

Curriculum Research Review Series: History

Introduction and background

In April 2021, Ofsted began publishing a series of reviews, bringing together research evidence about different subjects. This latest addition to the series explores research relating to history. It aims to identify factors that contribute to high-quality school history curriculums, assessment, pedagogy, and systems. This understanding of subject quality will be used to examine how history is taught in England's schools. The review draws on several research and policy documents to which links are provided in the full report. Ofsted is keen to highlight throughout the report that there is no one method of teaching and learning history. For this reason, it speaks throughout of elements which 'may' rather than 'must' be included in a high-quality curriculum.

Key points

National context

- All pupils are required to study history from Key Stage 1 to the end of key stage 3. In primary schools, pupils might study history for between 1 and 2 hours per fortnight. This time might be organised into 'blocks' where pupils study history for a number of weeks before studying another subject. In key stage 3, pupils are likely to study history for between 2 and 4 hours per fortnight. Although teachers have previously expressed concerns about the limited time given to history, particularly in primary schools, a 2019 survey suggested that these concerns have eased, and that more schools may now be ensuring that the study of history is given adequate time in the curriculum.
 - The national curriculum sets out goals for history education in terms of broad substantive concepts that pupils should learn and disciplinary knowledge about how historical accounts are created. It identifies broad areas of content that pupils should study. However, schools have significant freedom to design their own curriculum offer.
 - History remains a popular choice at both GCSE and A level, with a slight increase in entries for the June 2021 series at both stages. There were 278,880 provisional entries for GCSE history, and 41,585 entries for A-level history. Both figures represent a small increase on the previous year.
- England, a teacher may choose to focus on features of monasteries.
- The rationale for curriculum decisions on all 3 levels will be considered as part of Ofsted's evaluation of the quality of subject education in history.
 - Teachers also make 'live' curriculum decisions as they teach lessons to add detail to their oral storytelling or to aspects of source material that they choose to explain and emphasise.
 - 'Live' decision-making of this nature is likely to be better judged and managed when underlying rationales for content selection are fully understood.
 - Studies of history teacher development show the importance of engaging in challenging debate around content choice for the renewal of strong history curriculums. In a high-quality curriculum, teachers may therefore have regular opportunities to discuss content selection.

Progress in history types of knowledge

- Pupils make progress in history by developing 2 types of knowledge – knowledge about the past (often described as 'substantive' knowledge), and knowledge about how the past is investigated, and about how historians construct claims, arguments, and accounts (often described as 'disciplinary' knowledge). Deploying both substantive and disciplinary knowledge in combination gives pupils the capacity to construct historical arguments or analyse sources.
- History teachers' tradition of placing substantial emphasis on the disciplinary aspect of pupils' learning dates back to the Schools Council History Project and its successors which, from the 1970s, sought to embed historical enquiry and argument into the teaching of history. Teachers have continued ever since to explore the relationship between these 2 types of knowledge.
- In a high-quality history curriculum, it is likely that teaching and curriculum design will reflect the balance between substantive and disciplinary knowledge. Teaching will develop historical knowledge and historical analysis simultaneously.

The curriculum

- Many history teachers value the freedom which they have in terms of curriculum design, which has allowed them to shape wider history curriculum debate through publications in which they analyse and compare practice.
- There is evidence, however, that because of wider constraints, some history teachers do not take effective advantage of this freedom and stay limited by narrow repertoires of content and out-of-date scholarship.
- A high-quality curriculum requires decisions on 3 levels, namely choice of topics, choice of content and decisions about detail within the selected content. For example, if teaching about religion in Anglo-Saxon



- In considering pupils' progress in history, we need to consider knowledge of 'substantive' concepts such as empire, monarch, tax, or invasion. These should always be taught through repeated encounters with meaningful examples in context. Context is important, as concepts have different meanings in different periods as, for example, the concept of 'revolution'.
- Pupils who do not have knowledge of substantive concepts will be less able to understand and learn new material. As an example, the concept of 'taking power' has complex connotations, including specific connotations when used in historical narratives. If a pupil does not have enough prior knowledge, they will struggle to understand this concept (another way of saying that it will be abstract). This may hinder their ability to make sense of a statement like 'Saxons took power in England'. However, a pupil's understanding of similar historical events from previous topics (such as the Roman invasion of Britain) might ensure that the concept of 'taking power' has some meaning for them.
- Chronological knowledge is highly generative. Understanding the broad characteristics of historical periods gives context to what pupils learn and can increase familiarity with new material, enabling them to develop a 'mental timeline' which makes new knowledge easier to learn and more secure. For example, a pupil will be able to learn more readily about the Norman Conquest if they have prior knowledge of general patterns of trade, migration, and political structures in the medieval period.
- Disciplinary knowledge involves learning about how historians study the past and construct accounts through specific examples. This requires substantive knowledge about relevant historical contexts. Disciplinary knowledge needs to be explicitly taught.
- Pupils need to develop disciplinary knowledge in a number of key areas – cause, consequence, change and continuity, similarity and difference, historical significance, sources and evidence, and historical interpretations (how and why different historical accounts of the past are constructed). Each of these areas requires security with substantive knowledge and repeated encounters with the concept. Historical enquiry is not a pedagogical approach: it refers to the means by which historians enquire about the past and use their findings to construct meaning.

Breadth and depth in the curriculum

- Content that is prioritised is known as "core" knowledge. High-quality curriculum design may be characterised by a strong and sophisticated rationale for choosing specific content – e.g., by a consideration of whether it will help pupils in their future learning.
- The review defines "fingertip" knowledge of events and individuals which pupils need for the study of current topics or for an end-of-topic assessment. Having this knowledge embedded will reduce demands on working memory, thereby facilitating analysis.
- It is important not to reduce a curriculum to 'core' knowledge only - background knowledge is important in history teaching. It provides meaningful examples and secure contexts for learning.
- In the Early Years and Key Stage 1, pupils should study fewer key concepts to facilitate deeper understanding. As they move into Key Stage 2 and beyond, the curriculum should grow in breadth.

- Stories are effective as a way to teach core and background knowledge of history. Fictional stories can also develop understanding of key concepts.

Effective teaching

- Teachers can support long-term learning by drawing attention to particularly important terms and expressions, precise phenomena, and broader frameworks in their teaching.
- Pupils are more likely to remember content that they have engaged with analytically. In history terms, this would seem to suggest that the approaches to develop pupils' disciplinary knowledge suggested above are also likely to secure pupils' substantive knowledge of the past.
- Recalling previously taught content (retrieval practice) and revisiting content in lessons (spaced practice) have also been shown to be effective in securing pupils' knowledge over time.
- Children with SEND should never receive a reduced curriculum, except in the most exceptional of circumstances for a handful of pupils. Reducing content coverage is counter-productive as it often makes further learning more difficult to achieve.

Assessment

- When conducting formative assessment, teachers need to decide what content to prioritise when assessing formatively, and it is likely that this should include important, highly generative knowledge.
- The content which is assessed must allow teachers to draw valid inferences about pupils' current levels of understanding.
- Assessment is most likely to be impactful when it focuses on important content – i.e., content that is highly generative or can most significantly limit progress when pupils lack security with it.
- It is unlikely that skills ladders or generic approaches to assessment are unlikely to capture the interplay between different layers of knowledge that pupils will be drawing upon.
- An undue focus on preparation for GCSE examination questions in key stage 3 study will result in a lower-quality curriculum that does not develop the breadth of knowledge that pupils need either for these examinations or to meet the wider aims of the subject.
- Although writing essays can be a good way of assessing substantive and disciplinary knowledge, they need to be balanced with a range of other approaches.

Subject/school level

- Previous research has identified the distorting effects of inappropriate whole-school systems on subject-level curriculums when generic models are applied uncritically across subjects. Greater autonomy for subject leaders to design or adapt these is likely to support a higher quality of education.
- Both the quality and quantity of professional development are likely to have a significant impact on the quality of education, particularly when professional development pays attention to subject distinctiveness and develops both content and content pedagogical knowledge.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-review-series-history/research-review-series-history>