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11 May 2009

Mrs D Smales
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Dear Mrs Smales

Ofsted survey inspection programme – Religious Education

Thank you for your hospitality and co-operation, and that of your staff, during my visit on 06 May 2009 to look at work in religious education (RE).

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

The overall effectiveness of RE was judged to be good.

Achievement and standards

The standards reached by pupils in RE are above average reflecting good achievement.

- Standards in RE are at least in line with the expectations of the Sheffield agreed syllabus. However, a significant number of children exceed these expectations because of the good teaching they receive.
- During the Foundation Stage, pupils quickly acquire confidence in talking about religion and beliefs using a range of appropriate subject terminology. For example, pupils were able to explain in simple terms why the Torah is important to the Jewish tradition, what it contains,

and how its importance is expressed. Similarly, some pupils were able to recognise some of the features of the festival of Hanukah.

- By the end of Key Stage 1 pupils can identify key features of the religions they have studied and are beginning to use religious terminology appropriately. For example, pupils in Year 2 were able to conduct an investigation into whether objects were sacred or special giving plausible reasons for their answers. A strength of their learning is their understanding that religion is diverse and important in the lives of many people.
- Throughout Key Stage 2, pupils develop their understanding to cover a wider range of religions and beliefs. Most significant to the good achievement is the way the pupils develop their skills of investigating and enquiring into different traditions and ideas. They discuss and debate religious questions with confidence and enthusiasm and many are able to grasp and explain some of the more complex issues underpinning those questions.
- By the end of Key Stage 2, pupils have made further progress in drawing together their learning about religions to understand the connections between belief and practice. They also make effective use of some of the technical language used in studying religion. For example, pupils in Year 6 were able to match people's decision-making processes to some philosophical standpoints including theism, egoism and cultural relativism, using the terms correctly.
- RE makes a very positive contribution to the pupils' wider personal development. It makes a considerable contribution to their understanding of, and respect for, diversity. However, it goes much further by supporting the development of a wide range of learning skills. Throughout work in RE, pupils are able to exercise responsibility for their own learning. They work well independently and in groups. Pupils are encouraged to think for themselves and come to personal judgements about matters being investigated. As a result, they develop the confidence to express themselves both orally and in writing. Pupils enjoy the subject and respond with enthusiasm to the opportunities it provides to participate in some challenging and engaging activities. Behaviour and attitudes to learning in RE lessons are exemplary.

Quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning in RE is good.

- Teaching is based on a very clear appreciation of the need for open, investigative learning within an ethos of respect for others. Teachers use great sensitivity when dealing with issues related to stereotyping, helping pupils recognise and deal with their own misconceptions or prejudices. Good use is also made of opportunities for reflection.
- Teachers have good subject knowledge which they use well to ask challenging questions and organise interesting and well-managed tasks. Effective use is made of strategies such as group activities, role play and paired work to ensure learning is both fun and purposeful.

- All lessons proceed at a good pace and are skilfully managed. In-class support is used effectively to support all learners. However, not all the activities are carefully adapted to ensure all pupils' learning needs are met.

Quality of curriculum

The quality of the curriculum in RE is good.

- The schemes of work have been carefully mapped against the requirements of the 2004 Sheffield agreed syllabus. The two areas of attainment 'learning about' and 'learning from' are well-represented and are interwoven effectively. A significant strength of the provision is the flexible and thoughtful approach to the way the subject is timetabled. A range of approaches is adopted depending on the nature of the topic, the opportunities for cross-curricular links, and the pattern of learning. When appropriate, good use is made of blocked units. Additionally, work is sometimes well integrated with other subjects and some use is made of short more intensive patterns of learning. However, very occasionally teachers are not always sure of the central focus of each unit of work.
- 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.
- Assessment opportunities are developing. As yet, there is no systematic way of tracking pupils' progress or informing teachers' planning in the light of on going assessment. The RE subject leader has rightly identified the need to review the way level expectations are defined in order to make these more straightforward, reliable and relevant to the learning. At present there is a slight danger that the school over-estimates the achievement of the pupils in RE.

Leadership and management

The leadership and management of RE are good.

- The subject co-ordinator, who is well-supported by the senior leadership team, is experienced, enthusiastic and dedicated to RE.
- The subject has good capacity for further improvement and clear links are being forged between the development of RE and wider initiatives in the school particularly in relation to curriculum planning.
- Opportunities for professional subject development of the staff have been limited but the recent inclusion of RE in the school's planning for the creative curriculum is proving a useful context to re-energise thinking about the subject.

Creative thinking in RE

The school has begun to focus more attention on the place of creativity in RE. It has rightly identified the need to explore the flexibility in the locally agreed syllabus as a basis for a more effective integration of RE within its innovative curriculum developments. This is beginning to encourage teachers to explore new ideas and move away from over-reliance on published exemplification material. The move to block RE and explore links with other areas of the curriculum, including literacy, is very positive. This is beginning to encourage the pupils to use more creative thinking and ways of expressing their ideas in RE. Pupils are encouraged to develop their ability to think openly and critically about religious ideas. A wide range of creative activities, including drama, role play, writing and art work, are used to support pupils' ability to reflect on and extend their understanding of key ideas of religion and belief.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, included:

- reviewing the planning of the curriculum for RE to ensure the central focus of each unit of work is clearly identified
- completing the implementation of the assessment arrangements for RE.

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

Jacqueline Wordsworth
Her Majesty's Inspector