

Report summary

Geography

Learning to make a world of difference

This report draws on evidence from visits by Ofsted inspectors to look at geography in a sample of 91 primary and 90 secondary schools (including one special school) from 2007 to 2010. It builds on *Geography in schools: changing practice* published by Ofsted in 2008. Part A reports on achievement and the quality of provision in geography in the primary and secondary schools visited, and identifies key issues which schools need to consider as they continue to develop their curricula. Part B deals with particular features of geography in schools which inspectors addressed in the course of the survey.

During the period of the survey, geography was at an interesting stage of development in secondary schools. Generally, provision was weaker at Key Stage 3 than at Key Stage 4 and in the 45 sixth forms visited. In some of the schools visited, the numbers choosing to study geography at GCSE level were declining. The quality of the provision was also declining and time allocated to the subject at Key Stage 3 was being reduced. In other schools, however, the subject was flourishing. Their senior managers and the teachers saw geography as relevant and valuable. In these schools, the students had good core geographical knowledge and an awareness of political, social, economic and environmental issues, locally and globally. They were skilful in interrogating and interpreting a range of sources of geographical information. They cared about their environment and were aware that they needed to act as responsible citizens.

The primary schools also presented a polarised picture, with a sharp contrast between inadequate and outstanding practice. Half the schools visited demonstrated work of good quality in geography; a lack of expertise and awareness of what constituted good geography characterised the others. As a result, pupils experienced too much variation in the quality of their geography provision. In those primary schools where the subject was inadequate, the majority of the pupils had weak core geographical knowledge and a poor understanding of the world they lived in. In the final year of the survey the picture was even more pronounced with inspectors judging the provision to be outstanding in five of the 30 primary schools visited, but inadequate in seven.

The report highlights how good and regular fieldwork motivated pupils and enhanced their learning in geography, although just over half the primary and secondary schools visited did not use it enough. Fieldwork encouraged a higher than average take-up of examination courses at a time when examination entries for geography were falling nationally.

The report also describes the value of learning geography and what needs to be done to reverse its decline. By paying greater attention to literacy, the global dimension of geography and the use of topical exemplars, teachers enhanced pupils' learning, engaged them and made lessons more interesting and enjoyable.

Geography has a distinctive role in the curriculum in linking the disciplines of science and humanities. In those schools where geography was strong, the subject contributed effectively to curriculum coherence as well as satisfying pupils' curiosity about people and places. Geography also offered opportunities to develop a wide range of skills and knowledge. This was particularly the case with information and communication technology (ICT) and where the enormous potential of geographical information systems (GIS) was used to give students insights into areas such as cartography, statistical analysis and natural resource management. In strong secondary school geography departments many students were inspired by challenging and engaging questions; with diverse sources and data; and with more in-depth and detailed descriptions and explanations of contemporary changes.

Developing a deeper understanding of people and places, and of the need to live in balance with an increasingly fragile environment, is more important than ever in today's world. Thus, in schools where geography was weak, as was sometimes the case in primary schools and at Key Stage 3, pupils were denied crucial elements of a broad and balanced education for life. These pupils had a narrow conception of the world and lacked knowledge of both physical and human environments. They also missed out on fieldwork and the power of learning directly in particular places and environments. They were denied the opportunity to think about change in the contemporary world and how to imagine alternative futures. This impoverishment of pupils' experience was a key issue to be addressed by the leadership teams in these schools.

Key findings

- There was marked polarisation in the quality of teaching and learning as well as the geography curriculum in the primary schools visited. Where provision was improving, it was usually because the headteachers acknowledged the value of geography, invested in subject-specific training and monitored the curriculum effectively to ensure coverage of and progression through the programme of study.
- Achievement was at least good in half of the 91 primary schools visited. However, pupils' progress was often uneven across classes and year groups.

- In approximately one in 10 of the primary schools visited, geography was more or less disappearing, often where the foundation subjects were being taught through themes.
- Improvements were often being slowed down by primary teachers' weak knowledge of geography, their lack of confidence in teaching it and insufficient subject-specific training.
- In secondary schools, relatively weak achievement in Key Stage 3 often contrasted with the good progress of those who had chosen to study geography at Key Stage 4. Uninspiring teaching and the lack of challenge discouraged many students from choosing geography at GCSE.
- The majority of students, especially at Key Stage 3 in the weaker schools, had poorly developed core knowledge in geography. Their mental images of places and the world around them were often confused and lacked spatial coherence.
- Over half the schools visited had reduced time for geography in Key Stage 3 over the last few years. In addition, poorly planned and taught integrated units of work in the humanities in Year 7, often linked to general skills-based initiatives, had resulted in less geography being covered.
- Half the secondary geography departments visited had adapted well to the changes required as the new Key Stage 3 curriculum was introduced. One reason was that subject-specific professional support had been sought out and utilised.
- Good fieldwork engaged pupils and encouraged a higher than average take-up of examination courses at a time when entries were falling nationally. However, just over half the primary and secondary schools visited did not use fieldwork enough.
- New technology was frequently in evidence in lessons with most teachers being competent users of digital projectors and interactive whiteboards to enhance presentations. However, more limited use was made of topical events in the news or geographical information systems to engage pupils in learning in geography.
- A lack of opportunity for writing at length, especially in the secondary schools visited, limited the opportunities for students, particularly the most academically able, to show their understanding of geography.
- Just over half the schools visited were not using geography to good effect to support pupils in understanding their role within their locality, their country or the wider world.
- The best geography seen was usually in schools which were participating in the professional development programme offered through the Action Plan for Geography, in specialist humanities schools where geography was one of the lead subjects or where the school shared good practice with local partner schools.

Main report published 4 February 2011
www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090224

The Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) regulates and inspects to achieve excellence in the care of children and young people, and in education and skills for learners of all ages. It regulates and inspects childcare and children's social care, and inspects the Children and Family Court Advisory Support Service (Cafcass), schools, colleges, initial teacher training, work-based learning and skills training, adult and community learning, and education and training in prisons and other secure establishments. It assesses council children's services, and inspects services for looked after children, safeguarding and child protection.

If you would like a copy of this document in a different format, such as large print or Braille, please telephone 0300 123 1231, or email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk.

You may reuse this information (not including logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Government Licence. To view this licence, visit www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/, write to the Information Policy Team, The National Archives, Kew, London TW9 4DU, or email: psi@nationalarchives.gsi.gov.uk.

This publication is available at www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/090224.

You may copy all or parts of this document for non-commercial educational purposes, as long as you give details of the source and date of publication and do not alter the information in any way.

To receive regular email alerts about new publications, including survey reports and school inspection reports, please visit our website and go to 'Subscribe'.

Royal Exchange Buildings
St Ann's Square
Manchester
M2 7LA

T: 0300 123 1231
Textphone: 0161 618 8524
E: enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
W: www.ofsted.gov.uk

No. 090224