Introduction and background

Ofsted is currently undertaking a series of reviews looking at the factors that contribute to high-quality school curriculums, the teaching of the curriculum, assessment, and systems. This latest review focusses on religious education (RE). Ofsted will use this understanding of subject quality to examine how RE is taught in England’s schools where RE falls under Ofsted’s inspection remit. Ofsted are keen to emphasise that there are a variety of ways that schools can construct and teach a high-quality RE curriculum and that there is no single way of achieving high-quality RE. As in the other reviews Ofsted is keen to point out that there is no one model for an effective curriculum – the word ‘may’ is therefore frequently used.

Key points

Recent developments and current provision in RE

- 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.
- Since 2013, several subject and research reports have been published. They include the State of the Nation Report on RE (2017), and Religion and worldviews: the way forward. A national plan for RE (2018).
- Much of this literature recommends some form of prescribed and detailed curriculum content (sometimes called a ‘national entitlement’) to support improvement in RE. Much of it 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 particularly 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.
- The National Association of Teachers of Religious Education (NATRE) finds that in 2020, 25 per cent of schools gave insufficient curriculum time to RE, i.e., under 45 minutes a week.
- At secondary level, the 2017 State of the Nation report found that 34 per cent of academies reported no timetabled RE and that at key stage 4, the 5 per cent or more curriculum time threshold for RE was met in only 50 per cent of state-funded schools. Forty-four per cent of academies reported no timetabled RE.
- The numbers of pupils entered for either a short or full GCSE fell by around 40 per cent in the decade between 2009 and 2019. Many RE teachers attribute this to the fact that RE is not part of the EBacc.

Curriculum progress and knowledge in RE

- The education inspection framework (EIF) considers the knowledge that pupils learn in the curriculum. As they journey through a well-sequenced curriculum, they will build different types of knowledge as they ‘know more and remember more’.
- The types of knowledge that pupils build within RE have not been extensively discussed or theorised. Sometimes, the very idea of ‘knowledge in RE’ itself has been avoided because claims made about both religion and non-religion are contested. Although Ofsted acknowledges that the building of subject-specific knowledge may not be sufficient for every possible suggested aim for RE, it considers it to be necessary and beneficial.
- Ofsted defines 3 types of knowledge: ‘substantive’ knowledge about religious and non-religious traditions; ‘ways of knowing’ – i.e., how to know about religion and non-religion; and ‘personal knowledge’ whereby pupils build awareness of their own presuppositions and values about the religious and non-religious traditions they study.
Teaching the curriculum

- No matter what type of activities they choose to use, teachers need to be clear about the ‘curriculum object’, i.e., about precisely what they want pupils to learn and how it relates to curriculum goals. For example, hearing a testimony from a faith practitioner may be engaging for the pupils, but the teacher needs to be clear about what it is intended to achieve. A high-quality curriculum may therefore consider how the activities will enable pupils to remember the RE curriculum in the long term.
- Within a coherent and well-sequenced curriculum, there is an emphasis on crucial knowledge, such as particular concepts, vocabulary, and other components of knowledge, and on teaching activities that focus on retrieving that knowledge. Prior knowledge can be activated in a number of ways – for example, using it to formulate questions for a faith practitioner. In a high-quality curriculum, judgements about classroom activities are informed by insights from cognitive science about learning, as well as subject-specific insights about the nature of the RE content to be learned. These 2 insights are more important than generic concerns about whether activities are superficially ‘engaging’.
- It is advisable for teachers to consider, when planning activities, whether pupils have the necessary prior knowledge to succeed. It is also beneficial to introduce teaching activities which remind pupils of previous material in order to embed knowledge from the curriculum in long-term memory.

Assessment

- The literature categorises 2 kinds of RE assessment: the ‘knowing kind’ and the ‘personal qualities, beliefs and values kind’. This report focuses on the first kind of assessment because this is appropriate for checking the knowledge that pupils build through the RE curriculum.
- Effective assessment treats the curriculum as the progression model, so leaders and teachers need to ensure that assessment expectations are related to it. Assessment needs to reflect what it means to ‘get better’ at RE. Leaders and teachers can consider whether existing assessment models in RE do treat the curriculum as the progression model.
- Some assessment models in RE continue to use ‘scales’, ‘or ‘levels’ of generic skills to determine progress. Many of these are variations of obsolete assessment models. There are significant flaws in these models. They are not related to the knowledge which pupils acquire as they progress through the curriculum. Furthermore, the assumption of a vertical model of skills progression in RE is not valid.
- Composite assessment tasks, such as the construction of an argument, are often used in RE. Although this is a valid form of assessment, research has highlighted a lack of clarity around what constitutes appropriate evidence. Summative assessment tasks must be framed with an explanation of what precisely constitutes evidence or backing for a particular type of question.
- In a high-quality curriculum, both formative and summative assessment may be used. Where summative assessments are used for accountability purposes, leaders can ensure that they are sufficiently spaced apart to enable pupils to learn the expanding chain of curriculum over time.
- In a high-quality curriculum, assessments are not excessively onerous for teachers.

Systems and culture

- Potential barriers to the effective delivery of an RE curriculum include teachers’ lack of subject knowledge and/or confidence, a lack of teacher knowledge about policy related to RE teaching, and a lack of consensus about what constitutes effective professional development for RE teachers.
- A high quality RE curriculum may include sufficient curriculum time for the delivery of an effective curriculum; subject specialist staffing; access to high-quality in-service training for leaders and teachers of RE to develop their professional subject knowledge; and subject leadership that can identify high-quality sources of training (for example, through subject associations and organisations).