

Planning an effective learning journey in Religious Education in a Church of England school

How do vision and purpose link to curriculum planning?

Church of England schools need to define a clear and distinctive Christian vision. This vision, or destination, needs to be appropriate to the context of the school. It needs to fit with a Christian vision of the flourishing of humankind and it needs to engage the whole community, not just the pupils.

This vision needs to help schools make all the important decisions – about staffing, budget, training, after school provision etc and of course the curriculum. Curriculum intent is a key focus in the new Ofsted inspection framework. Middle leaders must be able to articulate the rationale behind the curriculum that is being delivered, so these conversations need to take place before curriculum decisions are made.

Asking and answering these questions may help with this process:

What is that vision and how will it drive the decisions that the school needs to take?

How does the vision link to the curriculum choices that are made?

What does the school deem to be the key purpose of Religious Education?

How does this express the school's Christian vision?

What should the RE curriculum look like if it is going to express the school's distinctive Christian vision?

There is no one model of curriculum that will answer meet these questions. The Statement of Entitlement from the Church of England Education Office reminds schools that their trust deeds, funding agreements or the Locally Agreed Syllabus are also significant factors which must be considered in relation to the RE curriculum.

What does an effective RE Curriculum look like?

In strand 7 of the SIAMS schedule¹, *the Effectiveness of Religious Education*, the following statement describes an expectation about curriculum planning: "Curriculum planning for RE is effective..." Provision is "well-constructed and coherent."

For effective learning to take place, pupils need to encounter knowledge that makes an impact (powerful knowledge)². They need to encounter "big ideas" or concepts more than once. They need to have time to develop and progress. Encountering a religion or a concept for a 6-week period and not returning to it, will not enable them to progress in their learning. Understanding Christianity³ (developed by RE Today and the Church of England Education Office) and Barbara Wintersgill's "Big Ideas"⁴ (developed as part of Learn Teach Lead RE) are resources which exemplify this way of learning.

Decide what the pupils/students need to know by the end of their time in the school, as far as syllabus allows. These are the non-negotiables in the context of the school and its distinctive Christian vision. Ensure that the rationale for these decisions is understood by all who teach RE. Decide in which year groups the non-negotiable concepts will be introduced and when they will be revisited. Articulate clear links between the concepts from one year group to the next. This will ensure that there is progression and the connections between the topics they are studying and the knowledge they are encountering are clear to all.

¹ <https://tinyurl.com/vy4zcg99>

² 'Powerful knowledge' is a term frequently used by Professor Michael Young. It refers to the most important or useful knowledge for any given curriculum area.

³ <http://www.understandingchristianity.org.uk/>

⁴ <https://tinyurl.com/vy37ctxh>

What is balanced RE?

The SIAMS schedule also talks about RE “reflecting a good balance between theology, philosophy and human science”. These are academic disciplines that appropriately underpin learning in RE and can be explored in the #BalancedRE⁵ project by G Georgiou, K Wright, O Seymour and J Chipperton.

The glossary on p19 of the SIAMS schedule defines theology, philosophy and human science.

Theology

“In the context of RE, conversations about foundational beliefs within religions and worldviews; examining the key ideas or concepts in religions and belief systems.” This means talking about the concept of God and identifying the foundational beliefs of the traditions, religions and beliefs studied. For example: Tawhid, the oneness of God in Islam, Resurrection in Christianity and Dharma in Hinduism for example.

Philosophy

“In the context of RE, conversations about thinking, reasoning and making judgements: investigating the nature of knowledge, reality and morality and the way in which we reason about them.” These are the “big questions” of life, the questions of truth and justice and the ways that people from a range of faiths and non-religious worldviews have answered these questions.

Human science

“In the context of RE, conversations about the human dimension of religions and beliefs: enquiry into the lived and diverse reality of religions and beliefs in the world today.” This covers the things that people do because of what they believe and the impact that the actions of religious and non-religious believers have had on society locally, nationally and globally.

Does the RE curriculum look at the following: (G Georgiou, K Wright, J Chipperton and O Seymour)

Theology

1. Where beliefs come from?
2. How beliefs have changed over time?
3. How beliefs relate to each other?
4. How beliefs shape the way believers see the world and each other?

Philosophy

5. Questions of knowledge, meaning and existence?
6. How and whether things make sense?
7. Issues of right and wrong, good and bad?

Social and Human Sciences

8. The diverse nature of religion?
9. Diverse ways in which people practise and express beliefs?
10. The ways in which beliefs shape individual identity and vice versa?
11. The ways in which beliefs contribute to, and impact on, communities and vice versa?
12. The ways in which beliefs contribute to, and impact on, society and vice versa?

An animation on that explores these elements further: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6NTW2bsFTLY> and support materials will be available on the #BalancedRE⁶ website.

Although the aim is for a curriculum that is scaffolded by a balance between these disciplines, this should be seen over the course of a phase of education, not in individual lessons or individual units.

⁵ <https://balancedre.org.uk/>

⁶ <https://balancedre.org.uk/>

Unit planning

The curriculum plan should set the topic, concept(s) and focus for the unit and where a scheme of work is used (diocesan scheme of work⁷, Understanding Christianity, Discovery⁸ or a bespoke one) there may be a suggested title, with guidance for content and activities. This should be considered as guidance, a starting point rather than a straight-jacket, as no two classes are the same. The scheme, or perhaps the locally agreed syllabus, may indicate expected outcomes. These should form the basis for the unit.

The key questions teachers should ask themselves are:

- What is it that the pupils should know and be able to do by the end of the unit?
- How will they show that learning?

This will often involve pupils answering the question that forms the title of the unit, but identifying how they will show that learning, will influence the journey through the material. This outcome does not necessarily have to be a written piece but deciding on how the learning will be recorded is important, especially where a “big book” is being used to record the learning journey. When the end point of the unit is identified, the steps that the pupils need to take to get there need to be planned, taking into account the needs of all learners. The RE then becomes content led rather than activity driven, keeping it meaningful, and ensuring that the intended outcomes are reached.

Each step planned must enable children to gather the information and develop the skills that they need to achieve the planned outcome(s), so the activities for each lesson or step must link to the key question or concept and allow for pupil progress. The same questions as above should be used for each step of the learning journey. Planning a series of “learning questions” for a unit or topic and a way for pupils to show their responses to those questions will contribute to assessment over time. This can inform the planning for the ensuing lessons/topics/units, as well as helping pupils to understand the purpose behind tasks.

Establishing what the pupils know at the start of the unit is also a key element in planning for effective RE. Including a recording of that baseline activity in the big book, if used, will contribute evidence to pupil progress and learning across the course of the unit and eventually across a phase.

Part of this planning process must include making choices about the range of information to be covered, the resources that will be used, the texts, artefacts, audio or video clips for example, whether any visits or visitors should be invited and whether there are opportunities for cross-curricular links.

Lesson planning

Each lesson or step will be contributing to the overall journey. A learning question or learning intention that links to the overall direction of the unit is important. Activities for pupils need to allow them to gather the required knowledge and develop the appropriate skills.

Start a lesson with something that links back to the previous lesson, reminding pupils of where they have got to on the journey. This retrieval process makes learning more effective. Frequent revision embeds information in the long-term memory. Likewise, finish with something that will provide a bridge to the following lesson. This could be as simple as asking pupils for a takeaway thought or question that can be recorded either by individuals or as a class, which may then provide the starting point for the following lesson. Such activities need to be carefully scaffolded to ensure that the overall direction of the learning journey is maintained. Take care to ensure that the activities have RE outcomes. While creativity is essential, avoid populating RE lessons with activities that fill the time but do not take the learning in RE forward. Check that activities will help the pupils to gain the knowledge and skills that they need for this stage of the learning journey.

⁷ <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/schools/religious-education/re-scheme-work/>

⁸ <https://discoveryschemeofwork.com/>

Recording the learning in Big Books

Recording learning in a big book or floor book, a bit like an EYFS learning journal, is an excellent way of ensuring that the wide variety of activities that constitute good RE are documented, lending the subject status and providing evidence of the curriculum over time. For the book to effectively record the learning journey, each stage will need to be included, so at each step a teacher will need to plan the content, the activity and the best way to record this. A double page-spread per lesson is going to allow for a variety of recording methods – individual responses, group activities, photographs, post-it notes are just a few examples that may be appropriate. This will help everyone involved to see the learning in RE as part of a journey, rather than as unconnected elements.

There will still be a need for pupils to work independently and record learning in individual RE books (or possibly topic books) so that progress over time for each pupil can also be monitored.

Assessment in RE

Assessment forms a crucial part in planning for effective RE. The SIAMS schedule is looking for robust schemes of assessment that enable teachers and pupils to gauge pupil progress and attainment. This includes all methods of assessment – formative and summative, self and peer assessment. Assessment should be in line with the requirements of assessment in the relevant Locally Agreed Syllabus and/or assessment schemes in a chosen scheme of work or resource. There is a diocesan recommended “End of Phase Outcomes”⁹ document that provides a basis for assessment in line with Understanding Christianity and the diocesan scheme of work.

However, assessment in RE is not going to be on a half-termly basis, as it will be in English and Maths. Over the course of a unit (6 lessons/hours or maybe longer) pupils will make progress but can only really be assessed against end of phase expectations on an annual basis.

The best assessment in RE (as in any other subject) will use all the assessment tools available, and tracking, feedback and recording should be in line with that used by the school in other subject areas.

It is worth asking the following questions of RE:

- Is the work taking place in RE having an impact?
- Is that impact in accord with the school’s distinctive Christian vision?
- Are the pupils making progress?
- Are all learners able to make progress?

A Summary

Plan a destination – WHOLE SCHOOL VISION

Decide how to get there – RE CURRICULUM

Identify the stops along the way – RE KNOWLEDGE

Look back and look forward – ASSESSMENT FOR LEARNING



⁹ <https://www.oxford.anglican.org/schools/religious-education/religious-education-resources/assessment/>