



Research review series: religious education

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The education inspection framework and RE

Our education inspection framework (EIF) reflects the expectations of how RE is provided. All schools that are state-funded, including free schools and academies, are legally required to provide RE as part of their curriculum. All schools are required to teach RE to all pupils at all key stages (including sixth form), except for those withdrawn. [\[footnote 3\]](#)

In schools without a religious character, we look at RE as part of EIF inspections under section 5. [\[footnote 4\]](#) We also look at RE in voluntary controlled (VC) schools, whether or not they are designated as having a religious character.

In other schools with a religious character, RE is inspected by a body appointed by the maintained school's governing body under section 48 of the Education Act 2005 or as provided in the academy's funding agreement. This report will be of particular interest to schools whose RE we look at under the EIF. However, it should also be of interest to the entire RE sector. For a summary of the legal context of RE and Ofsted's inspection arrangements, see [Appendix A](#).

Curriculum progression and debates about knowledge in RE

Based on the '*findings in the report*', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
A consideration of the knowledge that pupils build through the RE curriculum, because accurate knowledge about religion and non-religion can be beneficial for achieving different purposes and aims for RE.	
High expectations about scholarship in the curriculum to guard against pupils' misconceptions. What is taught and learned in RE is grounded in what is known about religion/non-religion from academic study (scholarship).	
Carefully selected and well-sequenced substantive content and concepts.	
'Ways of knowing' are appropriately taught alongside the substantive content and are not isolated from the content and concepts that pupils learn.	
A consideration of when pupils should relate the content to their own personal knowledge (for example, prior assumptions).	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

Substantive content and concepts in RE

Based on the '*findings in the report*', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
'Collectively enough' substantive content and concepts in the RE curriculum to enable pupils to grasp the complexity of a multi-religious, multi-secular world. This substantive knowledge is a representation and reconstruction of religious and non-religious traditions and concepts.	

Representations of religious and non-religious traditions that are as accurate as possible. Leaders and teachers might use scholarship to construct representations so that pupils do not learn misconceptions.	
Depth of study in certain areas of the RE curriculum to provide pupils with detailed content that is connected with the concepts and ideas that they learn.	
Without this, more complex discussions about religion and non-religion will be superficial. Leaders and teachers can make intelligent selections for depth of study to indicate a range of religious and non-religious ways of living.	
Detailed knowledge of specific religious and non-religious traditions (such as their stories, narratives, texts and testimonies) in the RE curriculum to enable pupils to make useful connections between content.	
A well-sequenced RE curriculum that prepares pupils with the prior knowledge (including content, concepts and vocabulary) they need for subsequent topics.	
The importance of this is very clear in the case of controversial and sensitive topics. Leaders and teachers might identify the necessary background knowledge that pupils need to learn for a topic and make sure that the curriculum is ordered to accommodate this.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

‘Ways of knowing’ in RE

Based on the ‘*findings in the report*’, high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
A curriculum design that includes ‘ways of knowing’ as a form of knowledge that pupils build through the RE curriculum. This helps pupils learn about the construction of	

substantive knowledge, its accuracy, its reliability and how provisional that knowledge is. Pupils are therefore prepared to think in critical and scholarly ways about the representations of religion and non-religion that they learn through the curriculum and encounter in the world beyond.	
A sequenced RE curriculum that includes scholarly methods and tools that pupils learn.	
Subject leaders and teachers who make good decisions about which 'ways of knowing' pupils need to learn and who match the 'ways of knowing' to the substantive content.	
Curriculum impact that includes pupils recognising the type of specialist discourse they are engaging in when asking questions, using methods and making claims about different content in the RE curriculum. This might have been achieved, for example, because pupils have learned how disciplinary discourses construct knowledge about religion/non-religion or how groups or families of methods explore religious and non-religious traditions.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

'Personal knowledge' in RE

Based on the '*findings in the report*', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
An RE curriculum that does not induct pupils into any religious tradition (in settings where the EIF applies to RE).	
A curriculum that builds pupils' awareness of their own assumptions and values about the content that they study ('personal knowledge').	
Precise, detailed and fruitful content (substantive content and concepts) that subject leaders and curriculum designers have selected to build pupils' 'personal knowledge'. Not all	

substantive content is equally appropriate to select as the basis for developing pupils' 'personal knowledge'.	
Subject leaders and teachers who adeptly identify specific content for the development of 'personal knowledge' because they recognise that some pupils may not otherwise see the immediate value of that content.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

Interplay, end goals and competencies

Based on the 'findings in the report', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
A curriculum that focuses pupils' learning on ambitious subject-specific end goals, rather than covers excessive amounts of content superficially.	
Curriculum impact that is achieved by pupils building up accurate knowledge about the complexity and diversity of global religion and non-religion. This provides pupils with many of the ingredients for cultural and civic competencies that are important to many RE teachers.	
Clear curriculum content that subject leaders and curriculum designers have planned to illustrate 'ways of knowing' and to develop pupils' 'personal knowledge'. A clear connection between the 'ways of knowing' that pupils learn, the 'personal knowledge' that pupils develop through the curriculum and the substantive content and concepts on which both depend.	
Subject leaders of RE who are aware of the ways that the RE curriculum can be susceptible to distortion and have ensured that it does not become distorted.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

Teaching the curriculum

Based on the '*findings in the report*', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
Leaders and teachers who consider, when they select classroom activities, how the activities will enable pupils to remember the RE curriculum in the long term.	
Teachers whose judgement about classroom activities is 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'.	
Leaders and teachers of RE who ensure that, in choosing an appropriate classroom activity, they are clear about what pupils are supposed to learn from it (the curriculum object).	
Teachers who recognise that the success of classroom strategies, methods and procedures depends, to an extent, on whether pupils have sufficient prior RE knowledge (from the curriculum) to succeed at the activity.	
Teaching activities that will continue to draw on, and to remind pupils of, parts of the RE curriculum that pupils have already covered. This enables pupils to learn the RE curriculum in the long term.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

Assessment

Based on the '*findings in the report*', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
Different types of assessments are used appropriately:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Formative assessments can help teachers identify which pupils have misconceptions or gaps in their knowledge, and what those specific misconceptions or gaps are. This can inform teachers about common issues, so they can review or adapt the curriculum as necessary. Formative assessments are less useful in making judgements about how much of the whole curriculum has been learned and remembered. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Where summative assessments are used for accountability purposes, leaders can ensure that they are sufficiently spaced apart to enable pupils to learn the expanding domain of the curriculum. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The purpose of the test should guide the type of assessment, the format of the task and when the assessment is needed. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RE assessment needs to relate to the curriculum, which sets out what it means to 'get better' at RE. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders and teachers can consider whether existing assessment models in RE do in practice treat the curriculum as the progression model. 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders and teachers can design RE assessments that are fit for purpose, in that they are precisely attuned to the knowledge in the RE curriculum that they intend for pupils to learn. 	
Leaders who ensure that	

assessments are not excessively onerous for teachers.	
Professional development opportunities for leaders and teachers to reflect on how different assessment questions and tasks in RE can frame teachers' and pupils' expectations about engaging with religious and non-religious traditions.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

Systems, culture and policies

Based on the '*findings in the report*', high-quality RE may have the following features

Main findings	My commentary
Sufficient curriculum time allocated to RE in order for leaders to deliver an ambitious RE curriculum.	
Subject-specialist staffing, so that pupils are taught RE by teachers with appropriate subject professional knowledge.	
Access to high-quality in-service training for leaders and teachers of RE to develop their professional subject knowledge.	
Subject leadership that can identify high-quality sources of training (for example, through subject associations and organisations) to further their RE knowledge in policy, subject content, subject pedagogy and RE research.	
<i>What I need to do next</i>	

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.