

Ofsted and Religious Education

On 12th May 2021 Ofsted published their Research Review on Religious Education. This is an important document for all teachers of RE, RE subject leaders and Heads of Department, where RE falls under Ofsted's inspection remit. Here are a few notes on the important findings of the review.

The review covers:

- an outline of the national context in terms of RE
- a summary of the review of research into factors that can affect the quality of education in RE
- a consideration of curriculum progression in RE, pedagogy, assessment and the impact of school leaders' decisions on provision

The review is written under the following headings:

The education inspection framework (EIF) and RE

In schools without a religious character, Ofsted looks at RE under section 5 of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF). They also look at voluntary controlled (VC) schools. In other schools with a religious character, generally voluntary aided (VA) schools, RE is inspected under section 48 of the Education Act 2005, now generally known as the Statutory Inspection of Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS).

Developments in RE

Ofsted's previous report, 'Religious Education: realising the potential' (2013) stated that the arrangements for local determination of RE had failed to keep pace with changes in the wider educational world. It also stated that many pupils leave school with scant subject knowledge in RE.

Reports since 2013 have often recommended some form of prescribed and detailed curriculum content (sometimes called a 'national entitlement') to support improvement in RE. However, not all in the RE world deem this necessary or desirable. The literature also suggests that RE curriculum development has not kept pace with academic and intellectual developments that might help pupils make sense of our complex multi-religious and multi-secular society.

A most significant and recent report is 'Religion and worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE.' This was written by the Commission on Religious Education (CORE) in 2018

RE at different stages of education:

This section gives some statistics about curriculum time given to RE at each phase from Reception to KS4, in maintained and academy schools.

It goes on to give statistics for pupils taking short and full course GCSE and A level qualifications. This number of GCSE entries fell significantly in the decade 2009 and 2019, often attributed to the fact that religious studies qualification is not part of the English Baccalaureate.

Ambition for all

This section talks about the need for a high quality curriculum that is ambitious. It talks of the need for this curriculum to be adapted for the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), reducing barriers. Research has found that religious studies was popular for early entry for GCSE, but that entrants did not necessarily perform as well as their peers. This was particularly noted in the disadvantaged and SEND groups.

RE and the quality of education judgment within the EIF

There are four key judgments under an overall judgment of effectiveness in the EIF:

- Quality of education
- Personal development
- Behaviour and attitudes
- Leadership and management

It is acknowledged that there are a range of ways RE operates in schools and therefore it may sit within the quality of education and personal development judgments, however the scope of this review is primarily concerned with the school RE curriculum through the lens of the quality of education judgement.

The report recognises that schools using a locally agreed syllabus will use this as a basis for what pupils are taught and that many academies have more freedom in their curriculum design. However, within the quality of education judgment, it is the enacted RE curriculum, in the context of the school, taught to and experienced by pupils, that is considered.

Curriculum progression and debates about knowledge in RE

The EIF considers the knowledge that pupils learn in the RE curriculum, to ‘know more and remember more’ as they move through their journey of the curriculum at primary and secondary level. The review talks of three different forms of knowledge in RE, the ‘pillars of progression’.

- ‘Substantive’ knowledge: knowledge about various religious and non-religious traditions
- ‘Ways of knowing’: pupils learn ‘how to know’ about religion and non-religion
- ‘Personal knowledge: pupils build an awareness of their own presuppositions and values about the religions and non-religions they study

Each is unpacked in depth, with useful summaries at the end:

‘Based on the above, high-quality RE may have the following features’

Teaching the curriculum

The following are paragraphs within this section:

- Pedagogical models in RE
- Suitable procedures, methods and strategies in RE:
 - ✚ teaching activities that are clear about the RE object
 - ✚ teaching activities well matched to pupils’ prior knowledge
 - ✚ teaching activities that support the recall of knowledge of the RE curriculum

As before, a useful summary: **‘Based on the above, high-quality RE may have the following features’**

Assessment

The following are paragraphs within this section:

- Types of assessment in RE – the ‘knowing kind’ and the ‘personal qualities, beliefs and values kind’ – EIF focusses on the former
- Assessing types of knowledge in RE – see above for types of knowledge
- Relating assessment expectations to the RE curriculum

As before, a useful summary: **‘Based on the above, high-quality RE may have the following features’**

Systems, culture and policies

This section covers:

- Prioritising RE in the school curriculum – timetabling, the need for specialist teachers
- Teacher education and professional development in RE – CPD, subject knowledge

‘Based on the above, high-quality RE may have the following features’

Conclusion

Significant challenges that limit high quality in RE are listed, including:

- Insufficient time to teach an ambitious RE curriculum
- School decisions not taken in the best interests of all pupils e.g decisions concerning the statutory nature of RE, opportunities to take a qualification in RE, early exam entry
- A lack of consideration of what it means to be ‘scholarly’
- A lack of clarity on what constitutes reliable knowledge about religion/non religion leading to teachers embedding unhelpful misconceptions
- Teaching approaches that don’t support pupils to remember the RE curriculum in the long term
- Approaches to assessment poorly calibrated to the RE curriculum
- Insufficient development of RE practitioners to address gaps in subject knowledge

The report hopes the research will be useful for all involved in RE, including agreed syllabus conferences, advisers, curriculum designers, ITE providers, local authorities, SACREs, other inspectorates (eg SIAMS), researchers, school leaders, subject organisations and teacher subject groups.

The full report can be found on the DfE website www.gov.uk - Research review series: religious education

I hope these notes are helpful

Pauline Dodds

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