

Deep and Meaningful? The State of Religious Education in England - Ofsted April 2024

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/subject-report-series-religious-education/deep-and-meaningful-the-religious-education-subject-report>

Purpose and Scope of the Report

- To explore the content and quality of Religious Education in English schools and academies from EYFS to KS5.
- The report is based on visits to 50 schools across England.
- The report focuses on the impact of the curriculum, sharing findings from quality of education (deep dive) inspection activity but recognises the importance of RE to personal development and pupil's understanding of a diverse world.
- The report notes that the place of religion in schools in England is complex and notes the variation of legal requirements and curriculum implementation.

Main Findings

- The RE curriculum often lacks sufficient substance to prepare pupils for a multi-religious and multi-secular society.
- There is often a superficial approach to curriculum that tries to cover many religions and worldviews without prioritising depth of study. This results in limited retention of knowledge.
- The RE curriculum rarely enables pupils to systematically build disciplinary knowledge or personal knowledge.
- Over simplistic and generalised presentations of religious and non-religious worldviews are taught and there is a lack of focus on the lived reality of religious and non-religious worldviews as they appear in the world.
- In the secondary phase, non-examined RE is often limited and of poor quality, with some schools failing to meet the statutory requirement to teach RE at all stages.
- Some secondary curriculums are restricted by what teachers consider necessary for public examinations, limiting the range and types of RE content taught.
- Timetabling including long gaps between lessons can hinder pupil progress and assessments rarely provide assurance of learning and retention of complex content.
- Some leaders and teachers mistakenly equate "teaching from a neutral stance" with teaching a non-religious worldview.
- The majority of teachers have not received subject-based professional development in RE, leading to misconceptions amongst pupils.

Recommendations for Schools

Curriculum:

Schools should ensure a distinct, rigorous, and challenging curriculum for RE that builds on pupils' existing knowledge and balances breadth and depth of study.

- Schools should carefully select the knowledge they expect pupils to gain to make sense of a complex and diverse world. They should make sure that important content and concepts are clearly identified and sequenced.
- Schools should make sure that curriculums clearly identify how pupils will develop disciplinary and personal knowledge through the chosen substantive content.
- Schools should make sure that curriculums do not contain oversimplifications of traditions, including, where appropriate, non-religious traditions (avoid generalisations)

- Schools should balance the breadth and depth of study of religious and non-religious traditions to ensure that these are collectively enough for pupils to make sense of a complex world.
- Schools should ensure that all pupils have the opportunity to deepen their knowledge in RE over time.
- Leaders in secondary schools should make sure that the curriculum is designed to meet or exceed exam board specifications (rather than being driven by them)

Teaching and Assessment:

Schools should be ambitious in developing pupils' knowledge, provide opportunities for review and building on important knowledge, and develop manageable assessment methods.

- Schools should be ambitious for pupils to develop the different forms of knowledge: substantive, ways of knowing and personal knowledge. They should make sure that teachers have high expectations of what pupils will know and remember as a result of the curriculum.
- Schools should provide opportunities for pupils to review and build on important knowledge over time. They should make sure that pupils use the knowledge that they gained in previous years as the curriculum becomes increasingly more complex and demanding.
- Schools should ensure that teaching specifically develops pupils' knowledge of the complexity of religious and non-religious worldviews.
- Schools should develop manageable assessment methods that move beyond the simple recall of factual information. They should check that pupils recall and understand the intended curriculum over time and that the domain of their knowledge is expanding.

Systems at subject and school Level:

Schools should ensure teachers have the necessary subject and pedagogical knowledge, effectively use allocated time for RE, minimise gaps between teaching, and implement an ambitious curriculum for statutory non-examined RE.

- Schools should ensure that all teachers have the subject and pedagogical knowledge that they need to teach RE well.
- Schools should check that the time allocated for teaching RE at all key stages is used effectively so that pupils learn a curriculum that is both broad and deep
- Schools should organise the timetable for RE so that gaps between teaching are minimised.
- Schools should ensure that the curriculum for statutory non-examined RE at key stages 4 and 5 is ambitious and consistently implemented. They should make sure that the RE content is clearly identified and builds on what pupils have learned at key stage 3.

Recommendations for Others

Recommendations for Government:

- The government should urgently update its guidance for schools about its statutory expectations of RE
- The Government should provide appropriate clarity about what is taught in RE, when and where (for schools inspected by Ofsted)

Recommendations for syllabus writers and commercial curriculum developers:

- Those involved in writing syllabuses and commercial curriculums should make sure that these enable pupils to build deep knowledge of the chosen religious and non-religious traditions.
- They should make sure that curriculums identify what pupils should learn and when.
- They should ensure that it is clear to teachers when pupils will revisit and review important content and concepts.

Recommendations for Initial and Continuing Professional Development Providers:

- Those involved in commissioning and organising professional development should increase access to, and the range of, training available to all leaders and teachers, to improve their subject knowledge.
- Those involved in training teachers and early career professional development should prioritise helping trainee teachers and those who are newer to the profession to gain the subject knowledge that they need.

Recommendations for Exam Boards:

- Exam boards should recognise that the way in which schools use exam style questions is not always appropriate. They should make sure that their communication with schools reflects this.

Conclusion

Whilst challenges persist in Religious Education, the Ofsted report demonstrates that it is possible to construct an ambitious and achievable curriculum that prepares pupils to make sense of the complex and diverse world. However, urgent attention needed to reverse the current state of RE and ensure its place in the curriculum and the positive impact it can have on pupils' lives.