Summary Review of Religious Education & Collective Worship

2018-2019

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Introduction

Following the revision of the Surrey Agreed Syllabus for Religious Education and its publication in 2017, SACRE expressed a desire to conduct a number of school visits across the Primary phase, in order to fulfill its obligation to monitor the impact of the syllabus, a year into its implementation. It was felt that focus should be, at this point at least, on the Primary phase, due to the increasing number of schools in the secondary phase converting to academies, and therefore beyond SACRE’s statutory remit. It was also felt that the scrutiny of GSCE data (including numbers of pupils being entered for GCSE) for the purposes of SACRE’s Annual Report did give some indication of which schools were likely to be compliant with the recommendations of the agreed syllabus and that contact with individual schools in order to congratulate or challenge would be a possible way forward after such analysis.

During the Spring term of 2018, SACRE’s newly-appointed Chairman wrote a letter of introduction to all schools, reminding them of their statutory duties in relation to Religious Education and inviting Primary schools to make contact with SACRE if they were interested in receiving a visit. The response, though disappointing, did generate replies from two schools, who received the first of SACRE’s visits. The RE adviser then circulated a second request via the Surrey RE subject leader network, which (not unsurprisingly) proved much more forthcoming. Schools attending these groups are generally those who have a higher priority on RE as part of their broad and balanced curriculum than those who do not attend. During 2018 – 2019, a total of 5 reviews were conducted, funded by the SACRE budget.

It was agreed that the focus of the visits should be primarily to establish how the syllabus has been received, and to identify ways in which SACRE might provide better support for schools generally. Schools were encouraged to take the opportunity to showcase their best work and were reassured that the visits were not by any means inspections, but would very much inform SACRE’s future work. Additionally, SACRE aimed to use the review process as an opportunity to identify good RE practice across the county, as well as to support and challenge where appropriate.

The following schools were reviewed at the request of SACRE:

Charlwood Village Primary School
Kenyngton Manor Primary School, Sunbury-upon-Thames
New Monument Primary Academy, Woking
Southfield Park Primary, Epsom
Witley CofE (Voluntary Controlled) Infant School

This report is intended to provide a summary overview of the findings of the reviews. The school visits reflected a range of different school communities, from a small VC infant school to large community primaries and including a rural village setting which provided education in mixed-age class groups. Each review was conducted over a half-day visit and generally included a meeting with the headteacher and / or subject leader, 2 or 3 part-lesson observations, an audit of pupil work and, where possible, some pupil interviews. Although not a specific reason for visiting the schools, SACRE also requested to observe an act of collective worship, which would help inform SACRE’s other statutory work. The visits were conducted by Rachel Boxer (Adviser to Surrey SACRE) and members of SACRE’s monitoring sub-committee, comprising the Chairman, two

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members of SACRE Group C (Teachers) and two members of Group A (Religious and non-religious belief groups). In all but one case, 2 or 3 SACRE members visited on each occasion, one of whom was always the RE Adviser and another an accompanying teacher. A summary of recommendations following each visit formed a part of the feedback to each individual school, both verbally and as part of a more formal written report. These reports give schools the opportunity to publicise their work more widely and would prove useful in evidencing the profile of RE within their broad and balanced curriculum (for example, in readiness for Ofsted or SIAMs inspections).

**Collective Worship**

Collective worship was reviewed in each of the primary phase schools visited, and provision was seen to be variable, reflecting each school's understanding of the nature and purpose of collective worship. It was clearly a real strength of two of the six schools, as the schools were able to articulate how crucial this small portion of the day is in forming a cohesive school community, united around shared values. It is perhaps interesting to note that both these schools are places where people’s beliefs are openly talked about and for many pupils, a part of their lives outside of the school. Although prayer was only a visible part of two schools’ assemblies, the majority gave pupils the opportunity to be still and quietly reflect on their responses to the focus. One school made particularly good use of a visiting youth worker, who clearly knew the children well and, given the school’s diverse community, led a very appropriate, prayerful and invitational response to the theme. This was clearly normal practice within collective worship in this school and was felt by SACRE to be best practice in meeting the needs of pupils from all faiths or none. Although not the definitive document on collective worship, schools demonstrating weaker practice were encouraged to read SACRE’s guidance on collective worship in community schools ‘Time to Reflect’.

**Religious Education - Overview**

At the times of the visit, schools were mid-way through the second year of implementation since the revision of the syllabus. During the course of the reviews, a number of part-lessons were observed. Curriculum plans and pupil portfolios were examined, and discussions held with subject leaders and headteachers. SACRE had requested to see lessons from two different key stages, where possible, and so a range of lessons were visited, most in the first part of the lesson where teachers and children were engaged in discussion, which provided a good opportunity for the SACRE to observe teachers’ and pupils’ questioning techniques. Teachers in all the schools visited made good use of the Agreed Syllabus, and of the non-statutory support materials, and all spoke of the way in which these had improved both teacher confidence and outcomes for pupils. The lessons observed were exploring a wide range of units across the key stages – from ‘What makes something special?’ and ‘What makes our world wonderful?’ in EYFS, to the more challenging content of ‘How is the Trinity Three – and yet One?’ in a year 6 class. All schools visited were observed teaching Christianity, which was a coincidence (though understandable, given the timing of some of the visits in the Autumn and Spring terms) and suggested to SACRE that, when visiting schools in the future, it would be useful to request visits to lessons focused on a wider range of religions or beliefs in order to be able to form opinions about the quality of RE across the range of learning within the Agreed Syllabus.
Subject leaders commented on how the enquiry cycle which formed a part of the ‘learning journey’ had helped teachers to plan appropriate subject content, scaffold pupils’ learning, and deepen their thinking. In one school, the subject leader also spoke about how the agreed syllabus had significantly improved pupils’ engagement with RE as a subject, which was confirmed by SACRE’s lesson observations of the differences in pupil attitudes in upper KS2, compared to the younger pupils whose teachers had been using the material in the revised agreed syllabus. In the schools visited, RE tended to be better taught where senior leaders gave a higher profile to the subject as part of their broad and balanced curriculum. All schools valued the contribution of RE to pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural development, and pupils were often able to articulate this for themselves, explaining that it helped them to appreciate and learn from the thoughts, beliefs and ideas of others. One school had received particular commendations from parents after their whole school ‘Faith Week’, which had boosted the profile of RE and given pupils the benefit of a week where RE was a significant focus, including encounters with people from different religious and non-religious backgrounds. Pupils at this same school also spoke of the impact that it had had on them.

Teaching and Learning in RE
In the best lessons, planning for learning focused closely on the subject content in the Agreed Syllabus, with consideration for the needs of the particular learners taken into account, which was supported using the attainment statements. It was observed that children made the best progress where the class teacher had made connections between the learning journey section of the support materials, the statutory subject content, and the attainment statements, so that they were really clear about the expectations of each unit, and which tasks will help them to explore the subject content together. In the best lessons, SACRE observed teachers using a mix of focused and open-ended questioning, enabling children of all ages and abilities to share and explain their thinking, skilfully clarifying it where necessary by asking further questions. This was demonstrated with both younger KS1 pupils, and older upper KS2 pupils. In one year two class, pupils were encouraged to use hand signals to indicate whether they wanted to agree, build on or challenge what other children were sharing in the class discussions, demonstrating a high level of challenge which was also then reflected in the quality of the pupils’ work. It was encouraging to see talk for learning playing such a big role across the primary range and in some cases to see the direct outcomes of this in pupils’ books, where they had been asked to express their learning in a very concise and focused way. Particularly good use of ‘sentence starters’ was observed in several of the schools, reflecting good practice in RE, where children’s written evidence doesn’t always reflect their ability in RE.

Less successful practice was seen where the focus of the learning was not clear – either for the pupils, or the teacher planning the lesson – or where lack of prior learning had disadvantaged pupils and meant that they were less able to access the deeper learning in some units. It is hoped that this will change over time, but as we are only in the second year of implantation, it would be hard to be sure of this. There were more successful outcomes where teachers recognised what pupils needed to know, and challenged misconceptions as they arose, supporting their understanding through the use of careful questions, both focused and open-ended as the context
In the best cases, subject leaders had used the context of the syllabus revision to review the curriculum provision in their schools, to identify and address issues with general subject knowledge in RE or resourcing in RE, or to overhaul the approach to RE across the school. Subject leaders also reported that pupils’ enjoyment and achievement in RE was often enhanced by creating opportunities to ‘block’ RE for a half-day or whole day. All schools were making good use of their school website not just to demonstrate their commitment to meeting their statutory duties in relation to RE, but also to ensure that RE has its place in their broad and balanced curriculum, as recommended by Ofsted.

Pupils’ Work

Across the visits, SACRE was shown a wide range of pupils’ work from across the key stages, both as part of lessons observed, in books during the audit and, on occasion, shared by pupils during the discussions with them. It would be fair to say that the quality of the work was variable, and that the best work followed on from pupils being given opportunities to talk, question and reflect: where teachers had made clear that, whilst important, literacy skills were not the main focus of the written work but that RE was ‘about the depth of their understanding’. Particularly good examples were found in one RE subject leader’s file where there were examples of planning, pupils’ work from each year group, photos of RE in action and KWL (‘What I know’, ‘What I want to find out’ and ‘What I have learnt’) grids completed by individual children. The RE subject leader had found that this format was ideal for demonstrating progress within a unit, having observed that the attainment statements on the units related to achievement across a whole phase of learning. Pupils in one school spoke of how they were given the opportunity in RE to choose how they presented their work, which gave them greater ownership of and engagement with the subject.

Assessment

It would still be true to say that assessment in RE is still an ongoing issue for schools, and that this has been compounded by the bespoke approach to assessment in other foundation subject areas, where schools have been encouraged to create their own interpretations of what ‘emerging’ ‘expected’ and ‘exceeding’ look like within their own school community. The statements of attainment within the units of work in RE do at least provide a strong starting point for schools, and the schools that expressed greater confidence in assessment were the ones that had begun to develop their own assessment practices using these attainment statements. Best practice in this area should take into account the prior learning and prior attainment of pupils and enable the teacher to adapt the challenge up or down using the attainment statements identified within the learning context of each unit. Some schools reported that they find the assessment grids contained within each of the units within the non-statutory support materials very helpful. These can be accessed from the Agreed Syllabus sections of SACRE’s website.
Conclusions
The purpose of the conclusions within this report is to establish recommendations to SACRE in exercising its statutory duties and to ascertain the focus for any future monitoring visits. The schools visited were grateful to SACRE for the support materials created to aid implementation of the revised syllabus, but recognised the challenges for staff teams in terms of subject knowledge. The RE subject leader networks do provide some opportunities for developing middle leaders and keeping them up to date with techniques and resources, as well as suggesting ways to support less confident colleagues, but there are some challenges in creating appropriate CPD opportunities for class teachers. This is not just a Surrey issue, it should be said! The monitoring sub-committee have drawn the following conclusions based on the evidence of the visits and comments from subject leaders, teachers and headteachers:

- that SACRE should request, where at all possible, to see lessons focusing on Christianity and also other faiths or beliefs, as well as in different key stages;
- knowing that RE (as a part of a broad and balanced curriculum) is to be featured more prominently in the new Ofsted Inspection Schedule, it is important that SACRE establishes functioning channels of communication to facilitate the operation of its statutory duties. Could / should SACRE group D (Local Authority) help with this?
- create some twilight CPD visits to places of worship for staff / subject leaders, led by SACRE’s adviser in partnership with members of SACRE group A & B. These could be joint ventures with Diocesan subject leaders for maximum effectiveness;
- the role of the Speakers’ Forum group in enhancing primary learning in RE, in a similar way to what’s been happening already in secondary schools, but to support specific units of work and create opportunities for pupils to engage with members of belief communities;
- the need for some advice for schools in regard to assessment in RE. This could be a partnership opportunity between members of SACRE group C and a working party of subject leaders from the Surrey RE network, benefitting both groups;
- the RE adviser and/or SACRE Chairman should attend HT quadrant meetings to share outcomes of the visits, to publicise SACRE’s work in partnering with schools and begin conversations with schools about future visits;
- future monitoring visits – especially visits to schools with whom SACRE has had little contact – should be viewed as a partnering opportunity, with a focus on offering schools some benefits (e.g. a faith visitor to support teaching and learning in RE, or input into a staff meeting) in return for the opportunity to discuss schools’ RE provision and make recommendations that will positively impact on pupils’ engagement with RE.

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