

Appendix

Ofsted's Research Review on Religious Education

Comments

Professor Trevor Cooling, Chair, Religious Education Council of England and Wales:

“The timing of the Ofsted report on Religious Education sends a powerful message to all those with an interest in the status of RE. As only the second subject review after science and the first Arts and Humanities subject in the schedule, it is a clear indication of the importance of Religious Education as a discrete subject, and the need for a broad and balanced curriculum.”

“The review spells out the essential role that RE plays in every young person’s academic and personal development and emphasises the value that an education in religious and non-religious worldviews provides in later life.”

Katie Freeman, Chair, National Association of Teachers of RE:

“The need for high quality teaching in all schools for all pupils, both from an academic perspective and for each pupil’s personal development, is abundantly clear in the Ofsted report.”

“It sends out a strong reminder to all school leaders of the requirement to teach the subject at all key stages, including sixth form, and to consider the professional development and subject knowledge needed for teachers to deliver a high quality RE curriculum.”

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Summary

In religious education (RE), pupils enter into a rich discourse about the religious and non-religious traditions that have shaped Great Britain and the world. RE in primary and secondary schools enables pupils to take their place within a diverse multi-religious and multi-secular society. At its best, it is intellectually challenging and personally enriching. It affords pupils both the opportunity to see the religion and non-religion in the world, and the opportunity to make sense of their own place in that world.

This review explores literature relating to the field of RE. Its purpose is to identify factors that contribute to high-quality school RE curriculums, the teaching of the curriculum, assessment and systems. In this review, they have:

- outlined the national context in relation to RE
- summarised their review of research into factors that can affect the quality of education in RE
- considered curriculum progression in RE, pedagogy, assessment and the impact of school leaders’ decisions on provision

The review draws on a range of sources, including our 'Education inspection framework: overview of research' and our 3 phases of curriculum research

Developments in RE

In RE, there are different issues that can affect quality of education. Ofsted's previous report on RE in 2013, 'Religious education: realising the potential', stated that the structures that underpin the local determination of the RE curriculum have failed to keep pace with changes in the wider educational world. The local determination of RE also means that a concept of quality is not straightforward to identify.

The quality of education established in this research review is based on the current legal framework, the most current non-statutory guidance available from the Department for Education (DfE) and national developments in RE which are concerned with quality of education. Since 2013, various subject and research reports have been published. These reports may supply further insights into the concept of high-quality RE. They include:

- 'A new settlement: religion and belief in schools'
- 'RE for REal
- 'Living with difference'
- 'The state of the nation' report on secondary RE
- 'A new settlement revised: religion and belief in schools'
- 'Religion and worldviews: the way forward – a national plan for RE'

Much of this literature recommends some form of prescribed and detailed curriculum content (sometimes called a 'national entitlement') to support improvement in RE. Though common, not all within the RE community deem a movement from local to national determination necessary.

Much of this literature also suggests that RE curriculum development in England has not kept pace with the academic and intellectual developments that might help pupils to make sense of our complex multi-religious and multi-secular society.

The evolution of society's religious and non-religious landscape highlights that it is all the more important for pupils to build up accurate knowledge of the complexity and diversity of global religion and non-religion. The 2013 Ofsted report stated that many pupils leave school with scant subject knowledge in RE. The literature also references chronic and intractable problems with school-level provision for RE. These are factors that can affect quality of education in RE and will be discussed at various points of this curriculum research review.

RE at different stages of education

Reception and primary years

As at secondary level, arrangements for RE in Reception and primary years are localised. Most locally agreed syllabuses recommend spending the equivalent of approximately 60 minutes a week on RE at key stage 1 and about 75 minutes a week at key stage 2. Most RE provision in Reception would be integrated within the Reception curriculum, as opposed to a stand-alone subject (see, for example, the RE Council of England and Wales's 2013 non-statutory framework).

However, the National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) argues that a significant number of schools give insufficient curriculum time to RE, based on responses to its regular primary school surveys. For NATRE, insufficient time is considered to be fewer than 45 minutes of teaching time a week. The surveys have suggested that:

- in 2016, this was just under 30% of schools
- in 2018, this was about 25% of schools
- in 2020, the figure remained at 25%

The latest survey did, though, note that, in almost 96% of schools, the curriculum time given to RE had either remained the same or increased. Almost half of academies without a religious character and almost a third of schools required to teach a locally agreed syllabus had increased the amount of curriculum time spent on RE. These positive changes were, in part, attributed to Ofsted's focus on the curriculum.

Secondary years

As at primary level, the arrangements for RE at secondary level are localised. Most locally agreed syllabuses are constructed on the assumption that the amount of curriculum time given to RE is at or above 5%.

However, using unweighted school workforce census data, the 2017 'State of the nation' report estimated that this threshold of curriculum time was only met in:

- 62% of schools where the locally agreed syllabus applies (including VC schools)
- 90% of other schools with a religious character
- 44% of academies

The report also found that 34% of all academies reported no timetabled RE. Overall, it estimated that, at key stage 3, 64% of state-funded schools gave 5% or more of their curriculum time to RE.

At key stage 4, the report estimated that 5% or more curriculum time was given to RE in 50% of state-funded schools. Specifically, the 5% threshold was met in 45% of schools where the locally agreed syllabus applies (including VC schools); in 91% of other schools with a religious character; and in 27% of academies.

Further, the report found that 44% of all academies reported no timetabled RE. If schools do not teach pupils any RE, this is illegal.

As part of RE teaching in key stage 4, schools may enter pupils for a religious studies qualification. Pupils in England can take either the full course GCSE in religious studies or the short course, which is equivalent to half a GCSE.

Ambition for all

A high-quality curriculum is ambitious and designed to give all learners the knowledge they need to succeed in life. This is particularly important for the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND). All pupils are entitled to be taught RE. Leaders and teachers may, of course, need to adapt the curriculum depending on the specific needs of individual pupils.

There are different ways that leaders and teachers might reduce the barriers that pupils with specific needs may face in accessing the RE curriculum. For example, this could include leaders doing highly specific curriculum planning that considers in greater detail the building blocks of knowledge that specific pupils need to access the RE curriculum. It could also include teachers carefully considering the most appropriate ways for specific pupils to learn aspects of the curriculum. Leaders and teachers should also consider appropriate accessibility for educational trips and visits related to RE. RE makes a major contribution to the knowledge that pupils need to succeed in life. That knowledge entitlement is appropriate for all pupils.

Some research findings contribute to the overall picture of RE for disadvantaged pupils and those with SEND. One study suggests that pupils attending schools with higher proportions

of disadvantaged pupils are less likely to have the opportunity to take GCSE religious studies.

RE and the quality of education judgement within the EIF

Within the EIF, there are 4 key judgements that sit underneath an overall judgement of effectiveness: quality of education; personal development; behaviour and attitudes; and leadership and management.

There are a range of different ways RE operates in schools. For example, in some, RE is also used as a vehicle through which to deliver whole-school moral and social initiatives. As such, RE may take various forms in school, and aspects of RE may sit in relation to 2 different judgements within the EIF: the quality of education and personal development.

The quality of education judgement is about the academic substance of what is taught. It looks at what pupils learn and know in each subject area. The personal development judgement explores how the curriculum may extend beyond the academic, technical or vocational. This may be, for instance, through the spiritual, moral, social and cultural development of pupils. It considers pupils' recognition of different people's values, feelings, faith and ways of living. What is learned and remembered by pupils in RE may, of course, contribute to personal development. However, this curriculum research review series is concerned with the factors that can affect quality of education in different subjects. As such, the scope of this review is primarily concerned with the school RE curriculum considered through the lens of the quality of education judgement.

The EIF considers the extent to which leaders of the curriculum adopt or construct a curriculum that is ambitious and designed to give learners the knowledge they need to succeed in life. As outlined previously, the extent to which school subject leaders are freely able to choose the content of their RE curriculums depends on the type of school and, where appropriate, its funding agreement.

Many academies have greater degrees of freedom about what to include within their RE curriculums. Schools that follow a locally agreed syllabus will use this as a basis for what pupils are taught. Typically, the content of this syllabus prescribes high-level outcomes that subject leaders go on to use as they design their school-specific RE curriculum. This contextualisation process is similar to the ways that schools may take high-level outcomes from the national curriculum in other subjects and use them to construct their school-specific subject curriculum. Non-statutory guidance might accompany an agreed syllabus to assist subject leaders in constructing their school RE curriculum.

However, to be clear: it is the enacted RE curriculum, in the context of the school, which is taught to and experienced by pupils, that is considered within the quality of education judgement. The contextualised school RE curriculum is also the focus of this research review.

Curriculum progression Summary

The RE curriculum should set out what it means to 'get better' at the subject as pupils move through the journey of the curriculum at primary and secondary level. Pupils build 3 different forms of knowledge in RE, which we will explain in this section. In high-quality RE at primary and secondary level, leaders and teachers think about how these 3 forms of knowledge are interconnected and sequenced within the RE curriculum. It is this RE curriculum that pupils need to know and to remember.

Curriculum progression and debates about knowledge in RE

The EIF considers the knowledge that pupils learn in the curriculum. As pupils journey through a planned and well-sequenced curriculum in primary and secondary schools, they will build these different types of knowledge as they ‘know more and remember more’ of the planned curriculum. Our previous research mentions that these types of knowledge are not isolated; they sit within interconnected webs in long-term memory. They will also differ between subjects.

The types of knowledge that pupils build within RE have not been extensively discussed or theorised. In some cases, this is because the ongoing debates about the aims and purposes of RE have led educators to claim that knowledge alone is insufficient for specific educational purposes such as fostering tolerance or mitigating xenophobia. Sometimes, the very idea of ‘knowledge in RE’ itself has been avoided because claims made about both religion and non-religion are contested, even though many educators recognise that the contention itself is part of the knowledge content of RE. Broadly speaking, teachers, practitioners and researchers in RE do not have well-established conventions to discuss the different types of knowledge that appear in RE curriculums.

Although educators make different claims about the purpose of RE, it is nonetheless vital for subject leaders, curriculum designers and teachers to be aware of different types of knowledge in RE. Without this awareness, misconceptions about the nature of religion can be taught. These misconceptions can be based on claims (for example, ‘only loving religion is true religion’) that are unwarranted by high standards of academic scholarship. A lack of consideration of the nature of knowledge can also result in pupils’ misunderstandings about the credibility of religion (for example, ‘science is about facts; religion is about opinions’), as well as the difference between types of knowledge in RE and in other subjects.¹

The importance of recognising different types of knowledge is also clear when thinking about the types of tasks pupils carry out in RE. For instance, when teachers plan for pupils to construct a response to a statement or question, there are at least 2 forms of subject-specific knowledge in operation: a knowledge of the topic that is being discussed and knowledge about the mode of enquiry that is being asked through the question. This is particularly important given different expectations about what constitutes an ‘argument’ in RE.

So, although the building of subject-specific knowledge may not be sufficient for every possible suggested aim for RE, it is necessary and beneficial for a range of purposes.

Three types of knowledge

This report refers to 3 different types of knowledge used in RE. These broad types of knowledge are ‘pillars of progression’ within RE. ‘Getting better’ at RE both at primary and secondary level comprises knowing more and remembering more of these pillars as they are set out within the RE curriculum:

- first, ‘substantive’ knowledge: knowledge about various religious and non-religious traditions
- second, ‘ways of knowing’: pupils learn ‘how to know’ about religion and non-religion
- third, ‘personal knowledge’: pupils build an awareness of their own presuppositions and values about the religious and non-religious traditions they study

We have used our own terms to define the types of knowledge due to a lack of established conventions within RE subject literature. Clearly, different professionals and researchers use a range of terms. However, following RE engagement events, our terms have already been taken up and referred to by researchers and educators in RE. [footnote 41](#) We will expand on our definitions in the coming sections.

In high-quality RE curriculums, these 3 types of knowledge are not artificially separated from each other. For example, when subject leaders plan a sequence of specific content and concepts for pupils to study, they also need to consider the most appropriate methods that pupils need to know to study that content.

Conclusion

This RE research review outlines the factors that can contribute to the quality of education in RE. This document has drawn on a range of research, evidence and other literature to identify features of high-quality RE at primary and secondary level. As such, it explains the research basis for how we look at RE in schools (where RE falls within our inspection remit). This review is not a simple checklist of activities that we expect to see in school RE, since there are various ways that schools can construct and teach high-quality RE. Rather, it outlines a conception of quality of education in RE viewed through the lens of the EIF.

RE is vital in preparing pupils to engage in a diverse and complex multi-religious and multi-secular society. However, this review has also identified that there are significant challenges that limit high quality in RE, including:

- insufficient time to teach an ambitious RE curriculum
- school decisions that are not taken in the best interests of all pupils, such as decisions concerning the statutory teaching of RE, the opportunity to take a qualification in religious studies, or early examination entry
- a lack of consideration about what it means to 'be scholarly' in objective, critical and pluralistic RE
- a lack of clarity on what constitutes reliable knowledge about religion/non-religion, leading to teachers embedding unhelpful misconceptions
- teaching approaches that do not support pupils to remember the RE curriculum in the long term
- approaches to assessment that are poorly calibrated to the RE curriculum
- insufficient development of RE practitioners to address gaps in professional subject knowledge

That said, this review shows that there are well-warranted and constructive ways forward that could support improvements in RE. The literature suggests that many of these are already taking place in the sector in subject communities and in some schools. The significant interest that RE attracts from a range of organisations and associations may also indicate that there is sufficient capacity to support improvements in RE in primary and secondary schools for the benefit of pupils.

We hope that this research review will be useful for all those involved in the design, support and inspection of high-quality RE in schools in England, including agreed syllabus conferences, advisers, curriculum designers, ITE providers, local authorities, local standing advisory councils on RE (SACREs), other inspectorates of RE, researchers in RE, school leaders, subject organisations and teacher subject associations.