

Transforming religious education

Religious education in schools 2006–09

This report evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of religious education (RE) in primary and secondary schools and discusses the key issues at the heart of RE teaching today. It is based principally on evidence from visits to 94 primary and 89 secondary schools in England between 2006 and 2009. The sample of schools represented a cross-section, including voluntary controlled schools, but did not include voluntary aided schools, for which there are separate inspection arrangements. The report builds on the findings of an earlier report, *Making sense of religion*.

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Executive summary

The past three years have seen significant changes and developments in the world of religious education (RE). The recent implementation by the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) of an action plan for RE has provided opportunities to strengthen support for the subject. The emphasis on promoting community cohesion has given added importance to RE within the curriculum. However, despite the very considerable commitment and energy which many teachers bring to the subject, in many of the schools visited the provision was no better than satisfactory quality, or in some cases inadequate, and the effectiveness of much of the RE observed was not good enough.

There is an urgent need to review the way in which the subject is supported at a number of levels. Among the questions to be considered are: whether the current statutory arrangements for the local determination of the RE curriculum are effective; whether there is sufficient clarity about what constitutes learning in RE and how pupil progress can be measured; and whether the provision for professional development in RE is adequate.

The quality of RE in the sample of primary schools was broadly the same as that reported in 2007 and not enough was of good quality. In schools where achievement was satisfactory, several key weaknesses were common which inhibited pupils' learning. Most notably, the pattern of curriculum delivery of the subject often limited the opportunities for sustained learning in RE. Schools visited took the subject seriously but, in too many cases, teachers lacked the knowledge and confidence to plan and teach high quality RE lessons.

The quality of RE in the secondary schools visited was worse than in the schools involved in the 2007 survey. The proportion of schools where RE was inadequate was considerably higher than previously. Among the factors which detracted from the quality of the provision were the impact on RE of the recent changes to the wider curriculum, particularly at Key Stage 3, and weaknesses in the quality of learning in much of the provision for the short course GCSE in religious studies.

There are also positive developments. Examination entries in religious studies at GCSE and GCE A level have continued to rise each year since 2006, reinforcing a key success of the subject in recent years. Results in the full course GCSE are rising, although for the short course GCSE the results show only limited improvement, with around 50% to 55% of those entered gaining the higher A* to C grades. Results at GCE A and AS level have remained broadly the same since 2006.

As reported in 2007, a key success of RE in the past decade has been the improvement in pupils' attitudes towards the subject. In most of the schools visited, pupils clearly understood the importance of learning about the diversity of religion and belief in contemporary society. Where pupils expressed more negative attitudes towards diversity, the RE provision was often inadequate and included few opportunities for them to develop an understanding of the beliefs and ways of life of others.

Section B of the report explores some of the issues arising from the survey findings. Although progress has been made in recent years in establishing greater clarity about the nature of RE, there are still serious areas of uncertainty about the subject which often inhibit teachers' ability to plan, teach and assess RE effectively, and undermine pupils' progress. A number of developments, including new programmes of study for RE by the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency which built on the publication in 2004 of the non-statutory national framework for RE, and the recent publication by the former DCSF of updated national guidance on RE, have gone some way to deal with some of these concerns.

However, the inspection evidence indicates that further work needs to be done to develop these initiatives further and to ensure that their impact in the classroom is more effective. In particular, more work needs to be done to clarify the place and use of concepts in RE and to define progression in pupils' learning more effectively. This report includes a consideration of the way in which a stronger role for enquiry in the teaching of RE could help address some of these issues.

A major success of RE is the way that it supports the promotion of community cohesion. In many schools RE plays a major role in helping pupils understand diversity and develop respect for the beliefs and cultures of others. Inspectors found a number of outstanding examples of good practice. There is scope to develop this contribution further by extending the use of local religious and belief communities in RE and ensuring that the changing nature of religion and belief in the contemporary world is reflected more strongly in the RE curriculum.

Previous Ofsted reports have raised the question of the effectiveness of the statutory arrangements in supporting the promotion of high quality RE. The current round of inspections has highlighted this issue again. There is still very significant variability in the quantity and quality of support for RE provided to schools by local authorities and Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education. Many schools have difficulty finding effective training in RE at local level in order to support implementation of the locally agreed syllabus. This report concludes that a review is needed to determine whether the statutory arrangements for the local determination of the RE curriculum which underpin the subject should be revised or whether ways can be found to improve their effectiveness.

Key findings

- Pupils' achievement in RE in the 94 primary schools visited was broadly similar to that reported in 2007. It was good or outstanding in four out of 10 schools and was inadequate in only one school.
- Students' achievement in RE in the secondary schools visited showed a very mixed picture. It was good or outstanding in 40 of the 89 schools visited but was inadequate in 14 schools.
- There has been a continuing rise in the numbers taking GCSE and A- and AS-level examinations in RE. Some concerns remain, however, about the quality of much of the learning that takes place in GCSE short courses.

- Most of the secondary schools in the survey with sixth forms did not fully meet the statutory requirement to provide core RE for all students beyond the age of 16.
- RE made a positive contribution to key aspects of pupils' personal development, most notably in relation to the understanding and appreciation of the diverse nature of our society. However, the subject's contribution to promoting pupils' spiritual development was often limited.
- The contribution of RE to the promotion of community cohesion was a strength of the subject in most of the schools visited. However, there is scope to extend the opportunities within the curriculum to enrich pupils' learning through greater use of fieldwork and contacts with religious and belief groups in the local community.
- There is uncertainty among many teachers of RE about what they are trying to achieve in the subject resulting in a lack of well-structured and sequenced teaching and learning, substantial weaknesses in the quality of assessment and a limited use of higher order thinking skills to promote greater challenge.
- Where RE was most effective, it used a range of enquiry skills such as investigation, interpretation, analysis, evaluation and reflection. However, this use is not yet defined clearly enough or integrated effectively within guidance to schools and, as a result, is not embedded sufficiently into classroom practice.
- There were a number of specific weaknesses in the teaching about Christianity. Many primary and secondary schools visited did not pay sufficient attention to the progressive and systematic investigation of the core beliefs of Christianity.
- There were significant inconsistencies in the way humanism and other non-religious beliefs were taught, and some uncertainties about the relationship between fostering respect for pupils' beliefs and encouraging open, critical, investigative learning in RE.
- The reliance on a narrow curriculum model in primary schools based on RE being delivered in half-termly units taught weekly, often inhibited sustained learning in the subject and limited the opportunities to link the subject to other areas of the curriculum.
- The revised Key Stage 3 secondary curriculum, introduced in September 2008, was having a negative impact on RE provision in about a third of the 30 secondary schools surveyed in 2008–09, particularly in Year 7. Too often the impact of these changes was not being monitored effectively.
- There was often a lack of continuity and progression between the RE curriculum in Key Stage 3 and the GCSE short courses. In the worst cases, this lack of continuity distorted pupils' understanding of religion and belief.
- The effectiveness of specialist staff training in RE was inadequate in four out of 10 of the schools visited. They were not giving sufficient time and resources to support teachers' professional development in the subject.
- The effectiveness of local arrangements to support RE varied too much and many local authorities did not ensure that their Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education had sufficient capacity to fulfil their responsibilities effectively.

Recommendations

The Department for Education should, along with the relevant delivery partners:

- carry out a review of the current statutory arrangements for the local determination of the RE curriculum, to ensure that these provide the best means of promoting the high quality and consistency of RE in schools
- establish stronger mechanisms for supporting and holding to account the work of local authorities, Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education, and Agreed Syllabus Conferences in relation to RE.
- establish clearer national guidance for Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences about the nature and use of key concepts in RE, the definition of progression, and the use of enquiry skills in RE in the design of agreed syllabuses
- provide more guidance on teaching about Christianity and non-religious world views, and effective ways of balancing the need to foster respect for pupils' religions and beliefs with the promotion of open, critical, investigative learning in RE.

The Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (OfQual) should:

- review, and as necessary adjust, the short course GCSE specifications in religious studies to ensure that they are securing a stronger focus on extending students' ability to understand the place of religion and belief in contemporary society.

Local authorities, in partnership with their Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences, should:

- ensure that the work of Standing Advisory Councils on Religious Education and Agreed Syllabus Conferences has good access to subject expertise to enable them to support schools effectively in promoting high quality RE
- ensure that high quality professional development in RE is available to their schools and encourage them to make the most of these opportunities to improve the quality of RE teaching
- ensure that agreed syllabuses and related advice:
 - offer guidance about the systematic use of enquiry skills in RE to enable schools to plan the subject in a more coherent and rigorous way
 - provide greater clarity about the use of key concepts and the definition of progression in RE
 - include guidance to schools about ways of incorporating RE within more innovative and creative approaches to curriculum planning.

Schools should:

- ensure that RE promotes pupils' spiritual development more effectively by allowing for more genuine investigation into, and reflection on, the implications of religion and belief for their personal lives
- make proper provision for continuing professional development for subject leaders, specialist teachers and others with responsibility for teaching RE in order to improve its quality
- provide more opportunities to use fieldwork and visitors in RE.

Primary schools should:

- ensure that the delivery of RE incorporates more sustained learning and stronger links with the wider curriculum.

Secondary schools should:

- explore the most effective ways of teaching RE in the context of revisions to the wider curriculum and monitor carefully the impact of any changes on pupils' achievement
- ensure that there is effective continuity and progression in pupils' learning especially between Key Stage 3 and GCSE provision.