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Mrs I Falconer
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Dear Mrs Falconer

Ofsted 2011–12 subject survey inspection programme: geography

Thank you for your hospitality and cooperation, and that of the staff and pupils, during my visit on 7 June 2011 to look at work in geography.

The visit provided valuable information which will contribute to our national evaluation and reporting. Published reports are likely to list the names of the contributing institutions but individual institutions will not be identified in the main text without their consent.

The evidence used to inform the judgements included: interviews with staff and pupils; scrutiny of relevant documentation; analysis of pupils' work; and observation of four lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is good.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good overall with some variation across units of work.

- In the Early Years Foundation Stage, pupils make good progress. Their awareness of their immediate locality is raised through play, adult-initiated activities and observations in the outside environment. There are well-structured experiences, including walks in the locality, which make them aware of changes in their environment and notice everyday features and landmarks.
- At Key Stages 1 and 2, where the topic is well planned and has a clear geographical focus, such as 'keen to be green', 'mighty mountains' and 'Antarctica', pupils make very good progress because there is a clear sequence of learning activities which builds their knowledge and understanding of specific places.

- Where planning is less focused, such as in the broad units on Australia and Africa, geography often provides a context for good creative writing in literacy with the geographical learning being more shallow and superficial.
- Pupils have a good knowledge of where places are, both near and far, because teachers frequently use atlases and globes to identify locations linked to topics in literacy and other subjects.
- There are limited quality opportunities for pupils to develop mapping and fieldwork skills. Progress in these areas is currently satisfactory.
- Behaviour in lessons is excellent. Pupils are keen to learn both collaboratively and independently. They enjoy finding out, especially about distant places, and they are especially keen when they can investigate a place in greater depth.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good overall.

- All observed lessons were at least good and were characterised by challenging and engaging tasks which enabled pupils to develop their thinking and understanding in geography. Teachers have good generic teaching skills.
- In these lessons, the quality of the questioning was good. Open questions enabled pupils to develop their answers. Very good use was also made of relevant geographical vocabulary, which was constantly being reinforced.
- A wide range of teaching and learning approaches, such as talk partners and group work, is used on a regular basis to encourage interaction and sharing of ideas among pupils.
- However, scrutiny of pupils' work showed that where planning of geography activities was less focused outcomes were not as successful, indicating that less secure or challenging approaches were being used. On these occasions, literacy outcomes were often paramount, with geography providing a context for writing.
- Effective use is being made of information and communication technology to support teaching. Multi-media video clips and photographs are used regularly to engage pupils visually and stimulate learning.
- Topical issues, such as the recent floods in Australia and the earthquake and tsunami in Japan, are frequently used as a stimulus for imaginative writing. However, the geography of the incident is not always explored in depth.
- Pupils' work is marked regularly. A commendable attempt is being made to moderate pupils' work as a means of monitoring quality as well as pupil performance. This is more secure at Key Stage 1 where it is easier to identify more limited outcomes. At Key Stage 2, good literacy outcomes sometimes distract and confuse judgements about geography. A well-written piece of creative writing may not always reflect good geographical learning.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is satisfactory.

- The current integrated curriculum is a 'work in progress' and has been evolving and developing over several years based on critical and conscientious self-review.
- The curriculum map provides a broad outline of what is to be taught. However, there is some variation in the quality and rigour of the geography in some of the units of work. Gaps sometimes occur when teachers are selective with the content of what might be taught.
- Where there is a strong emphasis on place, the quality and depth of study is clearly evident. Where the topic is broad, such as in the unit on Australia, coverage is shallow and lacks focus.
- Non-fiction texts are used well to raise awareness of a range of places around the world. This could provide a strong basis for some more in-depth work in geography. Currently, this is not always the case.
- The use of the outdoor environment to support learning and the development of fieldwork skills is an area that the school has identified as a priority for development. In particular, the residential experience at Llanwrtyd Wells in North Wales has the potential to become a quality geography fieldwork experience for the older pupils.
- Equally, links with schools abroad, such as the embryonic link with Buenos Aires in Argentina, are currently not firmly embedded into the taught curriculum to support geographical learning effectively.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is currently satisfactory but there is good capacity to improve.

- The subject leader is relatively new in post but has used her initiative to produce an audit of both the curriculum and outcomes for pupils to identify gaps and areas which need improvement. Monitoring structures are appropriate.
- Resources currently available are satisfactory overall. The school is well stocked with atlases and globes, but lacks the range and variety of resources to teach some units in sufficient depth.
- The resources and professional support provided by the subject associations have not been used in the past. However, recently, links have been established and the school is hoping to benefit from greater involvement in subject-specific professional development in the future.
- The senior leadership team is supportive of these developments to develop subject expertise as well as improve provision through the quality and range of the resources available to teachers.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- developing and resourcing the integrated units in the curriculum to ensure that there is consistent rigour and depth to the learning in geography
- using the support, training and resources available through the subject associations to improve provision and the confidence of teachers to teach geographically
- making more effective use of the outdoor environment to enhance learning and develop fieldwork and mapwork skills in particular.

I hope that these observations are useful as you continue to develop geography in the school.

As I explained previously, a copy of this letter will be published on the Ofsted website. It may be used to inform decisions about any future inspection. Except in the case of academies, a copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector