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## **The impact of the New Secondary Curriculum on Religious Education in Schools and implications for initial teacher education.**

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### **Background**

The New Secondary Curriculum (NSC) was introduced for year seven in schools in England in September 2008 and it is now being rolled out in year 8. While it is hard to assess the full impact of the NSC as it is in its early stages of development (Ofsted 2009) it is becoming clear that in many schools the introduction of the NSC has meant a move to a more integrated and skills based curriculum in KS3 and indications are that this is having an impact on the provision for Religious Education (RE) in schools. This research uncovers the range of different ways in which RE is working with the new developments and brings to light some important implications for teacher training in the subject. The research was carried out in secondary schools in the NW of England and was intended to inform those involved in initial teacher education (ITE).

### **Research Questions**

The research questions:

- What is the extent of the impact of the NSC on RE in schools? For the purposes of this project the schools used in the investigation were all in Cumbria and Lancashire and were all active in taking trainees in RE for school experience within the secondary ITE partnership at a major HE provider.
- What is the nature of the impact of the NSC - how is the introduction of the NSC having an impact on the provision for RE? The sorts of questions asked here were: Is the timetable allocation for RE now different? Has the staffing for the subject changed? Is the content or the approach to the curriculum changing - for example is there a move towards a more integrated curriculum?
- What are the implications for ITE? This research draws on the perceptions of a number of teachers in identifying the implications that the introduction of the NSC has for training secondary RE teachers in the future.

### **Methods**

The literature review first gives a brief account of the distinctive place of RE within the school curriculum and indicates the nature of the subject. Secondly, it looks at the introduction of the NSC and sets it in the wider context of curriculum change and integration. Thirdly, the review takes account of some recent literature on initial teacher education in times of a change.

Three methods of investigation were employed. First a questionnaire was sent to schools to discover the extent of the impact of the NSC on RE. This was followed by an in-depth enquiry into the nature of the impact of the NSC through individual interviews with RE teachers in twelve secondary schools. Lesson observations were also carried out in three schools to provide a 'reality check' and to enable the researcher to get a sense of the NSC on the ground. The research began early in January 2009 when the first lesson was observed. The sixty questionnaires were sent out in March. Thirty were returned by 1 April. Two further lessons observations took place in the interim period. Interviews were

held in June, transcribed, analysed and written up later in 2009. The same researcher was responsible for the data collection and the analysis.

### **Frame**

The research began essentially as an 'evaluation' of the impact of the NSC on RE and it was intended to inform practice in secondary ITE. The data for analysis included thirty completed questionnaires, twelve transcripts from interviews and notes from three lessons observed. The analysis drew on literal, interpretive and reflexive models of analysis. The responses to 'first order questions' were taken at face value as this was a matter of retrieving information from questionnaires and interviews. An interpretive approach was adopted to analyse 'second order' questions and this allowed different perceptions of the impact of the NSC to emerge. A reflexive approach to the analysis of the data also came into play in analysing the interviews - for some of the teachers the interview was an opportunity for their own reflection and evaluation of the impact of the NSC and fresh insight was gained within the interview itself. The process of analysis allowed for cross checking to see where the findings from the interviews were supported by those from the questionnaires and observations. The themes that structured the analysis related directly back to the research questions on the extent and nature of the impact of the NSC on RE and the implications for ITE.

### **Research findings**

The research findings shed important light on the impact of the NSC and highlight the diversity of the responses within RE to the introduction of the NSC. The findings raise important questions about provision for RE in secondary schools in the longer term and the picture that emerges will help to inform the work of those involved in secondary ITE programmes in RE. The findings suggest that the introduction of the NSC has immediate and significant implications for ITE in RE and for other secondary school subjects.