

Press release

Geography teaching has improved significantly, but more focus needed on fieldwork

Ofsted has today published a subject report looking at how geography is being taught in England's schools.

From: [Ofsted](#)

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The report draws on evidence from subject visits to a sample of primary and secondary schools.

Inspectors have found that there have been significant improvements in geography education since the [subject report](#) published 12 years ago. This is particularly true at primary level and key stage 3. In almost all the schools visited, leaders had made changes to the curriculum to ensure that knowledge was better sequenced, so children could build on what they had learnt.

However, this review found that children's opportunities to learn and develop their fieldwork skills are still lacking at both primary and secondary level. This extends beyond the challenges that were presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. In primary schools, fieldwork is often conflated with field trips. Pupils may go out of school on a visit, but they are rarely learning how to collect, present and analyse geographical fieldwork when they do so. In secondary schools, pupils rarely do fieldwork beyond the requirements of the exam boards. Most schools simplify this fieldwork so that pupils can give prepared answers in the exam, leaving pupils ill equipped for the non-examined assessment at A-Level and higher education.

The report also identifies the need for better support for non-specialist teachers and more subject-specific CPD for both specialist and non-specialist teachers.

His Majesty's Chief Inspector, Amanda Spielman, said:

Geography is vital to children's understanding of our physical world. It's great that both primary and secondary schools have made such strides in

their geography teaching. Pupils are now being taught a much more ambitious and challenging curriculum.

I hope that schools can now focus on ensuring that children get more opportunities to develop their data collection and analysis skills so they can master the fundamentals of geography fieldwork.

The report makes a number of recommendations for how schools can ensure that all pupils receive a high-quality geography education, including:

- Making sure that the curriculum supports effective transition between key stages so that content builds cumulatively and is not repeated.
- Giving the same level of thought to the curriculum at key stages 4 and 5 as is given at other key stages, including considering how to sequence the content of exam specifications in a way that allows pupils to develop a fuller understanding of the subject over time.
- Teaching pupils about fieldwork. Pupils should know how to collect, present and analyse data, and how to reach and evaluate conclusions based on this data.
- Considering the prior knowledge that pupils need in order to access more complex ideas and concepts so they can develop their expertise in the subject.
- Considering how pupils will build on knowledge, not only within a topic but over a series of topics, so that they can apply what they have learned in different scenarios.
- Planning how to identify and address likely misconceptions in each topic.

TES- What Ofsted's geography subject report means for schools

The inspectorate's new report into geography teaching highlights areas of development for schools at every stage, says Steve Brace

21st September 2023, 11:23am

Steve Brace

Ofsted's *Getting our Bearings*, released earlier this week, is geography's

first inspection report since 2011. Back then, many felt that primary geography had been lost in generic topics, key stage 3 was seen as particularly weak, and GCSE and A-level entries had fallen to 163,600 and 27,600 candidates respectively.

Today, many would agree that the subject is better planned and more effectively delivered. Pupils are more likely to be taught a curriculum where geography takes centre stage, and we saw a record 279,100 GCSE and 34,700 A-level entries for the subject in 2023.

This deserves celebration, though we also need to consider how to continue geography's progress. So, here are some key areas to focus on, in response to the Ofsted report.

Connected geography

Since its last report in 2011, Ofsted found there were improved curricula at early years and foundation stage (EYFS), primary and key stage 3, which better represented geography's distinctive nature.

However, we now need stronger connections across units to help consolidate progression, particularly in primary schools. Units need to be better sequenced and pupils' understanding needs to be built from one unit into the next.

For example, before learning about climate change, pupils should first study the different features of weather and climate, and then move on to how latitude determines climate zones and biomes. This sequencing of the curriculum underpins knowledge of what we expect the climate to look like and better prepares pupils to understand how the climate is changing.

Fieldwork for all?

Ofsted found that **fieldwork was underdeveloped** in almost all schools. Its quantity has reduced, being absent in some KS3 programmes, and we need to see better quality of fieldwork.

As Ofsted highlights, and as I discussed in an **earlier Tes article**, continuing professional development is needed to make this happen. School leaders should give fieldwork more support, teachers should consider low-cost fieldwork on-site or within the local area, and fieldwork should be planned across the key stages.

Moving beyond one-off trips that only meet exam requirements and using Ofsted's suggestion of a "curriculum for fieldwork" as a planning tool will also help departments to expand and improve their fieldwork programmes.

Studying places

Place studies are geography's building blocks, yet, according to Ofsted, they can be "simplistic, inaccurate and/or outdated" and reduced to a single story.

Teachers should review how, and for what purposes, places are studied. Are some only studied through the four horses of the geographical apocalypse: disasters, disease, poverty or climate breakdown? Or are they studied through a fuller and more accurate presentation of their people, places and environments.

Similarly, there is a need for schools to move on from using old case studies and resources. For example, Mount St Helens erupted in 1980, yet is still often studied. If your school is using resources or case studies that are older than pupils, or indeed your staff, it might be time to swap them for new ones.

Untapped resources

Both the Royal Geographical Society and Geographical Association can provide schools with help for all of the above and more. However, Ofsted found that teachers were rarely turning to these organisations. When teachers are receiving "very little subject-specific CPD" - particularly for fieldwork, geographic information systems and subject knowledge - it's important to make the most of subject associations and the support they can provide.

If teachers connect with us, they will benefit from the full range of our CPD, most recent curriculum resources and advice.

In *Getting Our Bearings*, Ofsted has described geography's positive journey since 2011, but this journey is not complete.

It will be the work of geography teachers, supported by their senior leaders and the geographical community, that achieves the future progress that is still needed.

RGS Blog: Ofsted geography subject report

21 Sep 2023

We invited Mark Enser, geography subject lead at Ofsted and one of His Majesty's Inspectors, to give an overview of the findings of [Ofsted's 2023 geography subject report](#), published earlier this week.

The report reveals significant improvements in the quality of geography education in schools since the previous 2011 report, while also highlighting areas for further work.

Ofsted's recently published [geography subject report](#) is titled *Getting our bearings* and it aims to do exactly that. It is an invitation to pause for a moment as a subject community and take stock of how far we have come, and where we want to go next. The report is based on 50 research visits that took place last year to a representative sample of schools across the country. What we found will hopefully be of use not only to teachers and subject leaders, but also policy makers and subject bodies.

One of the most noticeable findings from these visits was the improvement in curriculum planning that has taken place since Ofsted's previous subject report was published in 2011. That report found that geography was being lost in cross-curricular 'topic' approaches in primary schools, which emphasised generic skills rather than geographical knowledge. It also noted that geography was particularly weak in secondary schools at Key Stage 3. Pupils sometimes received very little specific geography education and the curriculum lacked challenge. What we now see in many schools is a well sequenced curriculum from Key Stage 1 to 3, with particular strengths in Key Stage 3 where leaders are ensuring the curriculum builds not only over a topic but over a series of topics. The recent visits also saw some strengths in how geographical knowledge is being developed in the early years foundation stage through the *Understanding the world* area of the curriculum.

However, our research visits also pointed to some areas where more care is needed. In most primary schools there was a sequence within each geographical topic, but little sense of the topics connecting and building over time, leading to pupils having a fragmented knowledge of the subject and struggling to answer questions about what they had learned. In secondary schools, exam specifications had often become a de facto curriculum for Key Stage 4. Where practice was strongest, leaders had considered how to create a curriculum from the exam specifications. However, this was very rare. In most cases leaders taught the content as laid out in the specification, simply working through it point by point. As a result, pupils struggled to connect different areas of the subject and see the bigger picture.

A third important finding from the visits was the role that fieldwork played in the curriculum. We talked to leaders about fieldwork prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and fieldwork happening now, and found there had been a reduction in the number of trips taking place since the pandemic, but little reduction in the amount of genuine fieldwork. This was because very little fieldwork, as opposed to field trips, had been taking place before the pandemic. Very few leaders, at any key stage, had thought about a curriculum for fieldwork or for developing other geographical skills. As a result, when pupils went out of the classroom, they were not developing a knowledge of how geographers collect, present and analyse data and reach conclusions. Instead, there were isolated events of out of classroom activity, which often lacked a geographical focus. There were some examples of very strong practice where the knowledge of how to complete fieldwork was treated as any other part of the curriculum, but this was rare.

Our report contains a range of findings, including areas of strength and areas where improvement is needed. My main hope is that these feed into our conversations as a subject community about what we want geography in schools to look like and it's potential to shape how children and young people see and engage with the world.

Mark Enser
Geography Subject Lead at Ofsted