

Making Sense of Religion – An Agenda for RE

Easthampstead Park

18 June 2008

Sandra Wylie, Chair of the West Berkshire SACRE, opened and Chaired the conference. She introduced Alan Brine who is the subject specialist adviser for RE at Ofsted.

Alan started by explaining what Ofsted does in relation to RE. He pointed out that where school inspection reports used to include paragraphs about each subject, since the new inspection arrangements were introduced in 2005 this is not the case.

Ofsted now does subject focused inspections - 30 per year in both primary and secondary sectors. Although this does not give rise to a huge evidence base it provides some information about trends.

Ofsted is also still looking at Section 5 reports for information about RE in terms of compliance and any contribution RE makes to the success of the schools inspected. There are references to RE in about 7% of reports.

It was explained that subject inspections have particular areas of focus. Recently the following have been included:

- Impact and effectiveness of agreed syllabuses
- Primary teachers' subject knowledge – evidence suggests that where this is limited it is probably one of the most significant barriers to the improvement of RE in schools.
- Community cohesion. Alan reminded us that from next year the way schools deal with the promotion of community cohesion (CoCo) will be included as an area of focus in school inspections. Subject inspections of RE have revealed that the promotion of community cohesion is one of the most consistent strengths of RE and this is what most pupils understand the purpose of RE to be. As a consequence Alan suspects that more than 7% of inspection reports may, in future, make reference to RE, because of its role in CoCo. Pupils identify visits and visitors as some of the best features of RE but there is huge variability in this across schools. Alan sees this as something that needs to be developed.
- Creative thinking in RE – this year's focus. There are two dimensions to this: a) does the subject promote creative thinking in the way its taught AND b) are schools thinking creatively about RE within the curriculum as a whole eg blocking teaching sessions, cross curricular work etc.
- Teaching of Christianity. Ofsted is also looking at this at present because there is a suspicion that thinking about how and why we teach Christianity lacks clarity.

Alan then went on to talk about what is known about the quality of RE. He said this is easily summarised in the phrase: Improving but could do better.

Unpacking that a bit he said:

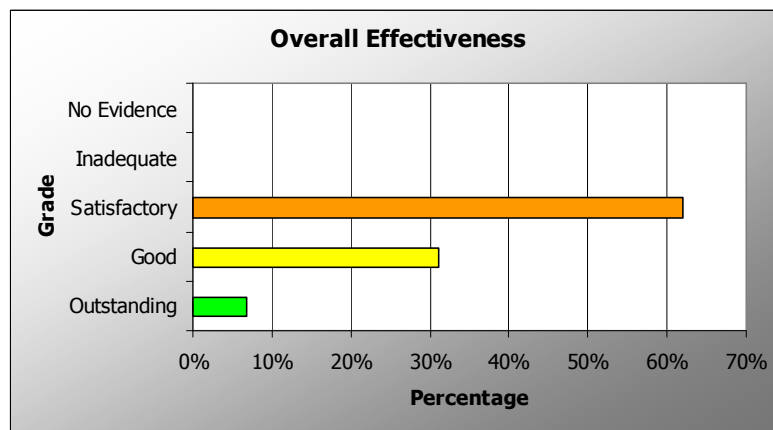
- There is some outstanding RE (especially in the secondary sector)
- Much less poor provision
- Secondary – GCSE numbers up and up and the widespread take up of the short course GCSE has not reduced take up of the full course
- Renewed relevance politically (in relation to CoCo) and in eyes of pupils – not sure why but it is suggested that religion is so often in the news now that pupils can see why they need to learn about it
- Initial Teacher Training (ITT) – good provision and improving secondary teacher supply. RE in ITT for primary is not so good

He also observed that RE in schools which are in special measures often proves to be the schools' strongest subject. This seems to occur more often than one might expect.

HOWEVER:

- Sixth form RE continues to be a problem with statutory requirements very often not met. Alan suggests maybe there needs to be a change in the law especially as it only applies to schools with sixth forms and not college contexts.
- There is too much that is only mediocre
- Too much variability:
 - within schools (eg in primary schools where quality depends to a large extent on the subject knowledge and enthusiasm of individual teachers; in secondary schools there is the on going problem of non-specialist teachers who do not get the chance to develop their knowledge and enthusiasm)
 - between schools (there is a question about how secondary schools build on primary school experiences)
 - across local authorities - Ofsted has raised questions about the wisdom of 151 different SACREs which have different levels of capacity to support RE. In some authorities there is almost no support for the SACRE and no professional support for RE. As a consequence there is some support for a single RE syllabus but lots of resistance also.
- Subject still lacks secure, shared understanding of purpose and progression

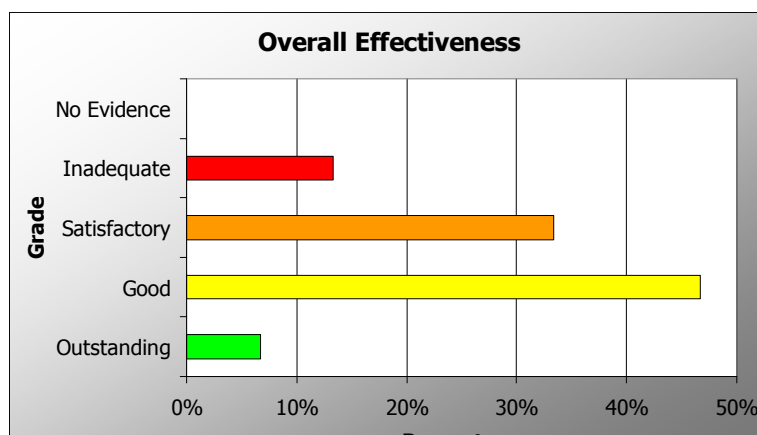
Alan shared the following information about RE in primary schools, pointing out that it is based on only 90 subject inspections over three years:



It is important to be aware that no failing schools or voluntary aided faith schools come into subject inspection programme.

The big question is how to shift from satisfactory to good and outstanding. 60% satisfactory puts RE into an uncomfortable position because most other subjects have less as they have more which are better than satisfactory. Alan talked briefly about the characteristics of satisfactory RE : lessons which do little more than share accurate information but do not challenge pupils, capture their interest or inspire them. Although satisfactory is OK we are now in a time when we are aiming for good.

The graph illustrating the secondary situation shows that there is inadequate provision but also a greater proportion of good RE than satisfactory.



The question in relation to the secondary situation then is how to put a stop to the inadequate provision.

During subject inspections Alan always speaks with pupils. He often asks them to grade their RE on a 10 point scale. When grading on in relation to being interesting/dull the usual response is around a positive 7. When grading in relation to how hard/easy the subject is, the usual response is about 5. Pupils know they are rarely really challenged.

Other things pupils say about RE include:

- It's engaging – we do a lot of active things
- We enjoy RE – its fun
- Pupils behave well, attitudes are positive
- RE helps us understand other peoples' beliefs (Alan sometimes challenges them by asking what, in this context, is not 'other'. It is interesting to consider how pupils identify themselves with religious faith. Alan suggested that Muslim, Sikh etc pupils are likely to place their religious affiliation quite high up a list of things that identify them, whereas young people who understand themselves to be Christian rarely do so)
- Lessons are orderly – we feel secure

Alan highlighted that it often seems senior school leaders, especially in secondary schools, don't ask too many difficult/challenging questions about RE. If there are no obvious problems, they are happy and don't put too much emphasis on how things could be better/more effective. The degree to which governors are interested in RE varies a lot.

Alan went on to explore some of the issues that are found beneath the surface of the current RE situation:

- Good progress in individual lessons is not translating into good achievement over time
- The lack of continuity and progression in the curriculum from Key Stage 2 – 4. Secondary schools' failure to acknowledge the prior learning that takes place in primary schools continues to be a problem. It can also be true that GCSE courses don't seem appropriately challenging after really good KS3 provision.
- Problems defining progression in planning and assessment are becoming intractable – many teachers have not got to grips with using levels to inform planning and assessment remains a continuing weakness in RE
- Over emphasis on content – there is a need to have a greater focus on skills and key concepts. There are too many lessons in which pupils find out information and write it down without doing anything with it. This is often because teachers have insufficient subject knowledge.
- In primary schools in particular, RE is still taught in isolation from other subjects. Obvious links with literacy and the development of thinking skills are not made.
- Tasks are not challenging enough
- Structure of learning is often not secure – pupils not clear about the purpose of their work, what they have learnt or how things link together ie how one lesson is related to another.
- Limited use of higher order thinking skills
- Pupils are unclear what it means to make progress in RE though they are often clear about what it means to make progress in other subjects

- And therefore achievement is modest.

In contrast, Alan raised everyone's spirits by describing three outstanding lessons:

Yr8: average mixed ability class had done some work on Buddhism. In the lesson observed, the teacher said she was going to introduce pupils to Ninian Smart. He had analysed religion into dimensions. Pupils were organised into groups and asked to think about what they'd learned about Buddhism then map what they'd learned against Smart's dimensions. Following this they had to decide which of the dimensions was the most important and be able to justify it. This was a challenging task and led to a fantastic debate.

Yr5: Noah and the Nativity. High performing school but lots of learning difficulties. Dynamic teacher. Quickly retold the nativity story with which pupils were familiar. Then went on to investigate it by looking at another story and pupils had to work out what the connections were. The teacher quickly told pupils the story of Noah which again they already knew. With careful questioning pupils worked out the links. Both stories were about new beginnings and covenant. Each was set at a time when everything had gone wrong and God did something to put it right.

Yr 2 were looking at what it is about stories that make them important to us. Then they looked at stories of particular significance to a Christian child and a Jewish child - looking at the value and power of story. Then the teacher introduced a letter from government about the story stealer. Pupils were told the story stealer was coming to steal stories because they were no longer allowed. Some children cried at this point. Children set up a protest group and wrote letters to explain why stories are so important to them and the children they had learned about. Pupils were involved in evaluating.

Alan went on to analyse why RE is good where it is so:

- Coherent structure to the learning
- Clear focus on key concepts within which to locate content
- Strong emphasis on developing skills of enquiry, evaluation, application, communication etc.
- Interesting activities which engage and challenge
- Pupils know what they are doing and why

So what of the future?

Alan suggested RE needs to focus more on

- process and pedagogy – on the 'how' as well as the 'what'
- the bigger curriculum picture which is emphasising the need to make young people
 - Successful learners
 - Confident individuals
 - Responsible citizens
- flexible, creative approaches to planning and delivery but without losing sight of the heart of RE (disciplined innovation is the term being used in training for the revised secondary curriculum)

All this might mean:

- More innovative models of curriculum delivery – blocking/integrating/linking
- Stronger emphasis on first hand experience, fieldwork in context of community cohesion
- Focusing on the contribution the subject can make to wider learning skills

- Agreeing on a more structured approach to learning – should we be more specific about the 'how' of RE?

Alan asked us all to think about whether our syllabus supports these innovations. (*Jo's note: the first three are no problem but the last one is a particularly interesting challenge in relation to the syllabus shared by the 'Berkshire' unitaries and SACREs might want to consider issuing advice on the 'how' of RE to supplement the syllabus*). He also pointed out that the five year review cycle of a syllabus doesn't fit with the timing of innovation in big curriculum developments.

Alan stressed that it is unlikely the government will undertake a review of the structures of RE and probably not engage with legislative change. Without this the following questions and thoughts arise:

- SACREs do good work but are Agreed Syllabus Conferences the best way of getting a new RE syllabus?
- With no information available in Ofsted reports for SACREs to find out what is happening in RE and how well the Locally Agreed Syllabus (LAS) is working, how can we find out about the effectiveness of the LAS?
- A SACRE can be a key player in the promotion of community cohesion because it brings together people from different communities.
- Government is now clear that religion and faith are important factors in CoCo BUT politically it is too difficult for government to institute any significant change with RE that would help the subject move forward in support of it.

The final slides in Alan's presentation posed questions which groups considered in discussion over their buffet meal:

- How do we balance compulsion with flexibility and innovation?
- How do we overcome isolation and secure right of withdrawal?
- How do we balance depth of learning with breadth of coverage?
- Should we say more about how the subject should/could be taught? i.e. offer a model of good teaching and learning?
- Do we honestly know how effective the local agreed syllabus is in promoting improvement?
- Is the AS:
 - A barrier?
 - A stranger?
 - A helpful support?
 - A driver of improvement?

And in relation to the national context:

- Increasing diversity in provision
- Ambiguity about non-statutory framework
- 151 SACRES of varying effectiveness
- Levels of LA support
- Monitoring arrangements
- Political pragmatism of the DCSF
- Review of 1/94
- Is the NSNF having the impact intended? Reality and rhetoric.
- 151 LAs developing and implementing their own AS - is this efficient/effective?
- In an age of self-evaluation and light touch inspection, do the monitoring arrangements - at all levels (school/SACRE/QCA/Ofsted) – provide what we need?

- Should SACREs have a wider CoCo role?
- Are we garnering OR protecting the little we have?

Plenary: Feedback from group discussions raised the following points:

- Important to encourage flexibility in the curriculum. Blocking was seen as a good strategy.
- SACREs need to provide support material to go with the LAS. There was some support for the idea of a national syllabus with localised guidance on interpretation together with localised support material.
- If RE in schools is about teaching understanding of religious concepts, how does this sit alongside the experiences of some pupils of unquestioning teaching within faith communities? Some parents might therefore not like open RE in schools.
- Good to think that creative teaching and learning could arise from almost any syllabus but it was realised that for inspiring RE we need inspiring teachers.
- Members of SACREs need a better idea of what best practice looks like,
- Withdrawal from RE will be difficult in the context of more creative and integrated curriculum developments. Ideally the law needs to be changed and no withdrawal from RE allowed.
- CoCo – link with interfaith forums is a good idea. Perhaps develop youth SACREs. There is a need for SACREs to work with LAs for a more cohesive approach to CoCo training in/for schools
- Question was raised about how we monitor what's going on and a recognition that most people on SACREs are not in a position to make judgements about lessons etc.
- Levels of LA support often present difficulties in small unitary authorities
- Keen to listen to teachers' views about the effectiveness of the LAS but we struggle to know how we can best support RE teachers in their work
- West Berkshire has funded a self evaluation programme which has had some success.
- All SACRE members are volunteers and can't easily take time off from work to get involved in RE in schools.
- Important to ask teachers good questions to find out about effectiveness of LAS.

At the end of the evening Alan remarked that there is an initiative now to make GCSE specifications more in line with the level descriptions. Introducing GCSE shortcourse to give RE status in KS4 may have made us lose the point of RE at that age which had been a concern about RE contributing to pupils' personal development. BUT where teaching is just focused on the exam, this is unlikely to be the direction and motivation for RE in KS4. Alan asks, is the requirement to have statutory RE in KS4 now outdated? With more creativity and college based vocational courses it is increasingly difficult for all schools to meet their duties.

Monitoring: probably best to have a 5 year cycle of support to coincide with syllabus development.