

## Report summary

# History for all

History in English schools 2007/10

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## Executive summary

This report is based on evidence from inspections of history between April 2007 and March 2010 in 83 primary schools and 83 secondary schools. Part A of the report evaluates standards and achievement in history, and the strengths and weaknesses of teaching and learning, curriculum provision and the quality of leadership and management in the schools visited. Part B discusses some key issues in history. It considers the extent to which the subject is in danger of becoming marginalised and losing its integrity in many of the schools visited. It also looks at good practice in teaching history, and evaluates how effectively history teachers are using information and communication technology (ICT).

There was much that was good and outstanding in the history seen for this survey: achievement was good or outstanding in 63 of the 83 primary schools and 59 of the 83 secondary schools visited. The use of ICT was much more evident than in the previous three-year survey period, and pupils had more opportunities to take greater responsibility for their own learning. History was generally taught well and the subject was well led. Most pupils enjoyed well-planned lessons that extended their knowledge, challenged their thinking and enhanced their understanding.

History teaching was good or better in most primary schools, and most pupils reached the end of Key Stage 2 with detailed knowledge derived from well-taught studies of individual topics. However, some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes they had studied within any coherent, long-term narrative. They knew about particular events, characters and periods but did not have an overview. Their chronological understanding was often underdeveloped and so they found it difficult to link developments together.

In part, this was because many primary teachers did not themselves have adequate subject knowledge beyond the specific elements of history that they taught. In addition the curriculum structure for primary schools was itself episodic and militated against pupils grasping such an overview. There is a pressing need for primary teachers to be better supported in their professional development in history, and for the curriculum to ensure that pupils study overview as well as in-depth topics so that

they can develop a coherent chronological framework for the separate periods and events that they study.

In the secondary schools visited, effective teaching by well-qualified and highly competent teachers enabled the majority of students to develop knowledge and understanding in depth. It also helped students to develop their ability to support, evaluate and challenge their own views and to challenge the views of others. Many students displayed a healthy respect for historical evidence, along with the skills to use it robustly and critically to support their explanations and judgements. In these ways the teaching of history is helping pupils to develop important and broadly applicable skills.

However, decisions about curriculum structures within schools have placed constraints on history, and other foundation subjects, at Key Stage 3. In 14 of the 58 secondary schools visited between 2008 and 2010, whole-school curriculum changes were having a negative impact on teaching and learning in history at Key Stage 3. Some of these changes included introducing a two-year Key Stage 3 course, assimilating history into a humanities course or establishing a competency-based or skills-based course in Year 7 in place of history and other foundation subjects. Where these developments had taken place, curriculum time for teaching had been reduced and history was becoming marginalised.

At Key Stage 4 and in the sixth form, history was generally taught very well. Teachers had a clear picture of what was expected at GCSE and A level; they prepared students thoroughly and achievement in public examinations was good and improving. For the past three years, history has been one of the most popular optional GCSE subjects, and numbers taking the subject at A level have risen steadily over the past 10 years. However, in some of the schools visited the students were restricted in their subject options at GCSE and some had been steered towards subjects which were perceived to be less demanding than history. Entries for GCSE varied greatly between different types of schools: students in independent schools were almost twice as likely to study GCSE history as those in maintained schools, while entries for GCSE history from academies were significantly lower than for maintained schools overall.

## Key findings

- In the schools visited history was generally a popular and successful subject, which many pupils enjoyed. Achievement was good or outstanding in 63 of the 83 primary schools and 59 of the 83 secondary schools visited. It was inadequate in only two schools.
- Although pupils in primary schools generally had good knowledge of particular topics and episodes in history, their chronological understanding and their ability to make links across the knowledge they had gained were weaker.
- History teaching was good or better overall in more than three quarters of the primary schools visited. However, teachers found it difficult to establish a clear mental map of the past for pupils. In part, this was because they lacked expertise

in the subject and also because the National Curriculum specifications treat topics in a disconnected way.

- In most of the primary schools visited, there was not enough subject-specific expertise or professional development to help teachers to be clearer about the standards expected in the subject and to improve their understanding of progression in historical thinking.
- In just under half of the 35 primary schools visited where the teaching of foundation subjects, including history, had become based on cross-curricular topics or themes, planning for progression in developing historical knowledge and thinking was limited.
- In most cases, links between secondary schools and their local primary schools were weak, so that expertise in the secondary schools was not exploited to support non-specialists in teaching history in the primary schools.
- History was successful in most of the secondary schools visited because it was well taught, notably in examination classes at GCSE and A level. The large majority of these history teachers were very well-qualified. In the large majority of the schools visited, the quality of the provision also reflected the strong leadership of the history departments.
- Attainment in history in the secondary schools visited was high and has continued to rise, particularly at GCSE and A level where results compare favourably with other subjects.
- Patterns of entry for GCSE history varied considerably between different types of school: only 30% of students in maintained schools took the subject in 2010 compared with 48% in independent schools. In academies, the proportion was lower still at 20%.
- While most work in the sixth forms visited was well-resourced, in some schools an over-dependence on set text books, linked to specific AS and A-level specifications, did not prepare students well for the challenges of higher education.
- Overall, achievement was weaker in Key Stage 3 than in Key Stage 4 because of a number of factors: more non-specialist teaching; reductions in the time that schools allocated to history; and whole-school curriculum changes in Key Stage 3 in an increasing number of schools. Nearly one in every three lessons observed at Key Stage 3 between 2007 and 2010 was at best satisfactory.
- The National Curriculum orders and programmes of study in Key Stage 3 have led to much high-quality teaching and learning in history. However, in one in five of the secondary schools visited, curriculum changes, such as the introduction of a two-year Key Stage 3 that allowed some students to give up history before the age of 14, and thematic approaches to the curriculum, were associated with teaching and learning that was no more than satisfactory.
- The view that too little British history is taught in secondary schools in England is a myth. Pupils in the schools visited studied a considerable amount of British history and knew a great deal about the particular topics covered. However, the

large majority of the time was spent on English history rather than wider British history.

- Three years after Ofsted's previous report on history, teachers had responded positively to developing independent learning in history. The most effective schools used a well-focused enquiry-based approach to achieve this. In addition, more schools were incorporating ICT into history. However, its impact in accelerating gains in pupils' historical knowledge and understanding varied, particularly in the secondary schools visited.

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