsley agreed syllabus, the pupils make satisfactory progress. Pupils in Year 2 have developed some familiarity with a range of aspects of religion. They are aware that religion and beliefs are diverse but have yet to develop confidence in talking about religious ideas. Their framework of language within which to place their learning about different aspects of religion and belief is limited. In one lesson, learning about celebration and prayer in Islam, they responded with enthusiasm and interest but most found it quite hard to explain the significance of these features of the religion.

- By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils reach standards broadly in line with expectations in relation to some important aspects of the agreed syllabus. They make good progress in developing key knowledge and ideas enabling them to describe and explain aspects of religious belief and practice effectively. In one good lesson with Year 6 on Islam, the pupils demonstrated wide-ranging knowledge and understanding of many aspects of the faith and were able to link together key beliefs, expressions of faith and stories.
- Pupils' ability to undertake their own investigations into religion and belief is more restricted. As a result, the progress made by more able pupils is sometimes limited. Progress in relation to the area of attainment linked to 'learning about' religion is better than that in relation to 'learning from' religion. Pupils with learning difficulties make good progress because they are well supported in lessons.
- The personal development of pupils in the context of RE is good. They find the subject interesting and appreciate the value of learning about and respecting religious and cultural diversity. Pupils in Year 6 were very keen to discuss and debate religious ideas but found it more difficult to structure and organise their thinking partly because much of the written work in RE is relatively low level recording of information. Behaviour and attitudes towards learning in RE are good.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- There is high level of consistency in the quality of teaching and learning in RE. Lessons are well planned and teachers make the purpose and direction of the learning clear to pupils. Good use is made of the opening of lessons to place the pupils' learning in context. In one good lesson in Year 3 on Jesus, for example, pupils were clear that work on a specific parable was linked to their wider enquiry into his significance.
- RE lessons are carefully planned and include a wide variety of different resources and activities to stimulate and enthuse pupils. In one lesson in Year 2, the teacher used her knowledge as a Muslim to help the children make sense of the significance of prayer within the tradition. Excellent use was made of her personal experience and a wide range of very interesting resources to give the children direct 'hands on' experience of the faith.
- Teachers use questioning and explanations effectively reflecting their good subject knowledge. They share their own enthusiasm for the subject with the pupils. Classes are well-managed and some good use is made of Information and Communication Technology to promote and support learning.
- While much of the learning in RE is well-organised and enjoyable, the range of skills pupils are required to use in investigating religion and belief and in organising their thinking are sometimes quite limited. Some of the tasks are not challenging enough to extend the skills of older more able pupils. Learning assistants and supported tasks are used effectively to help those with learning difficulties.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory with good features.

- The RE curriculum meets the requirements of the locally agreed syllabus. Although it is primarily based on the 2000 QCA units of work, these have been tracked against the agreed syllabus to ensure an appropriate balance of coverage. The use of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority material is proving effective in supporting the good teaching and in securing the focus and coherence in much of the learning.
- Some good links are forged with other areas of the curriculum, notably information communication and technology (ICT) and creative activities. In Key Stage 1 and some years in Key Stage 2 use is made of blocked units to provide opportunities for more intensive learning and cross-curricular links. Elsewhere RE is usually taught on a weekly basis. There is scope to review these different patterns to evaluate their impact on pupils' progress. While links with literacy are tracked and highlighted, the range of writing tasks is limited.
- The scheme of work includes all six major world religions, more than that required in the agreed syllabus. The time allocated to RE is generally good and, as a result, pupils do develop their knowledge of these different traditions. The pattern of work on Christianity includes a wide range of different aspects of the faith. However, the opportunities for pupils to link together this learning within a more coherent understanding of the key beliefs of the religion are not entirely secure.
- There are some good opportunities for learning outside the classroom and enrichment activities linked to RE. Good use is made of the local church community to support learning in RE. Efforts are being made to make contact with other faith communities in the area but, at present, these links are under-developed.
- A simple assessment structure is in place to track pupils' learning but this is not particularly effective in identifying whether all pupils are making appropriate progress. The school has recognised that reviewing and developing assessment in RE, linked to use of the levels in the agreed syllabus, is a priority for development.

Leadership and management of RE

The leadership and management of RE are satisfactory.

- RE is currently co coordinated by an acting subject leader who brings extensive prior experience to the role together with enthusiasm and good subject knowledge. The school is actively considering succession planning for the role.
- The subject is well-organised and very effectively resourced. While opportunities for professional development have been limited, the structure of the scheme of work together with the teachers' enthusiasm and the positive profile the subject has in the school have ensured RE is taken seriously.
- The arrangements for monitoring and reviewing RE are under-developed. The most recent report on the subject to the governors lacked a clear evaluative edge. The guidance developed by the school about effective subject self-evaluation has yet to be applied rigorously to the subject. Improving the monitoring process in RE is the key priority of the current development plan.

Once this is established it will be important to focus evaluation and action planning more carefully on pupil progress and the quality of the provision.

Creative thinking in RE

The effectiveness of the use of creative thinking in RE is variable. There are strengths with some good use of creative activities to stimulate interest and enjoyment. Puppet-making, dressing up, story-telling and imaginative use of ICT are among the examples seen. Very occasionally, the creative activity is not fully integrated into the learning and can distract from the main subject learning objective. Where creativity is rather more limited is in relation to developing pupils' critical faculties and their ability to use higher level thinking skills in the context of the subject.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- using more challenging thinking skills and written tasks, particularly to extend the more able
- developing the arrangements for assessing pupils' progress and monitoring the effectiveness of RE
- extending the range of links with local non-Christian communities to provide pupils with more first hand experience of religious diversity and support the promotion of community cohesion.

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