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03 July 2009

Mr S Miller  
Headteacher  
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Dear Mr Miller

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 1 July 2009 to look at work in religious education (RE).

As outlined in the initial letter, as well as looking at key areas of RE, the visit had a particular focus on the use of 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 and pupils, scrutiny of relevant documentation, analysis of pupils' work and observation of two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be satisfactory.

Achievement and standards

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

- Pupils use a developing vocabulary to describe some key features of religions but their understanding is less well established and often briefly

expressed. By the end of Year 4 pupils know some of the stories about Jesus, some of his parables and can give simple explanations of their meaning. They have extensive basic information about Hinduism, such as the Rama and Sita story, the characteristics of popular deities and what would be found in a home shrine. Year 5 pupils learn about Christianity and know about Mary Jones and her Bible. They also learn about Islam and know, for example, the outline of the life of Muhammad, the practice of salah and the Hajj. Written work in Year 6 is weaker than in the other two years, although pupils can talk in detail how the Shabbat meal is celebrated. They have a developed understanding of Christianity and can give simple explanations about why Christians go to Church and why they perform certain rituals, such as baptism.

- In their assessment tasks Year 5 pupils explain briefly which of the five pillars they think might be the most difficult to keep and Year 6 explain what Jesus meant by a specific parable and suggest reasons why people go to Church. They write about pilgrimages to Lourdes and Mecca but comparisons between them are often superficial.
- Although pupils' knowledge of the religions they study is sound and often good, they do not demonstrate the same level of attainment in other aspects of the subject. They do not regularly make links between the sources, practices and beliefs of a religion and rarely make meaningful comparisons within and between religions. They have some understanding of the impact of religion on people's lives.
- The personal development of pupils in the context of RE is good. They demonstrate positive attitudes to the subject and have opportunities to relate what they learn to their own lives and experiences. By encountering different cultures they have become more respectful of others.

### Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is satisfactory.

- The quality of teaching is inconsistent and there are considerable variations between year groups. At its best, for example in the Year 6 lesson observed, teaching is rigorous, expectations are high and questioning is effective. The lesson provided particularly high levels of challenge for the most able pupils. The faith of individual pupils was recognised and affirmed.
- In accordance with the school's strategy for raising standards and improving attitudes, teachers make extensive use of a critical skills programme, which coupled with the use of creative activities, challenges pupils to think and engages them in their work. Evidence of this was seen

in both lessons observed. For example, pupils were challenged by very good questioning and follow up questions, which made them think through their responses.

- However, although activities developed generic skills such as questioning and decision making and were enjoyable for pupils, they were less effective in promoting learning in RE because they were insufficiently focused on the objectives for the subject. Pupils tended to concentrate on the activities rather than the learning they were supposed to demonstrate through them.
- Teachers' subject knowledge is variable by class and by topic. Their knowledge of Christianity is generally stronger than of other faiths and when teaching Christianity teachers go into greater depth with beliefs and ideas and set tasks that require more analysis and evaluation. Planning implies that other religions are taught in the same depth but in reality this does not always happen. Pupils' work on Hinduism, Islam and Judaism consists largely of learning facts about religious practice. Teachers appear less confident in teaching Hinduism than the other religions and they fall back on teaching through commercial work-sheets which include low-level tasks, such as colouring in and simple identification exercises.
- Assessment arrangements for RE are in place but they have not yet made their intended impact on standards because marking is not always accurate and does not inform teachers' planning or task setting sufficiently.

## Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is satisfactory.

- The curriculum meets statutory requirements and long term planning is thorough and based on the North Somerset agreed syllabus.
- The RE curriculum has a number of strengths. There are some effective and much appreciated enrichment activities. Pupils visit local churches and increasingly the school is finding people of other faiths to speak to pupils. The school is beginning to build connections between RE and other subjects. There are good links with the personal, social and health education programme and recently with an arts week.
- Continuity and progression in the curriculum are better established with regard to Christianity, which is taught every year, compared to Hinduism, Islam and Judaism which are taught for one year each. There is a tendency to start each of these three religions with the same expectations and hence the level of challenge does not increase year on year. The use

of the same key question asked about each religion tends to anchor expectations at the same level.

- Assessment arrangements are very good. Formal assessments, pupil records and tracking are all in place. As yet these systems have not had their full impact because assessments do not take account of the full range of expectations set in the attainment targets and level descriptions. Assessment for learning is not yet developed to build progression year on year.
- The curriculum promotes creativity and the displays around the school illustrate the use of drama in particular. Year 6 pupils interviewed spoke enthusiastically about experiencing a re-enactment of the Friday night meal when learning about Judaism. However, creative activities have sometimes become ends in themselves rather means to raise standards in the subject.

## Leadership and management

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

- The subject leader has been in post for some years and during that time has developed many well constructed systems for planning and evaluating RE. These include a detailed scheme of work, a thorough assessment system and a monitoring procedure. She has worked hard to make the subject enjoyable for pupils and ensure it reflects the ethos of the school.
- The subject leader's commitment to RE can be seen in her regular attendance at training events and the way she disseminates these among the staff. She has also collected good resource boxes containing a wide variety of materials for teaching each religion. This has encouraged other teachers to follow her example; for instance a Year 5 teacher put together an excellent 'baptism' box that made possible a good starter activity.
- The systems in place have not yet had their intended effect of improving standards and learning. For example, the careful monitoring reports based on work scrutiny are descriptive rather than evaluative. They outline what pupils have done rather than how well they have done it or if they could have done it better. Consequently the school's evaluation of RE is inconsistent. It has rightly judged standards and achievement to be satisfactory but inaccurately judged teaching to be good. However, the capacity to make the necessary improvements is good.

- The subject leader has acted on a previous report which identified that insufficient attention is paid to extending pupils' understanding of diversity and living in multicultural Britain. The details of Hindu, Muslim and Jewish practice are taught sympathetically and made interesting for pupils. School monitoring identifies RE as a subject that has contributed to an improvement in attitudes to people of different faiths and cultures.

### Creative thinking in RE

RE lessons provide many opportunities for creativity. For example in the Year 6 lesson observed two pupils sat in the 'hot seat' as Jesus and took questions from the class. Drama and food are often used to enhance enjoyment, although more thought needs to be given to relating this creativity to RE learning outcomes.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- balancing creative tasks with rigorous subject related expectations
- making assessment more effective by teaching and assessing the full range of RE objectives
- strengthening subject monitoring by making reviews less descriptive and more evaluative.

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, SACRE and the local diocese. It will be published on Ofsted's website. It will also be available to the team for your next institutional inspection.

Yours sincerely

Barbara Wintersgill  
Additional Inspector