

Inspecting RE: An examination of OFSTED inspections

The [publication of the Religious Education Research Review](#) was greeted positively by many teachers as it appeared to indicate that Religious Education was not only on Ofsted's radar but potentially fairly high up their list of priorities.

The press release for the publication in May 2021 states, "The review recognises that there is no single way of constructing and teaching a high-quality RE curriculum. However, it does identify some common features." This article examines the inspections published between **1st May -14th Oct 2021**. We investigate whether inspectors are taking account of the factors identified in the research and if this is improving the potential of inspections to drive up standards in RE.

1. Studying the curriculum in depth, knowing more and remembering more

Unsurprisingly, one of the key mantras of the inspection framework, echoed in the research review, appears frequently in the latest set of reports and those that refer to RE are no exception. This 'depth of knowledge' is also linked to the need to avoid misconceptions.

The following is from a primary school report where a deep dive was part of the inspection:

Subject leaders have improved the organisation of the curriculum in some subjects, such as geography and personal, social and health education (PSHE). However, in others, such as religious education (RE), the curriculum does not help pupils to know more and remember more.

In another primary school report however,

Teachers accurately assess how well pupils are doing. Assessment is well suited to the age of the pupil and the subject they are learning. For example, they ... know what the word 'faith' means in different religions. Because teachers do this, any misconceptions from pupils are picked up quickly.

2. **A well sequenced** curriculum to ensure that pupils learn the knowledge they need for later topics.

This is another focus of the framework which most teachers have recognised:

A junior school where the inspection included a RE Deep Dive includes the following:

Leaders have set out clear guidance on what should be taught in most subjects over time. Teachers use this to plan well-sequenced lessons. As yet, religious education (RE), design and technology (DT) and computing are less developed than other curriculum subjects.

An infant school where the inspection included an RE Deep dive received this comment:
Teachers plan lessons that develop pupils' knowledge in each subject. For instance, in religious education, children start by learning about religious festivals in Reception Year. They then build on this knowledge by developing their understanding of beliefs and worship in Year 1.

This middle school report makes the link between clearly planned sequencing and depth of knowledge.

Pupils are respectful and understanding of differences. However, they do not always remember the knowledge that they learn about faiths and other cultures. Leaders should ensure that they promote diversity through planned and sequenced opportunities in the curriculum, so that pupils develop a deeper knowledge of different faiths and cultures.

3. Planning an ambitious curriculum

This secondary school report highlights the way that an ambitious curriculum allows pupils to achieve depth in their learning.

"There are similar strengths in the wider curriculum. In religious education, for example, leaders have created an ambitious curriculum. Pupils develop a strong foundation of knowledge to engage with complex ethical, moral and faith-based issues."

A different secondary school report, where provision for RE is combined with other subject areas, the curriculum is judged to lack ambition.

"Some curriculum plans are not ambitious enough. This means that pupils do not develop rich knowledge in some subjects. This is particularly the case in religious education, which is delivered through 'life' lessons. Leaders should ensure that curriculum plans are ambitious in all subjects, particularly religious education."

A secondary report highlights the impact of shortening key stage 3:

Pupils make their options choices at the end of Year 8. They continue to study a range of subjects in Year 9. However, the curriculum is not ambitious enough in the subjects that pupils decide not to study at key stage 4.

4. Collectively enough

The research review found that high quality curriculums cover substantive content and concepts collectively (or 'collectively enough'), rather than covering excessive amounts of content superficially

This primary school deep dive highlights the danger of trying to cover too much content in the curriculum:

“In some subjects, for example in the history and Religious Education (RE) lessons visited, teachers try to cover too much content. This means pupils become confused about what the key knowledge is they need to remember.”

5. Adequate **curriculum time** is given to RE, so that leaders can deliver an **ambitious curriculum**.

The other side of the coin to the expectation that pupils are entitled to experience an ambitious curriculum is having sufficient time to deliver it as these two secondary school reports illustrate:

“There is not enough planned curriculum time in some subjects. Pupils study a breadth of subjects, but sometimes not to sufficient depth. This is hindering some pupils from making the most of their learning. Leaders must make sure that the curriculum allows pupils to deepen their understanding and to apply their learning with fluency.”

*“In key stage 4, the opportunities for some pupils to expand upon their knowledge of different religious traditions are limited. This means that they do not build on what they have learned in key stage 3. **Leaders should ensure that there are sufficient opportunities for all pupils to continue to develop their knowledge of, and respect for, different faiths as they become older.**”*

6. Developing pupils’ **personal knowledge** helps them to relate the content to themselves (for example, their own prior assumptions).

This secondary school report identifies the consequences of insufficient attention to opportunities in this area in planning the curriculum:

“Pupils do not have sufficient knowledge of different people’s faiths and beliefs and have limited opportunities to reflect on their own beliefs and perspectives on life. Leaders need to ensure that all pupils experience purposeful opportunities that allow for their spiritual development.”

7. **There is sufficient training and professional development so that teachers have appropriate subject professional knowledge.**

NATRE has regularly reported on the challenges of providing high quality RE when teachers have not received sufficient training. This secondary monitoring report highlights an example of good practice:

“There is also appropriate support put in place for non-specialist teachers to help with planning and teacher subject knowledge. Consequently, more pupils are opting to study this subject at key stage 4.”

A primary school report also explains the consequences of lack of teacher subject knowledge:

“Most of the curriculum is making sure that all pupils have learned more and can remember and build on specific vocabulary and knowledge. However, this is not the case in all subjects, for example RE and history. Teachers should improve their specific subject knowledge further in all subjects so they can deliver leaders’ plans even better and pupils can learn more.”

In addition to the features of high quality RE identified in the Research Review, inspectors also highlight other important areas as follows

8. The importance of visits and visitors

This comment appears in a secondary report:

“During the pandemic, pupils have not been able to visit local historical sites or places of worship. However, teachers arranged virtual visits where possible, to ensure that pupils continued to enjoy cultural, historical and spiritual experiences.”

Similarly, this statement features in a primary school report:

“Leaders and governors, rightly, take pride in the breadth of experiences and opportunities the curriculum provides for pupils. Pupils learn to understand and respect those with different customs, beliefs and lifestyles to their own. Visits to interview and learn from Sikh, Muslim and Buddhist leaders have helped pupils to broaden their religious understanding.”

9. Links to SMSC and Personal Development

A primary school report includes the following:

Pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development is weak. Pupils are not able to talk about British values such as democracy, liberty and law. They have limited understanding and knowledge about other cultures.

Conversely this Primary School received this more positive comment:

Teachers plan regular classroom conversations about spirituality. This encourages pupils to express their personal opinions and discuss their beliefs.

10. Generally poor or non-existent provision

An example from two secondary schools, the first currently in special measures and the second now deemed inadequate:

“Despite this work, there are some areas of the curriculum in which pupils still receive a poor-quality subject education. For example, senior leaders have identified that there is an unacceptable standard of religious education (RE), and they are taking actions to build a more suitable RE curriculum, using the locally agreed syllabus.”

“Pupils do not currently have lessons in religious education (RE). The programme for pupils’ personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education is poorly planned and taught. Consequently, pupils do not build up their knowledge and understanding effectively in these subjects.”

11. The importance of subject leadership

A primary school report includes this statement:

“You have taken action to improve the quality of the wider curriculum. Smaller building blocks of knowledge allow pupils to understand ideas that are more complex. Some subjects, such as science and religious education, are further on with this work than other subjects, such as computing. Subject leaders understand their role in supporting teachers to develop their subject expertise. The role of subject leaders in checking that pupils have learned the curriculum is less well developed.”

NATRE would be pleased if inspectors could consider the impact on the quality of the curriculum of the allocation of staff to the timetable for RE. In secondary schools, excessive use of teachers who mainly teach other subjects can have a significant impact on learning and on the effectiveness of the subject leader. Likewise, in primary schools, where teaching assistants or higher-level teaching assistants deliver RE *without proper training or support*, inspectors should also consider the impact on learning.

It is disappointing that there are so few deep dives of RE, especially during secondary inspections. Even when you take into account those schools with a religious character where the RE is not inspected by Ofsted, the number of RE Deep Dives is significantly lower than would be expected. On the other hand, we note that RE is commented on in some schools where it has not been selected as a subject for a deep dive. We hope that the number of Deep dives and schools where RE is commented on will continue to increase.

In conclusion, there is certainly some evidence of inspector training leading to a greater awareness of elements of high quality RE included in the Research Review. It is good to see schools encouraged to offer a curriculum in RE that is ambitious. We are not yet seeing reference to phrases from the report such as the value of learning being grounded in academic study, but most other areas of the research review do appear to be having an impact on the inspection process. We will continue to monitor the reports produced by OFSTED.