

1. INTRODUCTION

The report draws from visits to 91 primary and 90 secondary schools (including one special school) in England between **2007** and **2010**. It evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of geography in these schools and assesses the challenges faced by the subject today. Geography was flourishing in a minority of the schools visited and was under pressure in the rest. The report describes the value of learning geography and what needs to be done to reverse its decline. It builds on the 2008 Ofsted report, *Geography in schools: changing practice* [See DSS Summary DSS 07/08 27].

2. 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.¹

¹ For further information on the Action Plan for Geography, see:
www.geographyteachingtoday.org.uk

3. RECOMMENDATIONS

Schools should:

- focus strongly on developing pupils' core knowledge in geography, particularly their sense of place;
- ensure that where they teach geography thematically or within a humanities programme, the subject elements are identified clearly and taught properly and the programmes of study are covered fully;
- improve the quality of provision in Key Stage 3 so that more pupils are able to continue to study geography successfully at GCSE and post-16;
- provide subject-specific support and professional development to improve teachers' confidence and expertise, enabling them to teach geography more effectively;
- maximise opportunities for fieldwork to enhance learning and improve motivation;
- make the best use of new technology in geography to enthuse pupils and provide immediacy and relevance;
- provide more opportunities for writing at length and focused reading, especially in secondary schools;
- ensure that geography enables pupils to recognise their contribution to, and responsibilities for, their locality, their country and the global community;
- develop and make best use of networks in order to identify and share good practice, ideas and expertise in the teaching of geography.

The full report can be viewed/downloaded at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/> > click on Publications and Research heading > enter geography in the Search field.