**Ofsted Annual Report 2022-23: Curriculum**

After a gap of some years, we have revived our thematic reports on school curriculum. Along with the curriculum research reviews, these are helping to inform inspector training and supporting school curriculum, teaching and assessment. They are also providing clarity for policymakers about system strengths and weaknesses and informing wider debate.

**The breadth of the curriculum**

Most schools offer a broad and ambitious curriculum. The research informing the EIF, including findings from our previous subject reports under earlier frameworks, raised concerns about the narrowing of the curriculum.[[footnote 21]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:21) Our new subject reports this year show a broadly improving picture in most, but not all, subjects:

* schools place a higher value on the subjects in the curriculum beyond English, mathematics and science than was the case at the time of our previous subject reports. The status of many foundation subjects has improved since our previous subject reports. In many cases, leaders ensure more time for teaching subjects such as geography, history and art and design. At the same time, they improve planning for these subjects. They identify what knowledge and skills pupils need and design their curriculums to build these over time. The quality of subject teaching is improving because schools think carefully about what to include in their curriculum
* in most schools, pupils study a wide range of subjects for as long as possible.

However, some subjects still do not receive the attention they deserve:

* in many secondary schools, pupils do not benefit from a broad and ambitious music curriculum. In physical education (PE), pupils typically experience a broad range of activities. However, schools do not always ensure that these contribute enough to developing pupils’ knowledge and skills
* in too many primary and secondary schools, the religious education (RE) that pupils receive is of a poor quality and not fit for purpose, leaving pupils ill-equipped for some of the complexities of contemporary society.

**Curriculum quality**

In most schools, the curriculum is effective in developing pupils’ knowledge and skills over time. We found that:

* most schools clearly specify the knowledge and skills that pupils need at each stage of their education
* schools are increasingly aware of the importance of pupils’ prior knowledge in deciding what pupils should be able to learn and do
* many schools make sure that pupils’ knowledge of important content, concepts and skills is secure so that they can access increasingly complex learning.

In some schools, pupils develop detailed knowledge of the topics studied. They remember this content in the long-term, and this knowledge allows them to learn increasingly complex content. However, the depth and security of pupils’ knowledge varies between schools. In some schools, pupils’ knowledge is less detailed, less securely remembered or more disconnected.

Typically, pupils’ knowledge is weaker in schools where:

* curriculum planning is superficial and does not identify how teaching can build pupils’ knowledge and skills sequentially
* teaching does not focus enough on securing the most important knowledge and skills for all pupils
* pupils are asked to complete tasks or answer questions without having secured the knowledge they needed to do this meaningfully
* assessment does not identify important gaps or misconceptions in pupils’ knowledge
* schools do not have an accurate understanding of the impact of the curriculum. In too many schools, quality assurance is focused on surface features of curriculum, teaching or assessment. Too often, it does not evaluate how well pupils are learning the curriculum.

Our subject reports identify some weaknesses in areas of the curriculum and in different phases of education. We found that:

* curriculum planning and teaching at key stage 1 does not always lay the foundations for future study as well as it could. Beyond reading and mathematics, schools do not always plan content with a view to how it might be used in future phases of education
* in some schools, external testing continues to drive curriculum decisions in unhelpful ways. For example, at key stage 2, reading comprehension in some schools is narrowly focused on SATS-style questions. Similarly, in some secondary schools, key stage 3 content directly duplicates exam specifications and teaching focuses excessively or prematurely on exam-specific techniques. This is an example of exams influencing curriculum decisions too early
* in all phases of education, support for pupils with SEND is too variable. In some schools, teachers focus too heavily on adapting activities so that pupils can complete the immediate task, for example by providing sentence starters. However, they do not consider how they could address gaps in those pupils’ knowledge or skills to enable them to learn increasingly complex content.

**Subject education**

Our subject reports highlight general improvements in most subjects. Some of our findings are summarised below. Across subjects, we found greater weaknesses in English, music and PE, and extensive weaknesses in RE.

In the coming months, we plan to publish subject reports in English, personal development, RE, art and design, computing and languages.

**English**

In English, the teaching of reading has improved markedly, but teaching in other areas, such as writing and spoken language, is less effective. We found that:

* schools give pupils a broad reading curriculum that includes a range of genres and styles
* most schools have not developed a well-sequenced curriculum for spoken language and writing
* particularly in writing, pupils are often not given enough time to practise to the point that they are fluent
* schools move too early to complex tasks before teaching pupils the underlying knowledge needed for those tasks and making sure that this knowledge is secure
* assessment is too focused on complex, final tasks and does not identify specific gaps in pupils’ knowledge.

To achieve a similar standard to reading, schools would benefit from further guidance and training about how to plan curriculum and teach writing, speaking and listening effectively.

**Reading**

The teaching of reading is strong. We found that in most schools, pupils learn to read fluently. Reasons for this include that:

* leaders prioritise reading in the curriculum and plan how to develop pupils’ love of reading
* schools invest in training staff, so that teaching is high quality
* schools have well-designed curriculums in place to develop pupils’ reading.

Successful approaches to teaching reading are particularly well-embedded in primary schools but are also developing in secondary schools. However, in some secondary schools, not enough is done to help weaker readers catch up with their peers:

* not all secondary schools address gaps for the weakest readers. In some cases, schools are too slow to identify these gaps or do not identify them at all
* some secondary schools do not take into account how weaknesses in reading, such as a lack of vocabulary, prevent pupils from accessing the breadth of the school curriculum.

**Geography**

Geography education has improved, but pupils’ knowledge does not connect across topics as much as it should.[[footnote 22]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:22) We found that:

* at key stages 1 and 2, schools have not always considered how pupils’ knowledge would build between units
* at key stage 3, most schools have carefully selected and sequenced content within, but not between, sections of the curriculum
* in some schools at key stage 4, the breadth of the curriculum is limited to a narrow interpretation of examination specifications
* some schools carefully designed the curriculum so that pupils learn about particular places in different contexts, helping them to develop a rich knowledge of place
* not enough thought has been given to how pupils would be taught explicitly to develop their knowledge of fieldwork.

To improve geography education further, schools should ensure that the curriculum and teaching build pupils’ knowledge over time, so that pupils can learn the connections that exist between different parts of the geography curriculum.

**History**

History education has improved significantly over the past 10 years, particularly in primary schools.[[footnote 23]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:23) We found the following strengths:

* schools have given careful thought to the breadth of the curriculum
* teaching is often effective, especially where teachers use stories and examples skilfully to help pupils make sense of content about the past.

We also found some specific areas of weaknesses in history education:

* the quality of assessment varies significantly between schools
* the teaching of disciplinary knowledge is typically weak, and often leaves pupils with misconceptions about the work of historians.

To improve history education further, schools need to make sure that assessment allows teachers to make accurate judgements about the quality of pupils’ historical knowledge and to identify and address any gaps. Schools also need further guidance and training, for example from subject associations, on how to develop pupils’ disciplinary knowledge in history.

**Mathematics**

Most schools build pupils’ mathematical knowledge effectively over time.[[footnote 24]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:24) We found an encouraging picture of mathematics when we visited schools:

* pupils in most schools experience a carefully designed curriculum where learning is broken down into small steps
* teachers generally explain new content clearly and check pupils’ understanding regularly, addressing any gaps
* teachers benefit from high-quality support and guidance through professional associations.

Our visits also highlighted two areas in which mathematics needs to improve:

* in some schools, teachers do not give pupils adequate opportunities to practise fluency in their mathematical knowledge
* secondary schools do not always teach problem-solving effectively enough so that pupils’ knowledge is secure.

Schools would benefit from further guidance and training in these areas.

**Music**

Music teaching in primary schools has improved.[[footnote 25]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:25) Many pupils now have regular opportunities to learn music. However, in many secondary schools, leaders do not ensure enough time for the teaching of high-quality music. We found that:

* in almost all schools, teaching in Reception prepares children well to learn music in key stage 1
* the teaching of singing in primary schools is strong.

However, weaknesses include the following:

* teaching at key stages 1, 2 and 3 often focuses on covering activities, rather than on making sure that pupils have learned content to a high standard
* key stage 3 music is mostly taught in isolated blocks of time and the amount of time allocated to it varies considerably
* the development of pupils’ singing and vocal work in secondary schools is far rarer than in primary schools
* the weakest aspect is the development of pupils’ composition. Very few schools think about how to build the knowledge that pupils need to learn in order to construct and deconstruct music.

In schools, music often enriches pupils’ education beyond timetabled lessons. Many schools reported that COVID-19 and budgetary pressures have had a significant impact on extracurricular music. We found that:

* many schools have a strong extracurricular offer, including instrumental groups and choirs
* the divide between the opportunities for children and young people whose families can afford to pay for music tuition and those who cannot still exists. Many school leaders say that the pressures on school budgets means that they will no longer subsidise instrumental lessons for pupils.

**Personal development, including personal, social, health and economic education and citizenship**

Schools are doing a lot of effective work in the area of personal development, but it is, too often, not as coherent as it could be.

We found that schools place a high value on pupils’ personal development and have ensured sufficient provision for each of the wide-ranging elements of personal development. In particular, the work to develop pupils’ self-esteem, confidence and independence in primary schools is high quality. However:

* in many schools, different parts of the curriculum are too isolated and not as well-connected to other content as they should be. For this reason, pupils’ knowledge does not build over time
* in personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education and citizenship, some schools do not identify what pupils need to know and be able to do
* in secondary schools, pupils have limited opportunities to take on additional responsibilities, such as pupil leadership roles on the school council
* the curriculum offer in citizenship in secondary schools does not typically match the scope and ambition of the national curriculum
* across primary and secondary schools, assessment practices are not fit for purpose
* too many schools do not prioritise this curriculum area enough and give leaders time to fulfil the demands of their roles
* teachers do not receive enough professional development to give them sufficient expertise to teach subjects such as PHSE and citizenship well.

**Physical education**

The PE curriculum is, too often, a ‘buffet’ of activities that do not build pupils’ knowledge and skills over time.[[footnote 26]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:26) We found that:

* most schools make enough time for a broad and ambitious curriculum to be taught
* in some cases, schools carefully consider the knowledge and skills which pupils needed to develop, and prioritise appropriate activities
* in some schools, children in Reception benefit from high-quality support to develop safe, efficient and effective movement.

However, the curriculum in many schools lacks coherence. This is because schools often provide a wide range of activities without considering carefully enough what pupils should learn through them. Too many schools do not make good enough use of the time they have, both outside and inside the classroom, to ensure that pupils develop their expertise in PE, not simply experience an assortment of activities.

In many schools, the curriculum for PE does not match the breadth and ambition of the national curriculum. In a majority of schools, the teaching of dance and adventurous outdoor activity was very limited or ineffective.

**Religious education**

RE in schools is generally of poor quality. Although it is a statutory subject, schools often consider RE as an afterthought. As a subject on the curriculum, it is under-valued. RE is a complex subject, and the lack of clarity and support from government makes schools’ job harder.

Some schools steer through these challenges well, but most do not. We found that:

* many schools do not meet the statutory requirement to teach RE at all stages
* pupils are rarely taught enough substance to prepare them to engage in a complex, multi-religious and multi-secular society (where religion and non-religion play different parts in different people’s lives)
* too often, schools do not teach topics in the RE curriculum deeply enough for pupils to develop a substantial understanding of the subject matter
* non-examined RE is typically not high quality.

All pupils should develop a broad and secure knowledge of the complexity of religious and non-religious traditions. It will take coordinated effort by stakeholders to improve the quality of RE in schools:

* **schools need high-quality professional development to teach RE well**
* curriculum publishers need to identify clearly what pupils will learn and when, building on knowledge over time, so that pupils develop a deep knowledge of the chosen religious and non-religious traditions
* the government should provide clear expectations about RE provision in schools. Schools should follow these. Current non-statutory guidance for RE should be updated and include clear information for schools about the breadth and depth of the syllabus they are expected to teach.

**Science**

Science education in schools is typically high-quality, although there is more to do to build pupils’ knowledge of ‘working scientifically’.[[footnote 27]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/ofsted-annual-report-202223-education-childrens-services-and-skills/the-annual-report-of-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills-202223#fn:27) Through our visits to schools, we found that:

* most pupils experience a broad and ambitious curriculum
* most pupils are taught by teachers with secure knowledge of scientific content
* in some schools, teachers identify and address common misconceptions, although this is not done consistently across schools
* some schools do not think about how pupils’ knowledge connects between different phases of their education well enough
* the teaching of knowledge relating to working scientifically is generally weak in both primary and secondary schools.