

Ofsted publishes research review on geography



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Ofsted has published the fifth in a series of reviews into different subjects across the curriculum. The latest review looks at geography education. It draws on our education inspection framework (EIF) and other literature to identify what contributes to a high-quality geography curriculum, as well as high-quality assessment, pedagogy and systems in schools.

Read the geography research review.

The review discusses the context of geography teaching and uptake in English schools. The subject has had a relatively low status in primary schools and over time there has been a gradual decline in the amount of time spent studying geography in the classroom. This contrasts with secondary schools, where the number of pupils entering geography exams has increased significantly in the past decade, according to the review. Now, almost half of key stage 4 pupils study the subject.

Like other subjects, the review notes that knowledge in geography can be organised into two forms – ‘substantive’ and ‘disciplinary’.

Disciplinary knowledge is used when pupils consider where geographical knowledge originates, and how they can learn the practices of geographers. Substantive knowledge sets out the content that pupils will learn. In geography, this has followed the split seen in the national curriculum:

locational knowledge

place knowledge

environmental, physical and human geography

geography skills and fieldwork

A successful geography curriculum reflects teachers' careful thinking and rationale behind what is taught, the sequencing of learning and the relationships between the forms of knowledge.

While Ofsted recognises that there is no single way of achieving a good geography education, the report identifies some common features of a high-quality curriculum. For example:

Teachers break down curriculum content into component parts and draw from the breadth of concepts to give pupils the knowledge they need to appreciate the wider subject. When choosing curriculum content, teachers consider pupils' prior knowledge and experiences.

Teachers recognise that building pupils' knowledge of locations, or 'where's where', helps them build their own identity and sense of place. Pupils develop an appreciation of distance and scale.

Pupils gain the knowledge they need to develop an increasingly complex understanding of place. This helps them make a connection between location and geographical processes and personal experience. For example, looking at their own route to school, town or city may lead to more conceptual understanding that they can draw on when looking at regional, national and global scales.

Fieldwork includes data collection, analysis and presentation. The experience of fieldwork draws together pupils' locational knowledge and that of human and physical processes. It should be practised regularly.

Pupils see that geography is a dynamic subject where thinking and viewpoints change. Teachers correct pupils' misconceptions through secure subject knowledge and effective teaching approaches.

Enquiry-based learning in geography can support the development of pupils' disciplinary knowledge. Through

careful content selection and teacher guidance, it can increase pupils' capacity to recognise and ask geographical questions, to critique sources and reflect on what they have learned, as well as the methods used.

When using contemporary media coverage to engage and motivate pupils, teachers ensure that the geographical knowledge to be learned is always at the forefront of their teaching. Teachers check that any media content is geographically accurate.

Sufficient teaching time is allocated to cover the breadth of subject knowledge, and school leaders give careful thought to how geography is timetabled.

In 2022, Ofsted will be publishing a report on the quality of geography curriculums taught in schools. We will gather the evidence for this through subject 'deep dives' during inspections under the EIF.

To find out more about Ofsted's curriculum work, read the principles behind the research reviews and subject reports.

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