

RE monitoring visits: Spring/summer Term 2010

Introduction

This report is based upon visits to six schools – four primary, one secondary and one special. As usual headteachers and teachers have been welcoming and most have been very well prepared for the visit. Some completed detailed self evaluation forms and some sent information beforehand. Numbers are low because there has been a significant number (seven) of cancellations this term – all good reasons, e.g. co-ordinator absent, school in difficulty and visit not appropriate, etc. Some will be carried forward to the autumn term. Another emerging issue is that, four years on, some schools coming up now have already received a monitoring visit. A decision may need to be made about this. Should schools that had significant areas for improvement be re-visited?

The relatively low numbers of schools visited does not present a problem in terms of the RE Adviser's time/work as she has a significant amount of work to do between now and the beginning of the autumn term, including:

- Detailed analysis of teachers' questionnaires re. the syllabus and following that, the drawing up of a plan of action to present to SACRE during the autumn term.
- Review of SMSC summaries over past two years or so to identify good/outstanding practice in cultural development - then set up a system to link these schools with those who are satisfactory or below.

Primary Schools

In the best school RE has a high profile. This is due to the outstanding leadership of the co-ordinator and the high level of support provided by the headteacher. Organisation and planning is meticulous and carefully tied in to the Agreed Syllabus. There is no room for complacency and the approach is dynamic. Teaching and learning is carefully monitored with focused feedback given to teachers, enabling continuous improvement. The way assessment is managed and implemented is a real strength. Pupils' progress is carefully tracked at an individual and group level. Data is carefully analysed to identify those at risk of falling behind. Teachers then address areas of weakness by adapting teaching and setting new targets. The co-ordinator accepts that to be this effective requires hard work and commitment from the teachers, but says, 'They just do it'. A discussion with children reflected their confidence in talking about religious and philosophical issues, e.g. (from a year 1 pupil), 'If something (God) is invisible, is it still real?' and 'Do Hindus and Christians have the same God?'

By contrast, in the other schools assessment is a key area for improvement. Linked to this is a lack of focused monitoring. Teaching may be observed, books may be looked at, but there is no link to standards or expectations. Marking frequently over praises work that is set at too low a level and co-ordinators do not pick this up. As levels are not used in planning or assessment there is no point of reference for assessing work. As a result, the more able are sometimes insufficiently challenged and the less able are given work that is too difficult for them. They are unclear about what they need to do to improve and the co-ordinators have no overview of standards or achievement.

A common feature in three of the schools visited is Ofsted's reference to weaknesses in pupils' understanding about multi-cultural issues. While the schools are making efforts to address this, some are more committed and successful than others. In one school pupils do not even have the opportunity to visit local churches. Schools are beginning to look into links with inner city schools with a greater ethnic mix as a way of developing multi-cultural awareness.

Another issue is a lack of careful planning. There is insufficient focus on the four key concepts and a lack of understanding about coverage of different religions. A 'scattergun' approach to the teaching of religions at key stage 2 often leads to superficial teaching and learning.

In one school the Ofsted report includes a comment from a pupil that RE is his/her least favourite lesson 'because we mainly listen to stories.' Work sampling during the visit suggested that pupils are engaged in a range of activities which go well beyond that.

In two of the schools there is no RE policy in place.

Areas of strength

- Co-ordinators who, even if non-specialist, are open to new ideas and keen to move the subject forward.
- Positive attitudes from teachers and pupils.

Areas for development

- Assessment needs to be developed so that it a) provides co-ordinators with evidence about standards and achievement in RE and b) Informs pupils about what they need to do to improve and make progress.
- Schools must find ways to provide pupils with first hand experiences of faiths other than Christianity, e.g. visits out, visitors in, links with inner city schools.

Secondary School

RE is led and managed by the head of humanities but an RE subject specialist is joining the school in September. There is some good practice in key stage 3, with the four main concepts used a starting point and a range of teaching methods used to sustain pupils' interest. However, work in a sample of books shown was at a low level with work appropriate to key stage 2 (or even key stage 1) marked as 'excellent'. There is no RE at key stage 4 and this is an issue of serious concern, though not picked up by Ofsted. WH to re-visit the school during 2010/11. The school also has to address Ofsted's comments about weaknesses in the promotion of community cohesion and pupils' multi-cultural awareness.

Special School

The Ofsted report states that this school also needs to provide more opportunities for pupils to develop their multi-cultural awareness and this is being addressed through the current development plan. There is a strong commitment to RE and it is delivered well. There is a high expectation of all pupils and topics come alive through a range of teaching styles and approaches. There are themed days around topics such as Bollywood, Diwali and Buddhist which bring the whole school together to celebrate different aspects of RE. Systems for assessment are in place but their development is a priority for improvement.

Acts of Collective Worship

The primary and special schools visited all had well organised assemblies, planned around themes. Different types take place on each day of the week, with Friday universally been used as a 'celebration of achievement' focus. Some schools hold assemblies in the local churches, especially at festival times. During most assemblies there are opportunities for prayer and/or reflection. Schools value the opportunity to come together as a community.

Support for schools/other work

Other

1. Training: RE for non-specialists (primary)
2. Attendance at Lincs HLTA conference where 6 day RE course was showcased.
3. Attended meeting of Lincoln Cluster Group (secondary).
4. Prepared press release in response to latest Ofsted RE report.

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