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Research and analysis

Rich encounters with the past: history subject report

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Applies to England

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Context

History immerses pupils in unfamiliar worlds, and in the diversity and commonality of human experience across time and place. At the same time, history helps pupils to make sense of their own experiences, and of the world they inhabit. The study of history is complex and constantly evolving through new approaches, new lenses and new evidence. Every pupil is entitled to encounters with the richness of the past and the complexity of historical enquiry.

The report evaluates the common strengths and weaknesses of history teaching in the schools inspected and considers the challenges that history education faces. This evidence was gathered by inspectors as part of routine inspections and research visits. The report builds on our [history research review](#), published in 2021.

We summarise the main findings from primary and secondary schools ([see the appendix for further details](#)) and share our recommendations. We then set out our more detailed findings from primary schools and secondary schools separately. These 2 sections focus on:

- curriculum design and organisation
- pedagogy
- assessment
- school systems and leaders' impact on history education
- subject knowledge and professional development, and
- the impact of the above on what pupils learn

When we inspect schools, we evaluate them against the criteria in the school inspection handbooks. Inspectors will not use our findings in this report as a 'checklist' when they are inspecting schools. We know that there are many different ways that schools can put together and teach a high-quality history curriculum.

Pupils begin their formal history education in Year 1, where history is a national curriculum subject. Although children in Reception do not study history as a separate subject, the [early years foundation stage framework \(EYFS\)](#) identifies important knowledge and skills that can support their learning in the future. As part of 'Understanding the world', children are expected to know about some similarities and differences between the past and now, and to understand the past through

settings, characters and events they learn about. The EYFS also highlights the importance of children developing vocabulary that will support their understanding across a range of areas. At key stage 1, the [national curriculum](#) sets out broad descriptors of content to guide maintained schools in designing their curriculum. Although academies do not have to teach the national curriculum, their curriculum must reflect the national curriculum's scope and ambition. [\[footnote 1\]](#) Within these broad guidelines, maintained schools and academies have significant flexibility to choose what pupils will learn from Reception to the end of Year 2.

At key stage 2, the national curriculum identifies more specific content areas for pupils to study. These range from the earliest human civilisations to the early medieval period. Pupils also learn about historical concepts and the methods and approaches taken by historians and others who study the past. It is important to note that, while historical concepts should be introduced to pupils in key stage 2, this is the start of a long curriculum journey to understanding the complexity of how historians study the past. It is not expected that pupils can make complex historical judgements at the early stages of their history education.

The national curriculum also sets out specific content areas and historical concepts that pupils should study at key stage 3. This begins in Year 7, when most pupils start secondary school. Again, across key stages 2 and 3, maintained schools and academies have significant freedom to choose the content pupils will learn within the broad framework of the national curriculum.

From the beginning of key stage 4 (starting in either Year 9 or Year 10), study of history is optional. Where key stage 4 starts in Year 9, schools must ensure that all pupils have studied a broad history curriculum across key stage 3. Since 2018, the number of pupils studying history at GCSE has increased slightly. In 2021/22, 278,088 pupils were entered for GCSE history. The number of pupils studying A-level history has fluctuated. It peaked in 2019 before dropping. In 2021/22, A-level entries increased again to 42,409. [\[footnote 2\]](#)

Terms used in this report

In this report, we use the same terms to describe the historical knowledge that pupils learn as we did in the history research review. These terms can be useful when commenting on specific aspects of history education, but they are not simple or discrete categories.

Substantive knowledge: in history, this refers to knowledge about the past.

Disciplinary knowledge: this refers to knowledge about how historians and others study the past, and how they construct historical claims, arguments and accounts. This is not a set of generic skills, but a complex body of knowledge. Pupils need to build this knowledge over time by encountering a range of meaningful examples of how historians have studied specific aspects of the past and constructed claims and accounts about them.

When designing history curriculums, some history teachers also distinguish between:

- **core knowledge:** content that, within a particular lesson or topic, curriculum designers and teachers consider most important for pupils to secure in their long-term memory

- **hinterland:** background information that helps to make core knowledge meaningful by placing it within a rich context

Specific aspects and features of pupils' knowledge that we comment on in this review include:

- **chronological knowledge:** pupils' knowledge of broader chronological frameworks, narratives and features of historical periods
- **terms, concepts and phenomena:** much of what pupils learn will be unique to the historical context. However, our research review found that knowledge of recurring terms, concepts and phenomena is important in helping pupils to learn new material. Again, these are not simple or discrete categories, but it can be useful for teachers and curriculum designers to distinguish between:
 - **terms:** labels given to particular historical events or phenomena, for example 'appeasement'
 - **concepts:** abstract ideas that share some features across different contexts. They can be more or less specific, for example 'nationalism', 'living standards' or 'power'
 - **phenomena:** events, developments or aspects of societies that share some features in different contexts, for example ways that cities can influence social or political developments or ways that rulers have projected an image of authority
- **gaps in pupils' knowledge:** throughout the report, we refer to gaps in pupils' knowledge. These relate to the specific curriculum journey of pupils in their particular school and classroom. It does not mean that there is a simple hierarchy of knowledge that pupils must systematically build in history. There are often many routes through which pupils can build knowledge to support future learning
- **richness:** in the best schools, pupils' knowledge had several features that are captured by this term. Pupils' knowledge was rich where it was (appropriately for their stage in the curriculum journey) wide ranging, detailed, connected and complex. Where we refer to pupils' knowledge **developing**, we are referring to the increasing richness of pupils' knowledge over time as a result of impactful curriculums, teaching and assessment

Main findings

In our [history survey report in 2011](#), we raised concerns about the marginalisation and integrity of history in schools. Evidence from our recent research visits indicates that the position of history in schools is much more secure now than it was 12 years ago. In most of the schools we visited, history was highly valued by leaders and teachers, and pupils were given enough time to study the subject. The trend towards erosion of history as a distinct subject appears to have been reversed.

In recent years, there has been significant work done in the large majority of primary and secondary schools to develop a broad and ambitious curriculum in history. This work is

having a significant impact on the quality of education that pupils receive in history.

The gap between the quality of history education in primary and in secondary schools appears to have closed. We were particularly impressed by the security of primary school teachers' subject knowledge, given the pressures of teaching a wide range of subjects. The overall quality of history education has improved, but there were significant differences in the quality of history education between schools. However, in most cases, we found similar strengths and weaknesses in primary and secondary settings.

Curriculum

In the large majority of the schools we visited, leaders made sure that there was enough time in the timetable to teach a broad and ambitious history curriculum. Pupils studied a wide range of historical periods.

In almost all the schools visited, the history curriculum was carefully designed to develop pupils' knowledge so that they could study a more ambitious curriculum over time. In a few schools, curriculum planning was less effective. In those schools, teachers focused on superficial aspects of the past, for example reducing Pharaonic Egypt (Egypt at the time of the Pharaohs) to the pyramids and mummies, without exploring deeper features of Egyptian society and culture. Here, teachers did not plan how to develop and secure pupils' knowledge to help them learn in the future.

Curriculum plans relating to disciplinary knowledge were typically not ambitious enough. The teaching of this was less effective than it could be. The complexity of disciplinary traditions and approaches was often misrepresented. We saw just a few schools where pupils developed more complex knowledge over time of how historians study the past and construct accounts.

Pupils generally developed secure knowledge of aspects of what they were taught in schools. However, the overall impact of history education varied widely, both within and between schools. In the best schools, pupils developed rich and connected knowledge of the past. In others, pupils' knowledge of history was disconnected or superficial, or there

were significant gaps. In most schools, pupils had misconceptions about how historians and others study the past and construct their accounts.

Pedagogy

In just over half the schools visited, teachers' pedagogical decisions were designed well to make sure that pupils could learn new material. Teachers drew on their secure subject knowledge to make the past meaningful for pupils. They used clear explanations to explore new information. Primary schools taught local history particularly well.

However, in nearly half the schools, teachers expected pupils to make their own judgements, for example on sources of evidence, without having developed the secure historical knowledge to be able to do this meaningfully. This approach typically influenced decisions about the curriculum, teaching and assessment. It often led to pupils having less secure knowledge of the past and misconceptions about the work of historians.

In all the schools visited, support for pupils with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) was a priority. However, this support was not always as effective as it could be. In most cases, this was because teachers focused on adapting the immediate task so that pupils could complete it, instead of building their knowledge and skills and addressing gaps so that they could access the curriculum in the longer term.

Assessment

Assessment in history was not fully developed in most of the primary schools visited. Commonly, teachers made broad judgements about pupils' progress, but did not identify or address specific gaps and misconceptions in their knowledge. In around half the secondary schools, teachers used assessment effectively to identify gaps and misconceptions in the most important knowledge they had intended pupils to learn. In the other half, this was not the case.

School systems

Whole-school systems and approaches generally improved the quality of history education. They were particularly effective in schools where leaders understood how pupils get better in history. In a few schools, however, poorly designed or implemented policies had a negative impact on history education. Leaders did not fully understand how to ensure and assure the quality of history education in their schools. They accepted superficial evidence that history education was effective, such as the presence of a lesson feature such as a retrieval quiz.

Teacher knowledge and expertise

Most teachers had secure content knowledge (knowledge of the historical content to be taught) of the topics they were teaching. In some schools, leaders supported and developed teachers' knowledge systematically. In others, individual teachers often committed significant time outside dedicated working hours to develop their content knowledge, including those in primary schools, where teachers teach a range of subjects. In most schools, however, guidance and training on effective approaches to teaching and assessment in history were limited.

Schools where pupils developed rich and connected knowledge tended to have some or all of the following features:

- regular access to high-quality training and resources, typically through subject associations
- ambitious curriculum plans that identified the most important content and concepts to support future learning
- a clear, shared understanding among teachers of the most important content and concepts that pupils needed to know and remember
- teachers with secure knowledge of the content to be taught
- pedagogical choices that emphasised the most important content and concepts in the school's curriculum, which were regularly revisited

- assessment that regularly and systematically checked that pupils were secure in their knowledge of the most important content and concepts, so that any gaps and misconceptions could be addressed quickly
- an approach that recognised how to balance this emphasis on ‘core knowledge’ with the importance of a rich and meaningful hinterland

Discussion of findings

In the most effective schools, there is a complex and powerful interaction between ambitious curriculum design and pupils’ developing historical knowledge. When pupils’ knowledge becomes richer and more secure over time, they are able to access a broad curriculum that increasingly represents the complexity of the past. This means that all pupils can ultimately meet ambitious curricular goals.

Effective curriculum planning is important in developing pupils’ knowledge and skills so that they can understand more challenging ideas. This is not necessarily a result of any particular type of planning. It is often the result of teachers and leaders understanding that what pupils already know can help them to make sense of new material. They understand how to organise the curriculum, teaching and assessment to emphasise the content and concepts necessary for accessing future learning.

Most schools have invested significant time in developing the history curriculum, and this has had a very positive impact on the overall quality of history education. The quality of curriculum thinking in primary and secondary schools has been noticeably raised since the time of our last history report. There is some exceptionally strong practice in a few schools, and this report sets out to outline that practice for the benefit of all schools.

Gaps remain in the quality of practice between schools. Our research indicates that, in many schools, leaders had not fully grasped the complexities of how pupils make progress specifically in history. This limited the impact of curriculum, teaching and assessment on pupils’ knowledge. In particular, some schools assessed progress in history largely through checking learning of isolated facts. This did not make sure that pupils developed rich and connected knowledge of the past.

In other schools, progress was linked to vague descriptions of skills. Put simply, the curriculum, teaching and assessment did not help pupils to develop secure knowledge about the past. Across all these schools, superficial features of curriculum plans or lessons were too readily assumed to be evidence of quality, or too heavily promoted as a way of ensuring a high-quality history education. For example, several schools at both primary and secondary level had identified ‘golden threads’ in curriculum plans. However, they did not plan and implement these in a way that helped pupils develop more secure and meaningful knowledge. In other schools, leaders mistook features of lessons, such as regular quizzes, for evidence that pupils were being supported to develop richer and more secure knowledge. In the most effective schools, leaders and teachers thought carefully

not just about **whether** material was being taught, but also about **what** was being taught or revisited. They also considered the impact this would have on pupils' future learning.

One of the great joys and most important aims of history education is to enable pupils to develop their own understanding of how claims and accounts about the past are constructed. This allows them to engage with the process of historical construction for themselves. However, in some schools, a poorly planned approach to this left some pupils with significant gaps and misconceptions. In a significant minority of lessons we observed, teachers encouraged pupils to come up with their own judgements in response to questions, when they lacked the knowledge to answer these meaningfully, rather than empowering pupils to construct judgements based on secure knowledge.

Pupils' historical thinking emerges in complex ways from their growing understanding of the past and of how historians construct claims and accounts. Attempts to 'shortcut' this process by teaching 'tips and tricks' or by encouraging pupils to make ungrounded assertions did not produce the kinds of meaningful engagement with history that we should want for all our pupils. In many cases, these approaches left pupils with limited and patchy knowledge about the past and serious misconceptions about the complexity of historical enquiry. Subject associations offer high-quality guidance on how pupils can develop meaningful disciplinary knowledge. It is likely that subject and senior leaders in some schools would benefit from further engagement with these.

Wherever teachers took the complexity of history seriously, pupils responded with enthusiasm. In many primary schools, for example, pupils were fascinated by the relationship between local, national and international developments. In many schools, pupils were gripped by the stories of individuals and became immersed in detailed study of other times and places.

The very best schools were those where teachers carefully balanced the richness and complexity of the past with clarity about how effective emphasis on curriculum, teaching and assessment could help pupils navigate this with secure and deepening knowledge.

Recommendations

Schools should ensure that:

- Teachers and leaders understand the generative power of knowledge in history: that is, how layers of historical knowledge interact so that pupils' knowledge of other past societies, of recurring terms, concepts and phenomena and of broader chronological frameworks help them to learn more easily about other topics.
- The curriculum that the school adopts, adapts or constructs identifies the most important content and concepts that can support pupils in future learning, so that teachers can emphasise these in teaching. This is important both in curriculum planning and in teachers' 'live' decisions about emphasis during teaching.

- Teachers are confident in making pedagogical decisions that emphasise important content and concepts in a meaningful way and in revisiting these regularly so that pupils develop secure knowledge. This includes building on what pupils already know, using well-selected stories and examples to make abstract ideas meaningful and using explanations to help pupils to connect information.
- Teachers use assessment to identify important gaps and misconceptions in pupils' knowledge and make sure that these are addressed. Although there is not a set hierarchy of knowledge that pupils need to build in history, at every point in each school's curriculum there is important knowledge that pupils need to know in order to make sense of what they are learning. Accepting significant gaps between pupils in knowledge of important content and concepts means that these gaps will widen over time, as some pupils understand less about new topics they are taught.
- Support for pupils with SEND focuses on pupils' ability to access the breadth and depth of the curriculum over time, rather than their ability to complete the immediate task. This includes making sure that all pupils are secure in their knowledge of important content and concepts that help them to make sense of the later curriculum.
- The curriculum gives pupils broad and rich encounters with the past, through different times, places and societies, different people, groups and experiences and through the lenses of political, social, economic and cultural history.
- The curriculum enables pupils to develop meaningful and increasingly complex knowledge about how historians and others study the past and construct their accounts, avoiding reductive or misleading representations of the complexity of historical enquiry and argument.
- Leaders plan systematically to develop teachers' knowledge of the content they teach and of how to teach history effectively to pupils.
- Leaders assure the quality of history education by meaningfully assessing the quality of what pupils learn and remember over time. This should include the richness, connectedness and complexity of pupils' knowledge of the past and their knowledge of how historians and others study the past and construct their accounts.

Initial teacher education providers and those who support early career teachers should ensure that:

- Teachers understand how pupils get better in history and know how to develop pupils' knowledge so that pupils can access increasingly more ambitious curriculum content.
- Teachers understand how to help pupils develop meaningful disciplinary knowledge and are aware of the misconceptions that pupils can develop if the work of historians is misrepresented.

Primary

Our findings are extrapolated from our sample of primary schools visited.

Curriculum

Planning for knowledge

Summary of the research review relevant to planning for knowledge

Pupils get better at history as they develop their substantive and disciplinary knowledge. Curriculum design in history is not straightforward. The range, depth and security of pupils' existing knowledge help them to learn new material. It is not possible to plot a simple, linear path through the curriculum. Instead, leaders and teachers must make careful decisions about what content to emphasise in topics and lessons (sometimes referred to as 'core knowledge'). Leaders should focus on identifying the core knowledge that, if learned, will be most likely to help pupils make sense of future learning. Some aspects of historical knowledge that may be particularly important for future learning are:

- knowledge of the immediate topic or context
- knowledge of broad features of the period and overviews of developments
- knowledge of terms, concepts and phenomena that recur in later topics

Leaders should also plan carefully to develop pupils' disciplinary knowledge over time.

1. In nearly all the primary schools visited, history was taught as a separate subject. Some schools had recently moved away from a topic-based approach. A topic-based approach was used in two schools visited.

2. Typically, leaders made sure that enough time was allocated to teaching history. This was between 60 and 90 minutes a fortnight. In some schools, history was taught around once a fortnight. In others, when taught, history lessons were weekly but on a rotation with other subjects.

3. Most schools had invested significant time in developing the history curriculum. Leaders had often identified what they wanted pupils to know and be able to do as a result of the taught history curriculum. In a few schools, leaders understood the importance of pupils' existing knowledge for their capacity to learn new, and more ambitious, material in history. For example, in one school, leaders designed the curriculum so that pupils built up increasingly complex knowledge of

phenomena such as trade to support their future learning.

4. In many schools, leaders' aims for the curriculum were too broad. They did not help teachers make decisions about the curriculum, pedagogy or assessment. For example, in one school, aims for pupils in Year 4 included: 'I can recognise similarities and differences'. In Year 5, they included: 'I am able to devise historically valid questions'. Very often, broad and ill-considered aims such as these unhelpfully distorted teachers' decisions about curriculum, teaching and assessment. They encouraged teachers to focus on pupils' superficially meeting these broad goals rather than on developing their historical knowledge over time. Other schools set more specific goals, such as 'Know about the relationship between city states, including examples of trade and war'. This gave teachers more precise guidance to support planning and assessment.

5. In many of the schools visited, leaders' plans for history did not set out in enough detail the specific substantive or disciplinary knowledge that pupils would learn. Plans tended to focus only on developing broad skills and competencies, rather than on how pupils would achieve these broad aims. In a few schools, clear plans were in place for key stage 2, but plans for key stage 1 did not give teachers enough guidance on what pupils needed to know and do.

6. In most schools, plans for what children should know and be able to do by the end of Reception were limited to knowledge about 'time' and 'the past'. There was just one school where leaders took a wider view and specified important vocabulary and concepts, such as farming, which children could encounter in Reception, and which would help them learn specific history topics in the future. In this school, children were well prepared for what they went on to learn in history. In a few settings, leaders had identified this as an area for future curriculum development.

Securing knowledge of recurring terms and concepts

Summary of the research review relevant to knowledge of terms and concepts

Some concepts are likely to appear frequently during a pupil's history education. Often, pupils' mental model, or schema [\[footnote 3\]](#), of these concepts makes a big difference to their understanding of new material. This mental model needs to incorporate increasingly detailed historical knowledge. It is not the same as pupils knowing a simple or generic definition of a term. Leaders can give pupils a better chance of making sense of increasingly challenging new material by planning for them to encounter a wide range of important concepts repeatedly. This will help pupils to develop increasingly complex knowledge of these concepts. Leaders can also consider how to develop pupils' familiarity with particular phenomena or states of affairs, such as the way ancient rulers might have projected an image of power. This can help pupils to learn about similar, and increasingly complex, examples in different periods. For the youngest children, developing relevant mental models of important concepts and phenomena early in their education helps to prepare them to learn history in the future.

7. Most leaders had planned their curriculum so that it focused on teaching pupils about important terms and concepts. In some cases, this was having a significant, positive impact on pupils' learning. In others, weaknesses in the school's approach were limiting the potential impact.

8. In the best examples, leaders had carefully designed the curriculum to emphasise particularly important concepts and phenomena. They focused on those that would best prepare pupils for future learning.

9. In some schools, leaders went beyond simply identifying broad themes that occurred across the curriculum. Instead, they had planned a learning journey that built pupils' knowledge of particular themes. For example, in one school, leaders had explicitly planned how pupils' knowledge about religion in the past would become more complex over time, through a range of meaningful examples.

10. In other schools, leaders had identified important concepts for pupils to learn, but did not relate them as carefully to what pupils would learn in the future. In some cases, leaders had identified recurring concepts or 'themes' because they believed that this was required. However, they had not considered how these could support pupils in their future learning. In these schools, leaders had often identified retrospectively where themes recurred in their curriculum. They had not planned how pupils would develop increasingly complex knowledge of these over time. For example, in one school, leaders had identified a theme of 'religion' across topics such as classical Greece, Rome and Maya. However, across these topics, pupils simply expanded their knowledge of a range of ancient gods. They did not develop deeper conceptual knowledge, for example, about the importance of religion to people or the relationship between religion and political power.

11. In some schools, the range of important themes that leaders had identified was narrow. For example, in one school, these were power, religion, society and empire. Even if these were had been thoroughly developed, they would not have covered what pupils needed to know to access the breadth of the curriculum. In other schools, pupils learned about a wider range of concepts, but they were taught simple definitions of these, which did not always reflect the way they were used in the context of history topics. For example, pupils learned a definition of 'invasion' that did not capture the typical features of invasions in the period they were studying.

Differences in how 2 schools used themes to organise their curriculum

In one school, leaders had identified a wide range of themes that pupils would encounter through a range of examples across the curriculum. These included settlement, society, rule, religion, trade, culture, technology and conflict. Leaders had identified these themes as they believed that secure knowledge of each of these would give pupils a strong foundation for learning a wide range of historical topics. Leaders had designed topics, organised into well-designed enquiry questions, that would build increasingly complex knowledge of these over time, for example by identifying what a pupil in Year 4 should know about how religion operated in a range of past societies. They had also identified vocabulary that children should learn in Reception in order to develop an early understanding of these themes. Teachers used assessment to check whether pupils had secure knowledge of these.

In another school, leaders had also identified important themes across the curriculum. However, they had only identified 'leadership' and 'society'. Leaders had identified existing curriculum content that fitted into these themes, but they had not considered what teachers could teach or emphasise to build pupils' knowledge of these meaningfully. Although pupils encountered these words regularly, they were taught them as simple items of vocabulary, rather than being given meaningful examples to help them to build complex schema relating to these ideas. Leaders had not considered what children in Reception could learn in order to begin to develop their knowledge of these themes.

Chronological knowledge

Summary of the research review relevant to chronological knowledge

Connected historical knowledge requires pupils to have secure knowledge of broad chronological frameworks and longer-term developments, as well as knowledge of the broader features of particular historical periods and places. This is likely to include knowledge of specific events and developments, although these need to be situated within a secure chronological framework.

12. In most of the schools visited, leaders recognised the importance of developing pupils' chronological knowledge, and there had been significant recent work on this area. They had often planned for pupils to develop specific chronological knowledge, such as being able to order events that they had studied. They also identified opportunities to revisit chronological knowledge to make sure that pupils remembered it.

13. In most schools, teachers in Reception were very effective at introducing children to the concept of time through familiar examples. In key stage 1, teachers were aware of mathematical knowledge that pupils did not yet have and used simplified representations to develop their knowledge of time further. This included regularly revisiting and building pupils' schema for broad categories of time, such as 'Before I was born but in my parents' lifetime'.

14. In a few very effective cases, leaders had gone beyond 'timeline knowledge' and considered pupils' 'sense of period' and their knowledge of broad characteristics of particular historical periods and 'big stories' about the past (for example how technology led to changes in organisation of early human civilisations).

15. However, a few schools overemphasised chronological knowledge to the detriment of other important aspects of pupils' knowledge that leaders had not considered in as much depth.

Knowledge of the immediate topic

Summary of the research review relevant to knowledge of the immediate topic

Pupils' learning within a topic is heavily supported by their knowledge of the historical context. Depending on what pupils need to learn, they may need a secure sense of the time and place they are studying, a secure knowledge of important developments, or an understanding of people's values and attitudes in that time and place. Pupils often need detailed and secure 'fingertip' knowledge about the particular topic they are studying. This allows them to think historically and construct accounts or arguments.

16. In most of the schools visited, leaders planned for pupils to have meaningful encounters with past times and places. Where this was effective, leaders had carefully identified what pupils needed to know about a particular time and place in order to make sense of more complex ideas and developments. For example, in one school, leaders had identified what pupils needed to know about the lives, roles and attitudes of different people in early medieval England in order to learn about social changes across the period.

17. Schools were particularly successful in developing topic knowledge in local history. In just over half the schools visited, including in some schools where this was weaker in other topics, teachers had successfully developed rich and connected knowledge of time and place when teaching pupils about history in their local area.

18. In a significant minority of schools, however, leaders and teachers assumed that pupils knew more about a particular time and place than they in fact did. In these schools, pupils often developed misconceptions when teachers did not explicitly check or develop pupils' knowledge of the time and place that they were studying.

19. In the weakest schools, pupils were asked to consider questions or complete tasks that they simply lacked the knowledge to do successfully. For example, in one school, pupils were asked to explain the purpose of a number of artefacts from Pharaonic Egypt. However, they had not been taught about Egyptian religious rituals or funeral practices. They would have needed this knowledge to make meaningful inferences. As a result, pupils were forced to guess or to fill gaps with their 'everyday' knowledge (drawing on common sense or modern experience in ways that were not helpful in the particular context).

Going beyond the superficial

20. In around half the schools visited, teachers focused on the most familiar or widely recognised aspects of historical periods, for example the pyramids when teaching about Pharaonic Egypt. They did not develop a richer, more connected knowledge of past societies for pupils. In these schools, pupils' knowledge typically consisted of disconnected facts about the past.

21. However, in a few schools, leaders had thought carefully about how pupils could secure a detailed knowledge of time and place. Teachers went beyond surface features to explore in detail how people lived in the past, their values and attitudes, and how developments were connected. In these schools, many pupils could make more considered historical judgements in response to questions. They had developed more secure knowledge about the topics they had studied.

In one school, a leader reflected, 'Pupils already know about the pyramids [and the] 6 wives [of Henry VIII]; we want them to know about the ancient world, the Reformation'.

Disciplinary knowledge

Summary of the research review relevant to disciplinary knowledge

Historians make claims and construct accounts of the past within established and dynamic traditions of historical enquiry. Historical argument is a particular form of knowledge construction. It is distinct from simply 'guessing' or having a point of view. Over time, pupils should learn about the ways that historians and others construct arguments and accounts about the past. Schools should be careful to avoid simplistic or misleading representations of the complexity of historical processes, methods and fields of enquiry.

22. In most of the schools we visited, leaders had considered how to develop pupils' disciplinary knowledge across the curriculum. In around half the schools, this planning was in the early stages.

23. In some schools, leaders framed topics using valid historical enquiry questions. For example, in one school, the teacher asked, 'What do we know about the impact of the Blitz?' These questions led teachers to plan substantive knowledge of time and place, while developing specific knowledge about how historians might study a particular event, phenomenon or society. Pupils in this school learned how historians might use different types of sources to answer different kinds of questions about the past. In schools where enquiry questions were well designed, and leaders had carefully planned what pupils needed to know in order to address the enquiry question meaningfully, pupils were often very successful and highly engaged in answering these questions.

24. In some schools, enquiry questions were used simply as topic headings, and the curriculum did not identify a range of knowledge that would allow pupils to answer the particular enquiry question. Without the clear focus an enquiry question should provide, it was difficult for teachers to identify the most crucial knowledge for pupils to learn and, therefore, for them to teach and assess.

25. In some schools, the 'historical' questions that pupils were asked to consider were poorly grounded in the traditions of historical enquiry. Often, pupils used present lenses to make judgements on questions such as 'Who was the best monarch?' or 'Were Viking punishments fair?' These questions encouraged pupils to draw on their modern understanding of leadership or

fairness, rather than helping them to understand differences in the ideas and values of people in past societies. They also resulted in teaching that was less focused on how historians learn about and communicate ideas about past societies.

26. In the best examples, leaders made sure that pupils were taught about how historians study the past through specific examples. In one school, teachers gave the example of historians using images on Classical Greek pottery and other sources to reconstruct aspects of religion and culture in Athens. In this school, Year 6 pupils demonstrated secure knowledge of how historians use sources. In a few schools, leaders were clear about the limitations of asking pupils to make their own judgements without also teaching them how historians do this and developing secure knowledge of the particular topic or context.

27. When teaching historical interpretations, teachers in many schools focused on pupils 'forming their own interpretations' about the past without teaching them how historians and others do this. In other schools, historical significance was conflated with 'impact'. Pupils made 'everyday' judgements about who or what was significant, without learning how and why historians and others might disagree about the significance of people or events. A question such as 'How significant was the invention of the steam engine?' is a question about impact (and therefore relates to the historical concept of consequence). To consider a question such as 'How significant was the Blitz?', pupils need to learn that significance is something that is ascribed to historical phenomena, and that different people at different times might have different judgments about what is significant.

28. In most schools, the disciplinary knowledge that pupils learned focused on sources and evidence. To some extent, this is a helpful approach. Knowledge of how historians use sources to construct accounts can help pupils to learn other aspects of disciplinary knowledge, such as how and why historians form different interpretations of the past.

29. Much of what pupils learned about sources focused on archaeological evidence or on artefacts. In some schools, teachers used artefacts very well to help pupils learn about the material culture of past societies. However, many pupils whom we spoke to had developed misconceptions about historians. They conflated them with archaeologists or thought they were simple 'fact-checkers' (see ['Impact: what pupils know and remember'](#)).

30. In around two thirds of the schools visited, teachers focused on pupils forming their own judgements about sources and about the past, without first securing the knowledge they needed to do this in a meaningful way. They devoted significant lesson time to this and did not spend enough time developing pupils' knowledge of the past to enable them to engage more meaningfully with sources. As a result, pupils often relied on 'everyday' thinking, or on simplistic tips and tricks, to make these judgements. For example, pupils dismissed an account from an Anglo-Saxon Chronicle as not reliable because it mentioned dragons, even though this source provides valuable information for historians. This often taught or embedded misconceptions about historians and how they study the past. For example, in some schools, pupils were taught to differentiate between primary and secondary sources. They had learned simplistic judgements, such as that sources from the time are less reliable than later sources. In other schools, pupils were still taught to spot, and comment negatively on, 'bias' in sources. Assessments and feedback suggested that teachers often wrongly inferred from this that pupils were making their own judgements, or that they had made progress in their thinking about history.

Ensuring breadth and depth

Summary of the research review relevant to ensuring breadth and depth

History curriculums should be broad and develop pupils' knowledge of the complexity and diversity of human societies, developments and experiences. Leaders should seek to adopt, adapt or construct a broad curriculum. Within the time available, leaders should consider how far the curriculum enables pupils to study a range of historical periods and to study the past through the perspectives of different timescales, including through overview and depth studies. Leaders should consider the depth in which different periods are studied. Pupils should learn about a wide range of places and societies, including how developments in different places are connected. Pupils should also learn about different people, groups and experiences. Teaching should seek to accurately represent the complexity and diversity of the past. Pupils should also study the past through different lenses and learn about different fields of historical enquiry, including political, social, economic and cultural history.

31. Nearly all the schools visited, both maintained schools and academies, based curriculum planning on the national curriculum. Leaders checked whether the content of their history curriculum matched the content headings given in the national curriculum. In almost all schools, this ensured that pupils were taught a range of different historical periods and topics in key stage 2.

32. In most schools, leaders had not considered how content choices in Reception or key stage 1 might help to prepare children with knowledge and vocabulary necessary for later study. Typically, content choices were based on existing practice or the availability of resources. For example, most schools taught about the great fire of London in depth at key stage 1, but leaders had not generally identified what knowledge pupils could develop from this topic that would help them later.

33. There were differences in how schools used the national curriculum to design their own curriculum. A significant minority of schools did not go beyond the level of 'topics'. They considered that they had 'covered' the national curriculum if they taught a topic that related to each of the content headings in the national curriculum. The stronger schools made sure that pupils studied topics in depth. Pupils secured an appropriately deep understanding of particular times and places. For example, when studying the Vikings, one school had identified a range of knowledge about Viking society and culture, Viking society in different places, and changes over time in Viking settlement in England.

A range of places and societies

34. Some schools had made sure that pupils learned about a range of places and societies and that they studied these in adequate depth. In the best examples, leaders had supported teachers to develop adequate subject knowledge of wider world studies, and pupils developed detailed knowledge of these.

35. In some schools, curriculum planning and teaching helped pupils to:

- connect their knowledge of different places and times
- put developments into broader frameworks, and
- develop knowledge of contrasting and related developments and contexts

36. Some schools missed opportunities to develop pupils' knowledge of longer-term developments. For example, in a number of schools, teaching about 'early civilisations' was limited to a single case study, most commonly of Pharaonic Egypt. Few schools made the most of the national curriculum recommendation to teach pupils an overview of the development of the earliest civilisations.

Local history

37. Most primary schools provided high-quality teaching of local history, which significantly enhanced pupils' knowledge and enjoyment of the subject. Often, leaders made sure that pupils knew enough about the wider context to make sense of local developments. They used local developments to help pupils understand change on a wider scale.

Range of periods and timescales

38. Pupils tended to study a range of historical periods that broadly matched the scope of the national curriculum.

39. In the best examples, leaders recognised the importance of pupils studying historical developments, both broadly and in depth. Teachers aimed to secure pupils' knowledge of coherent narratives over longer periods of time. This enabled them to contextualise more in-depth studies. For example, in one school, pupils learned in depth about the Shang dynasty in China. They developed secure knowledge of the period and were able to connect this to developments in other parts of the world, including the British Isles. In key stage 2, pupils developed connected knowledge about the development of cities. This continued into a later study of the development of Baghdad.

40. Around one third of schools devoted significant time to modern history topics, which pupils also study in key stage 3. In some cases, pupils studied modern history for a whole school year or longer. This limited the depth and breadth of knowledge that pupils could develop about earlier historical periods. In one school, leaders had decided not to teach significant parts of the national curriculum, because they believed that earlier periods were less relevant to pupils. This resulted in pupils missing opportunities to develop their knowledge of these periods, and they had gaps in their understanding of 'big stories', such as the development of technology and cities.

A range of people, groups and experiences

41. In most of the primary schools visited, leaders had made sure that pupils learned about a range of people, groups and experiences across the curriculum.

42. In many schools, leaders had recently introduced new studies of individuals to the history curriculum. This aimed to broaden the range of people and groups studied. In a few schools, leaders had made sure that pupils learned these alongside secure knowledge of the historical context. They made sure that teachers reflected the diversity and complexity of different experiences when teaching about events and developments.

43. However, in some schools, pupils developed misconceptions about the experiences of particular groups. This was because teachers had not accurately represented the complexity and diversity of experiences in the past, or because they had introduced individual stories without teaching about the broader context that made these stories meaningful. For example, in one school, pupils learned about Rosa Parks but were not taught about the wider context of African-American civil rights in the USA. Pupils had misconceptions, for example, that segregation was limited to public transport, that African-American experiences were identical in all parts of the USA, and that Rosa Parks was the first person to challenge segregation. In these schools, pupils often viewed groups as homogenous and assumed that large groups of people had shared very similar experiences.

Fields of enquiry

44. Leaders had planned the study of political history across the curriculum. In most schools, teachers sought to secure coherent knowledge of broader political narratives over time. In almost all schools, pupils learned about some social, cultural and economic aspects of societies they studied. However, this was usually not planned as coherently to the same extent as political content. In around a third of schools, pupils learned very little about these aspects across the curriculum as a whole. As a result, they had very limited knowledge of important historical phenomena such as trade, religious beliefs or art.

45. In just under half the schools we visited, leaders had used overarching themes to give the curriculum coherence. While this was not always successful, in some schools, leaders made sure that the themes connected pupils' knowledge of important political, social, cultural and economic developments. In one school, leaders had paid careful attention to blending social and political content across the curriculum. They had also made sure that pupils learned about the economic and cultural aspects of past societies in some detail. For example, leaders had introduced a detailed topic on the Phoenicians to help pupils learn about trade and cultural exchange in depth.

Impact: what pupils know and remember

Summary of the research review in relation to pupils' knowledge

■

Over time, a well-designed and well-taught curriculum enables all pupils to develop rich and connected substantive and disciplinary knowledge. This requires them to develop increasingly secure and complex knowledge of important content and concepts that can support future learning. It includes abstract concepts and chronological knowledge that connects pupils' knowledge to broader frameworks and narratives, making sure that it goes beyond isolated 'facts' about the past. Pupils should also develop increasingly secure and complex knowledge about how historians and others study the past and construct historical accounts. The scope of this disciplinary knowledge may be more limited for younger pupils. However, it must avoid misconceptions and unhelpful oversimplifications about the processes of historical enquiry.

46. In the majority of the schools visited, pupils had secure knowledge of aspects of the topics they had learned. In some topics, pupils remembered the content and concepts that leaders had identified as most important. In others, most often where leaders had provided limited guidance or training for teachers, there was less consistency between what pupils remembered. Often, significant numbers of pupils remembered relatively superficial details about topics they had studied, but they knew less about the ways that past societies functioned, people lived or developments occurred.

47. In some schools, pupils' knowledge about different topics had developed into richer and more connected knowledge about the past. For example, in one school, pupils demonstrated secure knowledge about a range of early civilisations. Most pupils could also reflect on important commonalities and differences between societies and developments, such as the importance of trade and resources. This was generally the case where teachers regularly helped pupils to connect information across topics through their explanations.

48. However, in around half the schools visited, some pupils' knowledge about different periods was disconnected and episodic. Pupils in these schools remembered features of different topics but did not know about broader narratives. There were gaps or misconceptions in their knowledge about when developments occurred or how they were connected. Typically, this was because leaders had not identified how pupils' knowledge should be connected across topics.

49. In other schools, pupils had generally secure knowledge of some aspects of what they had been taught. However, some pupils lacked important knowledge that was necessary for learning current or future content in their particular curriculum journey. Often this was because teachers had not emphasised or revisited the most important content. In some schools, it was because of weaknesses in assessment, which failed to identify or address these gaps.

50. Pupils' ability to communicate their knowledge and ideas through writing was often limited. In schools where this was the case, opportunities for pupils to develop their writing were limited, or teachers actively avoided them. As a result, some older pupils were unable to write fluently about what they had learned.

51. Across the schools visited, pupils' disciplinary knowledge of how historians and others study the past and construct accounts was very limited. This had led to most pupils having significant misconceptions. Most commonly, pupils viewed history as a very limited type of archaeology that involved digging up objects from the past and guessing what they were used for.

52. In many schools, pupils had also developed a general distrust of historians and their work, as

well as the sources of evidence that historians use, and they dismissed these as untrustworthy. Consequently, pupils' knowledge of the disciplinary traditions and approaches of history did not develop as they progressed through the curriculum.

What a small sample of Year 5 and 6 pupils knew about how historians and others study the past and construct accounts

In many schools, history was confused with a simplistic view of archaeology:

- 'They dig things up.'
- 'They dig things up and send them to a lab.'
- 'They use sources.'

In some schools, pupils had a general distrust of historians:

- 'They look for artefacts, and a lot of the time it is not true.'
- 'Sometimes, they have proof. Sometimes, [it's] not all correct because most of it is guessing.'

In a few schools, pupils had begun to recognise that historians work with a range of sources and draw on a wide range of research:

- 'They plan and go to libraries.'
- '[They] look through diaries of events and use primary and secondary sources to try and get a somewhat accurate view of what happened.'
- 'They have to learn off each other using sources and piece it together.'

Pedagogy

Summary of the research review relevant to pedagogy

Teachers need to choose activities that emphasise and revisit important content and concepts to make sure that all pupils learn and remember them, while ensuring that new information is taught within a context that makes this meaningful for pupils. Narratives and stories are a highly effective way of teaching new content in history.

When supporting pupils with SEND or with gaps in their knowledge, it is more important to make sure that pupils can access the curriculum (by securing knowledge of important content and concepts) than to engineer access to the immediate task by adapting it.

53. In most of the schools visited, teachers planned lesson activities around what they wanted pupils to learn. In the more effective schools, teachers also considered what pupils already knew when choosing activities and offering explanations.

54. In some schools, teachers regularly revisited important content and concepts, either through specific activities or through high-quality explanations. This was particularly effective when teachers helped pupils to understand bigger ideas and underlying concepts as they reoccurred in new contexts, or to connect the material they had learned into broader frameworks and narratives. For example, in one school, teachers drew pupils' attention to the importance of geographical features in the development of early civilisations across a range of topics.

55. Some schools recognised the importance of stories to history teaching. Teachers made highly effective use of narrative, stories and context to make content meaningful for pupils. For example, in one school, pupils had developed a secure understanding of the experiences of enslaved people in North America. The teacher achieved this through a careful combination of broader context and a range of individual stories. In another school, pupils had been taught detailed content about medieval Baghdad. This gave them secure knowledge of broader ideas, such as the impact of intellectual and scientific developments, the importance of trade and the development of cities. Stories were often used very effectively in Reception, particularly where teachers had identified important vocabulary or concepts that could be learned effectively through a particular story.

56. In some schools, teachers did not always consider what pupils needed to know in order to make sense of new material or engage meaningfully with activities and historical questions. Often, this was a result of teachers focusing on pupils making their own judgments in order to 'think like a historian'. One typical example was teachers asking pupils to make inferences from sources without knowing enough about the context. This approach often had a number of negative effects on pupils' learning. First, it meant that pupils' responses were based on guesswork, because they did not know enough about the topic. This often led to misconceptions or gaps in their knowledge. Often, these were not addressed or challenged, as teachers considered that pupils had been successful in the task (because they had made a judgment). Second, this approach taught pupils to conflate guesswork with 'historical thinking'. This resulted in misconceptions about disciplinary knowledge. Third, this approach was time intensive. Pupils spent much of their lesson time making guesses, which left limited time for learning about the time and place they were studying.

57. The regular choice of time-intensive activities had an impact on timetabling and the possible scope of the curriculum in some schools. In these, leaders believed that history and geography lessons required a full afternoon of teaching as a result of these activity choices. The solution to fitting in both history and geography that most schools chose was to teach each for half the academic year in rotation.

58. In a few schools, leaders and teachers did not focus enough on what they wanted pupils to know about the past. In these schools, teaching activities often focused on aims that were not specific to history. In one school, for example, pupils had made models of a roundhouse, but had not learned the features of these or when this type of house was common.

59. In less effective practice, teachers rarely revisited material they had previously taught. In some cases, teachers had revisited material but had not considered what might be the most important content or the most effective way to revisit it. For example, some teachers used short retrieval activities, but these often focused on superficial or specific details that were not important to

curriculum objectives.

60. Support for pupils with SEND and for pupils who struggled to access the curriculum because of gaps in their knowledge was generally not planned well. Leaders and teachers in some schools had a limited understanding of how to help these pupils access the history curriculum. In other schools, teachers focused on adapting a particular task, for example by using writing frames or scaffolds, so that pupils could access it. However, they had not considered how to support pupils to access the curriculum by making sure that they developed secure knowledge of what was being taught, or by addressing gaps in what they already knew. In one school, leaders had significantly lower expectations for some pupils. Here, tasks were often differentiated into a 'lower-', 'middle-' and 'higher-ability' format, and the 'lower-ability' tasks focused less on pupils learning historical content.

Assessment

Summary of the research review relating to assessment

Assessment in history should allow teachers to make valid and meaningful judgements about the range and security of pupils' knowledge. It should enable them to identify gaps and misconceptions for groups or individual pupils so that these can be addressed quickly. Assessment should focus on whether pupils are secure in their knowledge of the most important content and concepts, which can support future learning. Assessing composite tasks is more challenging, because the interaction between layers of knowledge can obscure gaps and misconceptions in pupils' knowledge. Teachers need to design such tasks carefully. They need to have secure knowledge of how to assess pupils in history. Without this, their judgements and feedback can be distorted by a reliance on generic or overly broad skills descriptors.

61. In around half the schools visited, teachers assessed whether pupils had learned the content of the curriculum and whether there were specific gaps or misconceptions in their knowledge.

62. In the best examples we saw, teachers had a clear, shared understanding of the content and concepts that pupils needed to know, and they focused assessment on these. In these schools, teachers checked pupils' understanding of new content. For example, in a lesson on developments in farming and technology in the Iron Age, the teacher used a series of short questions to check whether pupils had understood key developments. Pupils wrote their answers on whiteboards, and the teachers checked that all pupils were secure in this knowledge. This enabled them to pick up gaps and misconceptions and address them quickly. In a few schools, teachers returned to important content and concepts regularly, to check that pupils' knowledge of these remained secure. However, in around a third of schools, the way these assessment approaches was implemented did not help teachers to identify specific gaps and misconceptions.

63. In a few schools, pupils were not assessed in history. In around a third of schools visited, pupils were only very infrequently assessed in history. In around half, assessment focused on trivial details or seemingly disconnected facts about topics.

64. In just under half the schools visited, teachers allocated broad labels to pupils, which purported to describe their 'progress' in history. However, in many cases, these judgements were made without teachers having a clear shared understanding of what pupils needed to know from the school's curriculum.

65. In some cases, teachers' judgements were based on poor proxies for pupils' progress, such as the quality of work in their books, or how well they engaged in lessons. In others, teachers identified evidence of broad history 'skills', such as 'asking historical questions' or 'using more than one source of evidence', but they did not consider whether pupils had secure knowledge of what they had learned. This often led to teachers giving pupils vague or imprecise feedback on their work.

Systems and policies at school and subject level

Summary of the research review relevant to systems at school and subject level

Leaders must make sure that teachers have enough time to teach a broad and ambitious history curriculum. Whole-school policies and approaches can be highly supportive of the quality of history education in schools, particularly when they are appropriately flexible to account for the distinctiveness of the subject and when leaders understand how pupils get better in history. Without this, whole-school policies relating to models of progression, assessment or pedagogy can have a negative effect. They can distort aspects of subject education or undermine teachers' efforts to provide a high-quality curriculum.

66. In almost all the schools visited, leaders had made sure that teachers had enough time to teach a broad history curriculum.

67. In most schools, history was taught in timetabled lessons. Typically, this was one full afternoon of teaching per week, in half-termly blocks, and geography was taught in the other half of each term. As noted above (in 'Pedagogy'), leaders in some schools felt constrained in their choice of timetabling history lessons because of the regular use of time-intensive pedagogies.

68. In some schools, teachers were given more freedom to decide when history was taught. Generally, teachers taught history regularly. In a few schools, however, pupils had not been given enough time to study history. Leaders had not made sure that teachers were devoting enough time to foundation subjects.

69. Whole-school decisions had typically improved the quality of history education. For example, in some schools, leaders made sure that teachers had time to develop their subject knowledge and knowledge of how to design and implement the curriculum in history. Others reduced teachers' workload of marking or other tasks so that they could spend more time on developing and renewing the curriculum and teaching resources.

70. In a few schools, whole-school decisions had a negative impact on history education. Usually this was because the whole-school approach to assessment was poorly designed or implemented.

It did not give teachers enough flexibility to check whether pupils were developing a secure knowledge of history as they progressed through the curriculum.

71. In some schools, potentially positive whole-school approaches were having a limited or negative impact when they were implemented in a generic way. This was when leaders had not considered carefully enough how to apply them meaningfully to history or how to check whether they were being applied meaningfully. So, initiatives that worked very well in some settings, such as regular retrieval practice or developing 'golden threads' across the curriculum, had a limited impact in others. This was because leaders applied them superficially without considering whether they supported pupils to develop richer and more secure knowledge over time.

72. While the actual process of quality assurance looked similar in most schools, there were significant differences in how far it attended to the important features of a high-quality history education. In some schools, leaders accepted the presence of superficial features as evidence of quality. For example, in one school, leaders considered the curriculum to be well sequenced because they had identified 'golden threads' in curriculum plans. In another, progression documents contained misconceptions about how pupils get better at history. Again, leaders accepted these as evidence that the curriculum was well sequenced.

73. In a few schools, quality assurance in history was markedly more sophisticated. For example, in one school, leaders used a range of approaches to check whether pupils were learning history securely and in depth. They had identified subject-specific aspects of quality to consider across the school. Examples included the extent to which pupils were secure in their knowledge of the historical context of periods they had studied, and how well teachers used smaller stories and narratives to teach pupils about broader developments and contexts.

Teachers' knowledge and expertise

Summary of the research review relevant to teachers' knowledge and expertise

Effective history teaching requires teachers to have secure content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge (knowledge of how to teach history effectively). Schools should support teachers to develop their content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge through high-quality subject-specific professional development, guidance and resources. When teachers are responsible for constructing the curriculum, they need to have strong knowledge of historical content, and of the work of published historians and history educators and researchers.

74. In most of the schools visited, teachers knew enough about the content they were teaching. This was particularly impressive given the pressures on teachers to develop subject knowledge across a wide range of subjects. Often, the school had provided useful guidance and resources to support them. This guidance was especially useful when it set out the most important content and concepts that pupils needed to learn in particular topics.

75. In around half the schools, leaders had allocated little or no time to developing staff subject

knowledge in history. In a few of these schools, teachers, or some teachers, carried out extensive research on their own to prepare for teaching history topics, without useful guidance or support. In others, guidance was too vague or broad to be useful in supporting teachers to make decisions about the curriculum, assessment and teaching in particular topics or lessons. In a few schools, teachers lacked sufficient content knowledge to teach history effectively.

76. In a number of schools, leaders' content choices were influenced by staff subject knowledge and the availability of resources. In many schools, for example, leaders and teachers felt less confident in teaching early civilisations, other than Egypt, and therefore significantly more curriculum time was given to this topic. In some of these schools, not enough time was allocated for teachers to develop their content knowledge of new topics, and it was therefore difficult for leaders to introduce new curriculum content.

77. CPD was available to subject leads, but teachers had rarely received enough training on how pupils make progress in history. Consequently, they did not always know how to help pupils make progress or how to make appropriate pedagogical choices for the history content to be taught. A common example of this was the way teachers focused heavily on pupils making their own judgements without having taught the knowledge pupils needed to do so (noted above in 'Pedagogy'). Commonly, teachers did not have enough expertise or training in how to assess pupils in history. Some schools provided limited guidance on this. In others, the guidance was too broad to help teachers make meaningful judgements about pupils' knowledge or identify gaps and misconceptions.

78. In most of the schools visited, teachers lacked expertise or training in teaching how historians study the past and construct their accounts. In around half the schools visited, teachers had misconceptions about national curriculum guidance on historical concepts. This led them to focus on pupils making shallow judgements about historical significance or constructing their own 'interpretations' of the past without having learned enough about how historians and others study the past and construct accounts.

79. In many schools, subject leaders in history had very little additional time or support to help them carry out their roles. They were expected to create curriculum and teaching resources and assure the quality of history education in the school within very limited time.

Secondary

Our findings are extrapolated from our sample of secondary schools visited.

Curriculum

Planning for knowledge

Summary of the research review relevant to planning for knowledge

Pupils get better at history as they develop their substantive and disciplinary knowledge. Curriculum design in history is not straightforward. The range, depth and security of pupils' existing knowledge help them to learn new material. It is not possible to plot a simple, linear path through the curriculum. Instead, leaders and teachers must make careful decisions about what content to emphasise in topics and lessons (sometimes referred to as 'core knowledge'). Leaders should focus on identifying the core knowledge that, if learned, will be most likely to help pupils make sense of future learning. Some aspects of historical knowledge that may be particularly important for future learning are:

- knowledge of the immediate topic or context
- knowledge of broad features of the period and overviews of developments
- knowledge of terms, concepts and phenomena that recur in later topics.

Leaders should also plan carefully to develop pupils' disciplinary knowledge (how historians study the past and construct accounts) over time.

80. In almost all the secondary schools visited, leaders made sure that enough time was given to the teaching of history. Typically, this was somewhere between 100 and 150 minutes a fortnight at key stage 3. In one school, history was taught within combined humanities in Year 7. This resulted in the range of history content pupils learned across key stage 3 being limited. In another school, pupils studied history for one hour per week in Years 7 and 8, and only some pupils continued to study the subject in Year 9.

81. Typically, schools had invested significant time in developing the history curriculum. Leaders had often identified what they wanted pupils to know and be able to do as a result of the taught history curriculum. In most of the schools, leaders had identified substantive and disciplinary knowledge that pupils needed to learn.

82. Leaders tended to have a sound rationale for the substantive knowledge that they wanted pupils to develop. In the best examples, leaders had thought carefully about how to create a broad and ambitious curriculum and give pupils the best chance of accessing this by developing their knowledge over time.

83. In a few schools, leaders had planned in detail the knowledge they wanted pupils to develop, but their rationale for emphasising particular content was limited. In some cases, these curriculum plans identified disconnected facts for pupils to learn and did not focus on important content and concepts to support future learning or ensure a broad and ambitious curriculum.

Terms and concepts

Some concepts are likely to appear frequently during a pupil's history education. Often, pupils' mental model, or schema, of these concepts can make a big difference to their understanding of new material. This mental model needs to incorporate increasingly complex knowledge. It is not the same as pupils knowing a simple or generic definition of a term. Leaders can give pupils a better chance of making sense of challenging new material by planning for them to encounter a wide range of important concepts repeatedly. This will help pupils to develop increasingly complex knowledge about these concepts. Over time, this will include knowledge about concepts that are sensitive to their historical context and the way they are used by historians. Teachers can also plan for pupils to develop their knowledge of recurring concepts by teaching them in the context of similar events, relationships and states of affairs in different periods.

84. In most of the schools, leaders recognised the importance of developing pupils' knowledge of substantive concepts over time. However, the way they did this, and its impact, varied significantly between schools.

85. In the best examples, leaders demonstrated sophisticated thinking about the content and concepts that might be most worth emphasising at different points in pupils' journeys through the curriculum. This included identifying where pupils might need more detailed 'fingertip' knowledge of an immediate topic, and what 'residue' knowledge (knowledge that needs to be remembered in the longer term) might be most important to secure for the future.

86. In other schools, leaders had identified broad 'themes' that recurred in their curriculum but had not considered what pupils might need to know about these themes at any particular point in the curriculum journey. In these schools, pupils could often remember historical examples relating to a theme (such as examples of 'power' they had studied), but they had not secured more complex knowledge, for example, of how power was typically exercised in past societies they had studied. Teachers with strong subject knowledge often mitigated this by helping pupils to make connections between events and phenomena in different contexts. In some schools, pupils' knowledge varied between classes. This happened when teachers' subject knowledge was mixed, and leaders had not identified the kinds of complex knowledge about concepts that pupils needed.

87. In a few schools, leaders viewed concepts as simple items of vocabulary to be learned and sometimes revisited. They did not consider the importance of context, including subject- and topic-specific contexts, or how pupils' schema for terms and concepts could become more complex over time.

Chronological knowledge

Summary of the research review relevant to chronological knowledge

Connected historical knowledge requires pupils to have secure knowledge of broad chronological frameworks and longer-term developments, as well as knowledge of the broader features of particular historical periods and places. This is likely to include knowledge of specific

events and developments, although these need to be situated within a secure chronological framework.

88. In most of the schools, leaders emphasised the importance of pupils developing a secure chronological overview of the past. In a few cases, this was limited to being able to order chronologically events or topics that had been studied.

89. Leaders had generally considered some 'big stories' or longer trends or developments that pupils would learn about, for example how the role of monarchs changed over time, or how patterns of settlement changed from the medieval period to the present day. In a few schools, they planned this carefully to help pupils connect what they had learned about different topics and form coherent narratives about different aspects of the past.

90. In the best examples, leaders had also emphasised broader features of historical periods to further develop pupils' knowledge of the past. For example, teachers made sure that pupils were secure in their knowledge of how political and religious power operated in medieval Europe. However, in most schools, this knowledge of broader period features was not planned. This left some pupils with patchy knowledge of different periods and contexts.

91. In most schools, the aims for pupils' chronological knowledge did not extend before 1066. Leaders did not make sure that pupils retained knowledge of key events, developments or trends that they had learned in primary school.

Knowledge of the immediate topic

Summary of the research review relevant to topic knowledge

Pupils' learning within a history topic is heavily supported by their knowledge of the immediate historical context. Depending on what pupils need to learn, they may need a secure sense of the time and place they are studying, a secure knowledge of important developments, or an understanding of people's values and attitudes in that time and place. Pupils often need detailed and secure 'fingertip' knowledge about the particular topic they are studying. This allows them to think historically and construct accounts or arguments.

92. In most of the schools, leaders recognised the importance of pupils having a secure knowledge of the narrative of key events or developments in the topic they were studying. When schools did this well, it helped to secure pupils' knowledge of the topic and their ability to make sense of more challenging information.

93. In a few schools, teachers made sure that pupils had a strong grasp of the context of the time and place they were studying and a secure knowledge of important events and developments. For example, in one school where pupils were learning about the witch crazes, they had a secure knowledge of relevant earlier developments, such as the Reformation, and of religious attitudes at

the time. Leaders had planned for pupils to understand the complexities of women's roles and prevailing attitudes towards women. This allowed pupils to make sense of more challenging material than they would otherwise have done.

94. Two factors appeared to be associated with how successfully teachers secured pupils' knowledge of contexts and narratives:

- the range and depth of teachers' knowledge about the topic being taught, and
- whether curriculum plans set out the most important content that pupils needed to know, including knowledge of the immediate context

95. One subject leader described how teachers had discussed the 'fingertip' knowledge pupils might need in a topic, and the knowledge they might need to remember in the longer term. These discussions had been a powerful professional tool for developing the curriculum and teachers' knowledge of how to teach the subject.

96. In most schools, teachers tended to refer to a sequence of events or the context of the time and place. However, they did not always connect this information for pupils or make sure that the pupils understood and learned it. In most cases, this was because leaders and teachers had not considered what pupils might need to know about the context or events they were studying. Teachers had focused on broader or less immediate aims and were less clear about what pupils needed to know in the present (see the example below). As a result, pupils' knowledge of the context they were studying varied, both within and between classes. This made it more difficult for some pupils to learn new material in history.

An example of weaker practice relating to pupils' knowledge of the context

In one school, pupils in Year 10 had been learning about Weimar Germany in preparation for GCSE examinations. They were a few weeks into the topic. Several lessons were seen in which teachers were teaching new content about Weimar Germany.

When teachers introduced new information, such as the threat of extremist parties, they focused on giving pupils just a few 'key facts'. Many pupils lacked deeper knowledge of, for example, the political system of Weimar Germany, or typical attitudes of different groups to particular political or social issues. Pupils found it very hard to recall information that they had learned recently. Overall, most pupils' knowledge of the topic was very weak. In most lessons, there was a short time when teachers taught new knowledge about the topic, followed by lengthy and repetitive practice in answering GCSE examination questions. Teachers failed to recognise that pupils' knowledge of the context was not secure enough. Many pupils struggled to answer the examination questions because of this.

One teacher recognised that there were gaps in pupils' knowledge and that they were 'struggling to understand Weimar'. However, teachers were encouraged to give pupils further practice in examination questions rather than to address the important gaps in their knowledge of the topic.

Disciplinary knowledge

Summary of the research review relevant to disciplinary knowledge

Historians make claims and construct accounts of the past within established and dynamic traditions of historical enquiry. Over time, pupils should learn about the ways that historians and others construct arguments and accounts about the past. Teachers should, therefore, teach pupils increasingly complex knowledge about important disciplinary concepts, approaches and issues. These are not generic skills. They should form an increasingly secure and complex body of knowledge. For example, pupils might learn about the ways that medieval social historians reconstruct the experiences of women in education in the period. They might learn how changing values and attitudes have influenced the degree and type of significance that historians and others have ascribed to a particular event. Historical argument is a particular form of knowledge construction. It is distinct from simply 'guessing' or having a point of view. Schools should be careful to avoid representing the complexity of historical processes, methods and fields of enquiry in simplistic or misleading ways. This can happen when schools teach pupils 'tips and tricks' rather than real examples of the ways historians study the past and construct their accounts. Teachers can support pupils to engage meaningfully with historical questions and construct their own historical responses and arguments, by building secure, meaningful disciplinary knowledge and rich substantive knowledge.

97. In most of the schools visited, leaders had planned for pupils to develop disciplinary knowledge. Leaders recognised the importance of pupils learning how historians study the past and construct their accounts.

98. However, in most schools, the scope of the disciplinary knowledge that leaders intended pupils to learn was limited. In most cases, this was because leaders and teachers focused on pupils making judgements in response to historical questions or about sources, without planning the disciplinary and substantive knowledge they would need to learn to do this better over time.

99. Instead, in these schools, pupils tended to learn simplistic 'tips and tricks', which misrepresented the complexity of the traditions of historical enquiry. For example, in most schools, pupils had been taught to comment on the 'nature, origin and purpose' of sources, or to write 'PEEL' (point, evidence, explain, link) paragraphs. However, they did not develop meaningful knowledge over time about how historians use sources to study the past or communicate claims about the past. In many schools, teachers accepted any judgements that pupils made as evidence of 'historical thinking'. They did not plan for, or identify, what pupils actually knew about how historians study the past and construct accounts.

100. The teaching of disciplinary knowledge in key stage 3 was overly influenced by leaders' interpretations of GCSE examination requirements. In most schools, pupils learned disciplinary knowledge that was either directly or indirectly connected to particular GCSE question types. This often meant that the scope of what pupils learned was limited to making simplistic judgements on individual sources rather than learning how historians construct accounts.

101. Students who studied history at A level were often taught more accurate and complex representations of how historians construct accounts about the past. However, in many schools, students were poorly prepared for this because the disciplinary knowledge they had developed earlier was limited or inaccurate.

102. To develop pupils' understanding of historical enquiry, teachers in some schools used examples of real historians and how they had studied a particular aspect of the past. However, this did not guarantee that pupils developed secure disciplinary knowledge. This was because, in many cases, teachers did not accurately represent the ways that historians constructed their accounts. Some presented historians' arguments as isolated gobbets, without reference to the wider context of the field of research or the available source material. While encounters with real historians were useful in demonstrating some aspects of historical enquiry to pupils, leaders' plans for what pupils would learn over time from these encounters were generally limited.

How one school developed pupils' disciplinary knowledge

In this school, leaders and teachers understood the misconceptions that pupils could develop about how historians and others study the past and construct accounts. When teaching about sources, teachers were careful to present the way that historians use sources positively. They showed how historians make reasonable judgements and construct accounts even when source material is limited. Teachers made sure that pupils had secure substantive knowledge of topics so that they could make sense of the way historians approached historical questions about these topics. They supported pupils to make meaningful judgements in response to historical questions. Teachers drew on the published work of historians to make sure that they represented their work in specific periods and fields of enquiry accurately. Leaders had begun to work on how this knowledge about historians could be sequenced more carefully to make sure that all pupils developed more secure and complex disciplinary knowledge.

103. Typically, historical topics were structured by overarching enquiry questions. In the best examples, these wove together specific substantive and disciplinary knowledge. Pupils learned how historians approach specific historical questions and problems in the context of secure substantive knowledge about a particular historical context. Pupils developed detailed and secure knowledge that enabled them to answer the enquiry question meaningfully.

104. However, in just under half the schools visited, leaders had not considered the relationship between substantive and disciplinary knowledge. In many schools, pupils were asked to answer historical questions but lacked the substantive knowledge of the particular context to do so meaningfully. For example, in one school pupils were asked to judge which factor was most important in developments in medicine in the 20th century. Pupils had limited knowledge of these developments and their causes, and they were therefore unable to answer the question meaningfully.

105. In some schools, historical questions were poorly grounded in the traditions of historical enquiry. Examples included 'Who killed Thomas Becket?', 'Was Guy Fawkes framed?' and 'How evil was Rasputin?' The first two questions focused pupils' thinking on narrow aspects of the past

and did not help them to learn about deeper features of events and societies through the lenses used by historians. In the third case, and in the case of similar questions, pupils were encouraged to draw too heavily on their own values and attitudes without understanding the context, values and attitudes of people at different times in the past. This left pupils with misconceptions about past societies.

106. In some schools, historical content was framed in ways that strongly suggested that there was a particular 'right' answer to complex historical questions. Some teachers encouraged pupils to take a particular moral or political position on contested issues.

107. The following are approaches to teaching disciplinary knowledge, observed during the visits, that led to more secure knowledge for pupils:

- plans for teaching disciplinary knowledge were influenced by an understanding of how specific historians had approached particular questions
- leaders carefully planned overarching enquiry questions for topics that foregrounded an aspect of disciplinary knowledge (for example how historians use sources) within a clear substantive context
- leaders explicitly planned how pupils would learn more, and more complex, disciplinary knowledge over time
- leaders and teachers ensured that pupils developed secure substantive knowledge of topics so that they could make sense of how historians had studied these periods, and were able to make their own meaningful judgements about the past

Ensuring breadth and depth

Summary of the research review relevant to ensuring breadth and depth

History curriculums should be broad and develop pupils' knowledge of the complexity and diversity of human societies, developments and experiences. Leaders should seek to adopt, adapt or construct a broad curriculum. Within the time available, leaders should consider how far the curriculum enables pupils to study a range of historical periods and to study the past through the perspectives of different timescales, including through overview and depth studies. Leaders should consider the depth in which different periods are studied. Pupils should learn about a wide range of places and societies, including how developments in different places are connected. Pupils should also learn about different people, groups and experiences. Teaching should seek to represent the complexity and diversity of the past accurately. Pupils should also study the past through different lenses and learn about different fields of historical enquiry, including political, social, economic and cultural history.

108. Most of the schools visited had invested significant time in developing the breadth of the content that pupils studied. Pupils were generally studying a broad curriculum that represented the complexity of the past.

109. However, schools varied in the depth in which they taught historical periods, societies and developments. In just over half the schools visited, pupils studied topics in increasing depth as their historical knowledge developed. In just under half, leaders had not considered the depth to which they wanted pupils to study topics. Teaching sometimes focused on more superficial or disconnected information. Teachers did not attempt to connect pupils' knowledge to give them a deeper understanding of the past. In one school, for example, pupils studied a broad range of content, but teachers quickly moved on to new topics without spending enough time on securing deeper knowledge of periods studied. Pupils remembered sketchy details of some events or biographical information about some individuals. For example, pupils typically remembered facts about the use of the guillotine in the period after the French Revolution and details about Napoleon's military career, but they did not know about the consequences of the Revolution or changes in French society.

A range of periods and timescales

110. In all the schools we visited, the range of topics taught was broadly in line with the national curriculum. Leaders often valued pupils learning about a wide range of historical periods.

111. Most schools devoted significantly more curriculum time to 19th and 20th century history than to earlier periods. In around a third of schools, a particularly heavy focus on later periods left pupils with patchy or limited knowledge of earlier periods. Typically, pupils studied little history relating to the 12th, 15th or 18th centuries.

112. In a few schools, some aspects of teaching were likely to result in simplistic ideas or misconceptions about people who lived in earlier periods, typically that they were stupid or cruel, or both.

113. In most schools, leaders wanted pupils to develop knowledge of coherent narratives across different periods. In some schools, this was very successful, particularly when teachers regularly helped pupils to make sense of broader developments and contexts. This was often through high-quality explanation, which helped to connect information for pupils. In one lesson, for example, the teacher regularly gave powerful explanations of how events pupils were studying linked to the wider context of the Cold War and interwar period in Germany. However, in around half the schools, pupils' knowledge of different periods was disconnected.

A range of places and societies

114. In most schools, pupils' knowledge of British history was complemented by detailed knowledge of developments in other parts of the world. In the best examples, leaders had considered regional

diversity on different scales and developed pupils' knowledge of how developments in different places were interconnected. For example, in one school, pupils developed secure knowledge of pre-colonial West African societies, regional diversity in the UK through women's experiences of the Industrial Revolution in contrasting areas of the UK, and how places are connected through the movement of people and ideas at different periods in the past. In another school, pupils learned about Baghdad and the history of the Steppe. This helped them to connect their knowledge of developments in different places into coherent narratives, as teachers emphasised the connections between developments in these places and other places they had studied.

115. However, in around a third of the schools, leaders had not thought carefully about the range of places and societies that pupils studied. Typically, pupils' learning about places beyond the British Isles was limited to a topic on the modern USA or the Cold War. Pupils learned very little about developments in other places or at earlier times, or about how they are connected.

116. It was rare that pupils had learned much about the history of different regions of the British Isles.

Local history

117. In all but one of the schools visited, pupils studied at least one significant topic linked to the history of their local area.

118. In most of these schools, pupils learned about the history of their local area regularly and in a number of different periods. Teachers combined specific topics on local history with smaller, but meaningful, encounters with local history when teaching pupils about broader developments.

A range of people, groups and experiences

119. In most schools, leaders had thought carefully about the range of people, groups and experiences that were taught across the curriculum. Pupils learned about the complexity and diversity of the experiences of different people and groups in the past, within the context of broader developments or features of the societies they studied.

120. However, in a significant minority of schools, pupils developed misconceptions about the experiences of particular groups. They often viewed groups as homogenous and assumed that large groups of people had shared very similar experiences. In a few cases, teaching emphasised only the negative experiences of a particular group, creating problematic singular narratives of victimhood. Typically, this was because teachers had not accurately represented the complexity and diversity of experiences in the past. This was often because they lacked sufficient content knowledge about these, particularly when the content had been introduced to the curriculum relatively recently.

121. Enquiry questions were sometimes chosen because they reinforced particular modern values rather than for exploring a historical issue. In some cases, teaching had, in practice,

misrepresented past experiences in order to present a particular view. Typically, this was the result of a lack of teacher knowledge about the complexities of particular content or about how to help pupils engage meaningfully with contested, emotive or controversial aspects of the past.

Fields of enquiry

122. Leaders had generally thought carefully about the blend of political and social content that pupils studied. In most schools, pupils were taught about a range of political and social aspects of the past.

123. Pupils' knowledge of British political history was often connected to coherent overarching narratives. In a few schools, leaders had also attempted to help pupils make sense of broader developments in social history. In others, pupils learned about aspects of British political history in different periods but had not been taught about how these developments might be connected. For example, teachers had not discussed how changing views about political power in the early modern period influenced developments relating to the British monarchy, which pupils had studied in earlier periods.

124. Pupils tended to learn significantly less about the cultural and economic aspects of the developments and societies they studied. Examples of economic and cultural history were often isolated in the curriculum and not connected to broader narratives. Often, content relating to these areas was not planned as deliberately as content relating to political and social history. Pupils' conceptual knowledge about economic history was often insufficient for future learning. For example, in some schools, pupils found content on economic history, such as learning about the Great Depression at key stage 4, hard to access. This was because they had not learned related conceptual knowledge through previous examples.

Impact: what pupils know and remember

Summary of the research review in relation to pupils' knowledge

Over time, a well-designed and well-taught curriculum enables all pupils to develop rich and connected substantive and disciplinary knowledge. This requires them to learn increasingly secure and complex knowledge of important content and concepts that can support future learning. It includes abstract concepts and chronological knowledge that connect pupils' knowledge to broader frameworks and narratives, making sure that it goes beyond isolated facts about the past. Pupils should also develop increasingly secure and complex knowledge about how historians and others study the past and construct historical accounts.

125. In the majority of schools visited, most pupils gained secure knowledge of aspects of the topics they had been taught. In around a third of schools, this knowledge was very secure for most

pupils, and most pupils knew about historical topics in depth.

126. In just under a third of schools, there were significant gaps between pupils in the depth and security of their knowledge. In some cases, this was because teachers had lower expectations of some pupils. In others, it was because curriculum planning did not clearly identify an entitlement of historical knowledge for all pupils, or because assessment did not check whether pupils had securely developed this knowledge.

127. In around one third of schools, there were significant gaps between pupils in their ability to express historical ideas and knowledge in writing. In just over half these schools, pupils who could not communicate fluently in writing were given little further support or fewer opportunities to practise than their peers.

128. In the schools where history teaching and learning were stronger, pupils gained secure knowledge of recurring concepts and phenomena. For example, in one school, pupils' knowledge of phenomena such as industrialisation and terms such as living standards became more detailed and more complex because they had learned about these securely in many different contexts.

129. However, in a significant minority of schools, pupils' learning was limited to superficial knowledge of some events and developments, and pupils had not been taught about underlying concepts or features. For example, in one school, leaders had identified political power as an important theme in the curriculum. Pupils had recently studied Nazi Germany. However, some pupils' knowledge was limited to biographical details of Adolf Hitler. Pupils knew little about how political power operated in Weimar or Nazi Germany or in other places and times.

130. In around half the schools, pupils were generally secure in their knowledge of content and concepts. This helped them to make sense of new material in lessons. However, in other schools, some pupils lacked knowledge of the terms and concepts that would have helped them to understand new subjects. For example, in one school, pupils needed to understand the term 'constitution' and to know something of how constitutions functioned in 20th-century political systems to make sense of what they were being taught. Most pupils did not have this knowledge, and they struggled. These gaps were not identified or addressed.

131. It was particularly common for pupils in some schools to lack broader contextual knowledge, which limited their understanding of new material. Typically, these pupils did not know enough about the political or social context of a particular time and place, or about people's values and attitudes. Planning to secure this knowledge was often limited, and teachers did not check whether pupils were secure enough in their knowledge of the context to make sense of new material. For example, in one school, some pupils did not know enough about the political, social and cultural context of Russia at the time of the new economic policy to make sense of what they were taught about specific developments in this period. However, in other schools, pupils gained secure contextual knowledge. This enabled them to learn new material and develop a more sophisticated understanding of aspects of the past. For example, in one school, most pupils gained secure knowledge about the development of 'witch crazes' in 17th-century England. They were able to make sophisticated judgements about causes because they had secure and detailed knowledge of the social, cultural and political context.

132. In around half the schools visited, pupils had secure knowledge of broader narratives, longer-term developments and chronological frameworks. However, in others, pupils' chronological knowledge was weaker or less connected. In some schools, pupils had misconceptions about when

events or developments had occurred.

133. In most schools, misconceptions about disciplinary knowledge were common. Typical causes included:

- limited or poor curriculum planning
- insufficient ambition in plans for disciplinary knowledge
- teachers' misrepresentations of the complexity of historical traditions and approaches, or
- teachers' lack of pedagogical content knowledge about how to teach disciplinary traditions in history

134. Many pupils believed that a historian's job is to spot 'bias' in sources. Others believed that good history was 'an opinion backed up by evidence'. The conflation of historians and archaeologists, noted in primary schools, persisted for many pupils. One older pupil said that historians 'take DNA samples, check bones and skeletons'. Pupils also continued to believe that it was important to determine whether a source was 'secondary' or 'primary', as this allowed historians to judge its reliability. In other schools, pupils developed a general distrust of historical source material and of historians, often encouraged by the way that this was represented in lessons. For example, teachers in one school gave positive feedback to pupils who said that a source was unreliable because it was a newspaper and 'all newspapers have their own bias'.

135. In a few schools, pupils recognised some processes of construction underpinning historical accounts. However, this was often limited to a belief that historians select a small range of the best sources and then decide 'what happened' from these. In a few schools, pupils knew that historians might have differing accounts of the past. However, very few pupils could identify reasons why historians might disagree, as they had been taught little about how historical accounts are constructed.

Pedagogy

Summary of the research review relevant to pedagogy

Teachers need to choose activities that emphasise and revisit important content and concepts to make sure that all pupils learn and remember them. Narratives and stories are a highly effective way of teaching new content in history.

When supporting pupils with SEND or with gaps in their knowledge, it is more important to make sure that pupils can access the curriculum, by securing knowledge of important content and concepts, than to engineer access to the immediate task by adapting it.

136. In most of the schools visited, teachers made appropriate choices about activities to teach the content they wanted pupils to learn. In the best examples, teachers made sure that activities allowed pupils to maintain their analytical focus on this content throughout lessons.

137. Teachers regularly gave effective explanations to develop pupils' knowledge. In the best examples, they skilfully emphasised important content, drawing pupils' attention to important information and helping them to make links between new material and what they already knew.

138. Teachers regularly used extended texts in history lessons. These could be very effective when they chose or constructed them with pupils' prior knowledge and the intended learning in mind. However, in many cases, pupils lacked the prior knowledge to make sense of these texts. In a few schools, teachers used individual stories and experiences very successfully to illuminate broader developments and show the diversity and complexity of past experiences. For example, in one school, teachers used a range of case studies to explore the attitudes of different people to life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). When done well, pupils' knowledge of broader developments and that of individual or smaller stories appeared to be mutually reinforcing.

139. However, in many schools, teachers did not consistently make the most of opportunities to develop and connect pupils' knowledge through high-quality explanations, texts or resources. This was often because leaders and teachers prioritised pupils 'thinking for themselves' (that is, answering questions or making judgements) without teaching them the knowledge necessary to make meaningful judgements. It was common in these schools for teachers to spend significant lesson time on pupils making ungrounded guesses and assertions, while opportunities to develop detailed and secure knowledge of the past were missed.

140. In around half the schools, significant lesson time, even in key stage 3, was spent on teaching limited approaches to answering questions derived from key stage 4 examinations. In these schools, teachers did not focus as closely on developing pupils' knowledge of the past. As a result, pupils' knowledge was often weaker, or there were gaps between pupils in their knowledge of the curriculum.

141. In a few schools, teachers regularly checked pupils' understanding of important content before moving on. However, in more than half the schools, teachers did not consistently make sure that pupils had secured their knowledge of important content before moving on, or they moved quickly through challenging content without helping pupils to make sense of what they had been taught.

142. In around a third of schools, teachers regularly revisited content that pupils had previously learned. In a few of these, leaders had a sophisticated rationale for the content that pupils needed to know securely at different points in their curriculum journey. However, in some schools, teachers rarely revisited previous content. In some other schools, teachers revisited content, but leaders had not considered what content was worth revisiting and why. In some schools, this led to a superficial focus on trivial details about topics. Pupils had secure knowledge of isolated facts about topics but a weaker understanding of underlying concepts and ideas.

143. The quality of support for pupils with SEND or who struggled to access the curriculum because of gaps in their knowledge was mixed. In the weakest instances, teachers did not know how best to support these pupils in history. Adaptations focused on helping them to complete the immediate task, for example through writing frames or by significantly reducing the breadth and depth of content that they encountered. In the best examples, teachers focused on helping all pupils to access the curriculum in the long term by making sure that they developed secure knowledge of important content and concepts. In one school, support for pupils with SEND was focused on the core knowledge identified in the curriculum, and targeted support was given to make sure that they understood the most important content. Teachers regularly checked this.

Assessment

Summary of the research review relating to assessment

Assessment in history should allow teachers to make valid and meaningful judgements about the range and security of pupils' knowledge. It should enable them to identify gaps and misconceptions, so that these can be addressed quickly. Assessment should focus on whether pupils are secure in their knowledge of the most important content and concepts that can support future learning. Assessing composite tasks, such as essays, is more challenging, because pupils need to draw on complex layers of knowledge to complete these tasks. This can obscure gaps and misconceptions. Teachers need to design these tasks carefully. They need to have secure knowledge of how to assess pupils in history in order to draw meaningful inferences from their work. Without a clear understanding of how pupils get better in history, teachers' judgements and feedback can be distorted by a reliance on generic or overly broad skills descriptors. Key stage 3 assessment, which is designed to closely mimic GCSE examination structures, is unlikely to support high-quality teaching or assessment.

144. In all the schools visited, pupils were regularly assessed in history. However, there were significant differences in the focus of this assessment, and in how teachers used the information from the assessment.

145. In the best examples, teachers identified the most important content and concepts in the curriculum and focused assessment on these. In a few schools, teachers systematically checked whether pupils had learned this important content during lessons and returned to it frequently to check that pupils had remembered it.

146. For example, in one school, teachers were supported with high-quality materials that identified the most important content and concepts that pupils needed to know, as well as common misconceptions they might have. These materials were developed and discussed in regular departmental meetings, and all teachers had a clear, shared understanding of what pupils needed to know. In lessons, teachers focused on teaching this content and regularly checked that all pupils had understood what they had been taught. They used a range of assessment approaches in lessons, and quickly and accurately identified gaps in individual pupils' knowledge. This went beyond checking that pupils could recall isolated facts. Teachers made sure that pupils were secure in their knowledge of the broader historical context and how new information related to this. In one lesson, for example, the teacher checked systematically that all pupils understood the significance of the German Nazi Party's 25-point programme in the political context of the period and as part of the narrative of the development of the party. Some pupils did not fully understand this, and the teacher explained it further, skilfully addressing gaps in pupils' understanding. Pupils in this school demonstrated secure and rich knowledge of the topics they had learned.

147. However, in more than half the schools, assessment did not focus enough on whether pupils had secure knowledge of the most important content and concepts in the curriculum. It did not help

teachers to identify important gaps and misconceptions in pupils' knowledge. There were several reasons for this across the schools visited:

- Teachers were unclear about the most important content and concepts that pupils needed to know.
- Assessment focused on broad skills and did not consider whether pupils' underlying knowledge was secure. In these cases, teachers did not identify weaknesses in pupils' knowledge, because the pupils were considered to have made satisfactory 'progress' if their work showed evidence of a broader skill (such as 'deploying evidence from more than one source'). In these schools, teachers identified some pupils as falling behind their peers, but did little to close gaps. They gave vague or high-level feedback that failed to address specific gaps and misconceptions. This affected the quality of pupils' understanding and their work.
- Formative assessment was too infrequent to identify weaknesses in pupils' knowledge quickly.
- Teachers accepted misleading indications that pupils had understood content, such as a response from a single pupil or pupils repeating information without demonstrating that they understood it.
- Teachers assessed pupils' knowledge of isolated facts but did not identify gaps in their broader knowledge of topics. For example, in one school, pupils were assessed on specific information about the events of the Cold War. However, the teacher did not identify that many pupils did not know about the division of Germany and Berlin after World War II, which made it difficult for them to make sense of the new content they were being taught.

148. In around half the schools, assessment at key stage 3 was based on GCSE-style questions. This tended to lead to teachers missing misconceptions and gaps in pupils' knowledge. In a few cases, significant time was devoted to practising simplistic approaches to GCSE-style questions rather than developing pupils' knowledge about the past.

149. In most schools, assessment of what pupils knew about how historians study the past and construct their accounts was weak. This was often because of the issues highlighted above relating to the teaching of disciplinary knowledge. These had led to a reductive approach to disciplinary knowledge and teachers overvaluing weak judgements made by pupils as evidence that they understood disciplinary knowledge.

Systems and policies at school and subject level

Summary of the research review relevant to systems at school and subject level

Leaders must make sure that teachers have enough time to teach a broad and ambitious history curriculum. Whole-school policies and approaches can be highly supportive of the quality of history education in schools, particularly when these are appropriately flexible to account for the

distinctiveness of the subject and when leaders understand how pupils get better in history. Without this, whole-school policies relating to models of progression, assessment or pedagogy can have a negative effect. They can distort aspects of subject education or undermine teachers' efforts to provide a high-quality curriculum.

150. In most of the schools we visited, whole-school policies and decisions helped teachers to provide a high-quality history education. Leaders had taken reasonable steps to limit the amount of history taught by non-specialist teachers and made sure that non-specialists were well supported.

151. Leaders often supported departments by allocating significant time to developing and renewing the curriculum. However, in a few schools, subject teachers were given limited time to work together.

152. Generally, leaders had reduced their expectations of book marking in recent years. Teachers considered that this had given them more time to focus on curriculum design, teaching and assessment. However, in a few schools, teachers were expected to devote significant time to marking books. This resulted in them having little time to focus on curriculum design or its impact on pupils' learning.

153. In most schools, teachers considered whole-school policies and approaches to curriculum, teaching and assessment to have been helpful. This was particularly the case when there was the flexibility to make sure that whole-school approaches did not distort approaches to teaching the subject. In one school, senior leaders recognised the potential for whole-school decisions to distort good practice in teaching subjects. They worked closely with subject specialists to avoid this.

154. However, in just under half the schools, the design or implementation of whole-school priorities had had a negative impact on some aspects of the quality of history education. Typically, this was where teachers had felt compelled to make pedagogical decisions to comply with leaders' expectations rather than because these were best for the subject and pupils' learning. Approaches to teaching and assessment were often too influenced by senior leaders' focus on preparing younger pupils for GCSE examinations. For example, teachers regularly taught and assessed examination-related skills and questions, which distracted them from developing and checking pupils' growing knowledge of the subject.

155. In most schools, leaders had systems in place to assure themselves of the quality of curriculum design, teaching and assessment. However, in most schools these systems did not consider the quality beyond surface features. For example, in one school, leaders were assured that the history curriculum was 'well sequenced' because the department had constructed 'skills progression ladders' to show how skills were revisited. However, these did not identify how pupils made meaningful progress in learning about the past.

Teachers' knowledge and expertise

Summary of the research review relevant to teachers' knowledge and expertise

Effective history teaching requires teachers to have secure content knowledge (knowledge of the historical content to be taught) and pedagogical content knowledge (knowledge of how to teach history effectively). Schools should support teachers to develop their content and pedagogical content knowledge through high-quality subject-specific professional development, guidance and resources. Where teachers are also responsible for constructing the curriculum, they need to have strong knowledge of historical content, and of the work of published historians and history educators and researchers.

156. In the majority of schools, teachers had good subject knowledge across the range of topics that they taught. In the best examples, teachers regularly engaged with the work of professional historians to develop their subject knowledge. However, this was rare.

157. In a few schools, leaders developed teachers' content and pedagogical content knowledge over time through regular discussions and training. In the best examples, leaders took a systematic approach to making sure that teachers had strong subject knowledge. For example, they identified and addressed gaps in collective knowledge across departments.

158. In most schools, subject-specific professional development was very limited. This was often because departmental time and training focused heavily on administrative tasks, or on GCSE specifications and cohorts. Less than a third of the schools visited had engaged with subject associations, and of these only a few had made significant use of these associations to develop practice.

159. In many schools, teachers misrepresented the disciplinary traditions and approaches of history or taught these in reductive ways that failed to develop pupils' knowledge of their complexity. This was despite almost all teachers having a clear understanding of the complexities of how historians study the past and construct their accounts. This suggests that there were other reasons for teachers presenting a different and misleading image of the work of historians to pupils, such as pressure to conform to whole-school assessment approaches, gaps in pedagogical content knowledge or training, and overemphasis on GCSE examination outcomes.

Appendix

Methodological note

This thematic report draws on findings from routine inspections and research visits to 50 schools. These visits were carried out between July 2022 and April 2023.

We identified a balanced sample of schools to visit in terms of:

- pupil numbers

levels of deprivation

- school location (urban or rural), and
- the schools' current overall effectiveness grade, although inadequate schools were not available for selection

These visits were split evenly between primary (25) and secondary (25) schools.

Participation in the research visits was voluntary. If a school declined to take part, inspectors visited an alternative school with similar characteristics.

Research visits were carried out in one school day, usually by a single inspector with relevant expertise in history education. Wherever possible, inspectors spoke to senior and subject leaders, visited history lessons and spoke to pupils. They also reviewed pupils' work in history.

Each inspector visited many schools. They gathered evidence about history education in the schools they visited. Inspectors did not make any judgements about the quality of history education in individual schools. However, the range of evidence gathered across these visits enabled us to identify common themes in history education that are likely to be relevant in a wide range of schools.

Inspectors focused on gathering evidence that related to the following areas:

- curriculum
- pedagogy
- assessment, and
- school-level systems and their impact on history education

When analysing this evidence, we drew on the conception of quality in history education set out in our history research review. This enabled us to consider how history education in English schools relates to our best evidence about how schools can ensure a high-quality history education for all pupils.

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1. The requirement for maintained schools and academies to offer a broad and balanced curriculum is set out in the Education Act 2002 (for maintained schools) and the Academies Act 2010. This expectation is reflected in the national curriculum and is at the heart of the education inspection framework.↵
 2. ['Explore education statistics, create your own tables tool'](#), GOV.UK.↵
 3. A network of knowledge associated with particular terms, concepts or ideas.↵

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