

History teaching fails to give pupils proper view of the past, says watchdog

Schoolchildren fail to grasp how events in history are linked because the subject is taught in “episodes”, an official report has warned.

By [David Barrett](#) 6:45AM GMT 13 Mar 2011



Pupils in a typical primary school will study Henry VIII

The Ofsted report said many primary and secondary pupils are being let down by a curriculum which does not give them a “chronological understanding” of the subject - instead concentrating on individual topics from ancient Egypt to post-war Britain.

The education watchdog also said that history teaching is being marginalised in state schools, while A-levels are not adequately preparing sixth-formers for more rigorous university courses.

The verdict will be seen as further damaging Labour’s legacy on education and add weight to calls for reform of the national curriculum, which is currently being reviewed by Michael Gove, the Education Secretary, with the help of Simon Schama, the historian and television presenter.

Pupils in a typical primary school will study the Romans and Celts, Ancient Egypt, Henry VIII and the Tudors, Victorian life, World War II, the Ancient Greeks, and Britain since 1948 between years three and six - but not what order they are in.

A “fundamental weakness” in primary schools was that some teachers “did not teach to establish a clear mental map of the past for pupils”.

The report said: “Some pupils found it difficult to place the historical episodes they had studied within any coherent, long-term narrative.

“They knew about particular events, characters and periods but did not have an overview. Their chronological understanding was often underdeveloped and so they found it difficult to link developments together.”

Christine Gilbert, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector of Education, said: “Pupils need to experience history as a coherent subject which develops their knowledge, thinking and understanding, especially their chronological understanding, and I hope the current review of the national curriculum will recognise the importance of this.”

In primary schools where history teaching was rated “satisfactory”, inspectors said there was “an unbalanced curriculum with too much attention paid to particular topics at the expense of others” and many teachers lacked specialist knowledge of the subject.

The report also criticised changes introduced by the previous government which allow schools to ditch history as a self-contained subject and instead incorporate it in a general humanities course alongside geography and arts subjects.

“Where these developments had taken place, curriculum time for teaching had been reduced and history was becoming marginalised,” the inspectors said.

“This resulted in significant gaps and encouraged an episodic understanding of the past.”

England is the only European country which does not teach compulsory history to the age of 15 or 16, with growing numbers of pupils now allowed to drop the subject at 13.

Ofsted stopped short of recommending that history should again be made compulsory at GCSE, but it did urge ministers to ensure pupils receive a “significant amount” of tuition in history to “at least the age of 14”.

Regarding history at secondary school level the report said: “One of the most serious concerns about poor provision was the tendency for teachers to try to cover too much content and ‘spoon-feed’ students.”

In some cases at Key Stage Three - for pupils aged 11 to 14 - some teachers gave only cursory checks to children’s work books so that “basic errors of spelling, grammar and punctuation were uncorrected”.

The inspectors found an over-dependence on text books at sixth form level, meaning students were unprepared for studying the subject at university.

And the report detailed falling numbers of schools offering history at GCSE.

In 2010, 102 maintained secondary schools entered no students at all to sit GCSE history, compared with 77 schools the year before. In State schools, only 30 per cent of pupils took history at GCSE last year - and 20 per cent at academies - compared with half in the independent sector.

The most able students are being let down, the report indicated.

History teaching for the brightest was good or outstanding in only 16 of 32 schools analysed, with the rest only satisfactory, it said.