Teachers learning: good CPD for effective RE – the role of the RE Quality Mark

Compiled by Linda Rudge (REQM Project Manager); contributors: Finola Jackson (Shocklach Quatt VC CE Primary School, Shocklach, near Malsop, Cheshire), and Sophie McNeel and Alice Hampson (both Newman RC College, Oldham, Greater Manchester).

In this article three teachers from two very contrasting schools reflect on the effectiveness of their professional and school development through the Religious Education Quality Mark (REQM) process.

Introduction

What is effective continuing professional development (or CPD)? How can we ensure that the knowledge and understanding of our professional knowledge have an impact on the subject and the school? How do we know what is ‘good’ RE, and how might we make an impact on an under-learning in the school?

The Department for Education published implementation guidance on effective CPD in 2016 and advised schools in England that the best CPD should include collaboration and expert challenges, and that it should be underpinned by robust evidence and expertise and have a focus on improving and evaluating pupil outcomes.

Much CPD today takes place in school, led by senior teams or subject co-ordinators, as well as engaging with external consultants or advisors. For RE, it is a challenge to access CPD as budgets are often very limited. It is also sometimes difficult to make sure that good practice in our subject is recognised in other parts of the school, and that pupil progress in RE is celebrated at the school’s wider community. Any resources that move schools on effectively in the professional development of their teachers, and the provision of RE for their pupils, are useful.

This article focuses on one - the REQM, managed by the RE Council of England and Wales.

Celebrating good RE

Schools that are inspected under Section 48 arrangements for those with a religious character or foundation might be seen to be at an advantage to community schools in this respect – although celebration through inspection might seem to be a daunting prospect. The teachers in the two schools represented in this article are in this situation, and chose to use the REQM materials alongside their usual departmental and subject planning to make sure they could benchmark their RE and their professional practice against the published REQM criteria, as well as the expectations of the inspectors and their own professional standards. For example, the effectiveness of RE forms an important strand of the new framework for SiAMs inspections.

The REQM is not an inspection tool – it is a mark of celebration or an award, achieved by schools that meet the criteria on Learners and Learning, Teachers and Teaching, Curriculum, Subject Leadership and CPD. It is open to all schools in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. If you might expect, the criteria emphasise an inclusive, broad and challenging curriculum; engaged learners who make good progress; subject connections with other curriculum areas; staff and pupil connections with other schools and the wider community; and reflective subject leadership supported by the senior team.

The teachers, their schools and their Quality Mark experiences

These three colleagues shared space together leading a workshop, and on the REQM stand, at the 20:20 RE conference organised by four subject associations in the autumn term of 2018. Their experiences form the main part of this article.

Finola Jackson

Finola is the RE subject leader and a member of the SLT in a small rural Church of England primary school with 45 pupils. It is a voluntary controlled school, so although the subject is not inspected separately, the quality of the RE is a key contributor to the overall outcome for the school. According to Finola, ‘The size of your school is no barrier whatsoever to going for gold.’ The school had to think creatively how to [meet certain aspects, including the cost of the award itself]; but it secured a grant from its local diocese. It was crucial to secure support from the governors too. Finola said, ‘They believed in our determination to enhance children’s learning experiences in RE and explore how this rich and important subject could make a significant contribution to whole school improvement.’

The school made changes to ensure that RE underpinned the entire school curriculum – it is now taught more creatively through art, craft, drama, sport, poetry, music and even forest schools. It books more visitors, workshops and trips. Children are also given the opportunity to unlock religious texts and discover that these often do not have simple meanings, and that there are many possible interpretations. All these activities are enhanced through strong relationships with parents, governors and the local church. RE innovations now drive the whole school curriculum.

Finola explained, ‘Our enquiry-based approach using “big questions” isn’t just confined to RE, and assessment and feedback [are] delivered across a range of different subjects. We are fortunate at Shocklach as the teachers do a great deal to support one another by sharing good practice, tips and resources for example. Both our local RE hub and high school were more than willing to lend art/football boxes and offer advice on a range of areas, including hosting an inter-faith week.

While at a World Religion course at Chester Diocesan, Finola was given a recommendation for the Pushpanjali Dance Company to enhance the study of Hindu philosophy, beliefs and rituals and help children understand the world around them. The experience prompted the children to consider a variety of big questions, including what Hindus believe happens after death. One of the dances taught by the Company’s Pragjyoti Madhavan was subsequently incorporated, at the children’s request, into the school’s end-of-year theatre production.

Finola believes the purposes of the REQM are twofold: ‘it recognises good practice in RE and is a key contributor to ongoing development. I am passionate about teaching and leading RE. The subject makes a unique and powerful contribution to children’s learning. It provides them with the opportunity to explore the big ideas around religion and belief and to think about what matters in their own lives.

Children’s work and RE experiences are regularly shared on social media platforms, such as the school Facebook page. Twitter and e-reviews and Facebook pages. Finola added, ‘It was exciting to raise the profile of RE in school and encourage parents to leave such positive comments from supportive parents and members of the local community. This evidence was shared with the Quality Mark assessor too. The assessor’s visit was an overwhelmingly positive experience and a wonderful celebration of RE. The children spoke enthusiastically about their RE experiences, particularly about using social media to express their images and their appreciation of being given time to do some “tricky thinking”.

Shocklach celebrated its award and issued a press release. The school benefited from positive press coverage and wider recognition, which included a direct quote from the assessor: “The subject teaching is very passionate and proactive and that is clearly why the subject is so well taught and embedded across school.” It is great that Finola Jackson’s passion is shared with other schools to benefit children.”

Finola said, ‘Achieving the REQM Gold has given the whole Shocklach community a huge boost and we are building on our success now as we work towards gaining Christian Aid’s Global Neighbours accreditation.’ She ended her presentation at the Crewe conference with the voice of a child: ‘RE is an incredible experience which helps me to understand life,’ said Isobet of Year 4.

Sophie McNeel and Alice Hampson

Sophie and Alice lead RE at a Catholic secondary college in Oldham. RE is a main focus for any inspection under Section 48. The school’s conference presentation showed the benefits of the REQM for a large RE department in a Catholic school, and how it allowed opportunities to build on good RE. Being in a Catholic school means that RE is an core subject. However, Sophie and Alice were keen to raise the profile of the subject even more as the students’ response to RE in the school is fantastic, and they wanted this to be shared by everyone.

1. usso.gov.uk/government/publications/standard-for-teachers-professional-development