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Research and analysis

Principles behind Ofsted's research reviews and subject reports

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Introduction

The curriculum – what pupils learn – is the very core of education. The curriculum in schools in England is built around subjects. Our inspection methodology is, as a consequence, based to a large extent on subject 'deep dives'. These provide evidence of curriculum quality, which informs our 'quality of education' judgement.

The inspections we carried out between September 2019 and March 2020, before we suspended routine on-site inspections of schools, gave us interesting insights into the curriculum in schools. You can read about some of our findings in our [Annual Report 2019/20](#).

This is only the start of our work in this area, though. As a force for improvement, we will be publishing a series of documents from April 2021, including:

- research reviews: these will collate currently available research evidence. We will consider what published research evidence tells us about a high-quality education in each subject
- subject reports: we will inform leaders, teachers and tutors, parents and policymakers about what we have learned about the state of the nation when it comes to the quality of school curriculum in a range of subjects

To carry out this work and lead on our curriculum thinking in schools, we have set up a curriculum unit. We have been recruiting subject leads for a range of subjects, starting with national curriculum subjects and religious education. These subject experts will be leading this work, along with our research team.

Research reviews

Our aim is that the reviews will support and inform those leading the thinking on subject education in our schools. Professionals from the education sector will also be able to see the research that is informing our conception of a high-quality education in a variety of subjects.

Our research reviews were planned before the COVID-19 (coronavirus) pandemic, but their publication is timely. As schools face the challenge of catching up, they will need to think carefully about what content to prioritise, what to limit and what to omit. By setting out the most helpful ways of securing progression in each subject, the research reviews can provide a set of guiding principles for subject leaders.

Establishing an evidence-based 'conception of subject quality'

We are committed to doing all we can to ensure the reliability and validity of our inspections and to being a force for improvement.

When our inspectors carry out subject 'deep dives', they draw on a shared understanding of a high-quality education. Inspectors base their understanding of quality of education on our inspection framework criteria. We developed these criteria from our review of relevant education research and our own [3 phases of curriculum research](#).

We can also continue to improve inspection practice by developing a well-evidenced view of what constitutes a high-quality education in each subject. We call this view the 'conception of subject quality'. It outlines subject-specific principles that can be used in deep dives to support the quality of education judgement. The principles do not specify curriculum content or a preferred curriculum model.

This conception of subject quality will also inform our subject reports.

Selecting research

The research reviews will set out the research that has informed our thinking on subject quality. When selecting literature for the reviews, we are drawing on research that aligns with the established principles for quality of education, as outlined in the [education inspection framework \(EIF\)](#) and summarised in our [Education inspection framework: overview of research](#).

The primary focus of each review will be on curriculum research relevant to the subject. However, we will also look at any research on teaching, assessment, school systems and policies that is relevant.

As well as academic papers, the research review will also include information from:

- the Education Endowment Foundation
- the Department for Education
- large-scale international studies, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)
- our own research and guidance
- secondary evidence, such as teacher-authored blogs

Educational research is contestable and contested, and so are documents such as these research reviews. Therefore, we are sharing our thinking with subject communities so that we can get input from the broader subject community. We hope that publishing our evidence base for how we have developed our understanding of subject quality will provide insight, both on what evidence we have used and on how we have interpreted that evidence when creating research criteria for our subject reports.

We are not aiming to summarise the totality of research in education. We are using several criteria to act as filters so that we can select the most relevant research. We have explained these below.

Filters we use to select research

Filter	Explanation
An understanding that curriculum is different from pedagogy	In the EIF, we set out a conception of a quality curriculum. This is based on both our review of existing research and our own curriculum research programme. Progress in curricular terms means knowing more and remembering more, so a curriculum needs to carefully plan for that progress by considering the building blocks and sequence in each subject. In contrast to some definitions of curriculum, we see it as different to (though of course connected with) pedagogy and assessment. Curriculum is about what teachers teach and when, and what pupils learn.
How people learn and, in particular, cognitive science	In recent decades, we have seen a knowledge explosion in the field of cognitive science, which has given us a growing insight into how people learn. This important body of work has informed our thinking in developing our EIF, and we believe it is hard to develop a high quality of education if we do not take the way pupils learn into account. Unfortunately, some subject literature is based on outdated understandings, for example that pupils have different learning styles. We are therefore using alignment with cognitive science (as outlined in the EIF overview of research) as part of this filter.
Relevance to inspection	All our research and evaluation work must be relevant to our role as a regulator and inspectorate. Relevance to the evaluation criteria set out in the EIF is therefore a key filter. This means that purely theoretical pieces are less likely to feature in the research reviews. We will not look at what, for example, a canon of work should be in a subject. We will instead consider what research suggests might be appropriate principles to guide the selection of subject curriculum content.
Subject specificity	We have applied the insights of cognitive science to the EIF, but the implications of these insights can vary in the context of each subject. For example, we know the importance of carefully selecting the most relevant content to support future learning. However, the range of contextual detail pupils may need in order to make sense of important ideas can vary between subjects. Therefore, our research and reporting will be through the lens of curriculum subjects.
What will achieve the aims of subject education	We will not be considering what the high-level aims of education in each subject should be. Documents such as the national curriculum have statements of aims for each subject, which clarify broadly agreed aims for subject education. This means that our conceptions of quality can consider the nature of a quality subject education that can achieve these aims.

We aim to publish research reviews for most national curriculum subjects by the end of 2021.

Subject reports

After we have published the research reviews, we intend to publish our subject reports.

While this work is based on the latest curriculum thinking, it's also not the first time we've done this. In the past, we published [thematic reports](#) on most national curriculum subjects and religious education. These were well received. Responses to our consultation on the EIF also showed a clear appetite from schools for us to resume publication of subject-specific reports.

Now that we are working within the EIF, those older subject reports may need updating. When it is appropriate to resume inspections under the EIF, we will use the 'conception of subject quality' outlined in each research review to create the research criteria for new subject reports.

The EIF allows us to gather rich evidence on the quality of subject education using our deep-dive methodology. We hope that sharing our inspection evidence on high-quality subject practice in this way will help the education sector more widely. Our subject reports will be written for a wide audience and should be particularly useful to subject, faculty and curriculum leaders in schools as well as teacher-training departments.

The subject reports will report on:

- schools' understanding of progress in each subject and how that informs their approaches to the curriculum
- the extent to which teaching supports the goals of the subject curriculum
- the effectiveness of assessment used
- the extent to which there is a climate of high expectations in subjects, where a pupil's interest in the subject can flourish
- the quality of systems around subject teaching and support for subject-specific staff development
- the extent to which whole-school policies affect the capacity for effective subject education
- access to the curriculum in the case of teaching pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND)

The research methodology

Our evidence will come from subject deep dives and/or research visits to schools. We have described the deep-dive methodology in ["Inspecting the curriculum"](#). Our research team will analyse the evidence that our inspectors collect, using the criteria developed through the research review. The research team will work with our subject leads to write the reports.

The deep dives and the reports will cover all school phases from Reception to Year 13. We will be drawing evidence from across the country, making sure we include schools from a range of contexts (such as urban and rural) and with different pupil intakes, from the most to the least disadvantaged, for example. We will also make sure that we include those with different inspection judgements. We will be looking at evidence from special schools as well. Inclusion of pupils with SEND will be one of the things we will report on.

We hope this overview has given a flavour of the work on subject curriculum that we are intending to do in the coming year. More than anything, we hope that the work will help subject leaders in their curriculum planning in the short and longer term.

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