

Aviation House
125 Kingsway
London
WC2B 6SE

T 0300 123 1231
F 020 7421 6855
enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk
www.ofsted.gov.uk



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Ms J Jackson
Acting Headteacher
Cassop Primary School
Cassop
Durham
DH6 4RA

Dear Ms Jackson

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 13 September 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 two lessons.

The overall effectiveness of geography is outstanding.

Achievement in geography

Achievement in geography is good overall but outstanding in aspects linked to sustainability and the environment.

- Pupils enter the school with a range of experiences but generally with a limited knowledge of their immediate locality and the wider world around them.
- As they move across the school, they make good progress in the acquisition of skills, including fieldwork skills, as well as the knowledge of a variety of places. They develop excellent awareness of their environment as well as the need to lead sustainable lifestyles.
- Pupils develop a good basis of core geographical knowledge and, by the end of Year 6, use technical geographical terminology with some conviction. Locational knowledge is satisfactory but less secure.

- Very effective use is made of the local environment as well as regular visits to a range of localities, such as South Shields, Durham City and Grinton in Swaledale, to enable pupils to develop good observational skills, develop mapping abilities and provide opportunities to collect data first hand.
- By the time they leave school, pupils are beginning to develop a keen interest in the world around them and in caring for their environment.
- Pupils show great pride in their community, generally work well collaboratively and are attentive and respectful.

Quality of teaching in geography

The quality of teaching in geography is good and at times outstanding.

- Effective planning means that pupils are engaged by a wide range of activities and with an appropriate range of geographical resources.
- Teachers are generally confident in their ability to deliver quality experiences because specialist and up-to-date geographical expertise is readily available.
- Very good use is made of the outdoor environment on a regular basis to support learning and the development of geographical skills.
- Teaching is most effective when there is a clear focus on a specific case study or aspect of geography. For example, the excellent and well-planned photographic resources from their partner school in Kenya provide a wealth of good-quality learning opportunities in their study of life in a contrasting locality. Where the focus is more general, for example in the topics on Mexico or Australia, learning outcomes can be more superficial.
- Teachers have a very good awareness of sustainability and their enthusiasm and passion support very good learning in this aspect of the subject.
- Assessment procedures are adequate. Teachers know their pupils well and are able to record their progress sufficiently accurately. Outcomes are moderated by the subject leader. The lack of an up-to-date portfolio of exemplification material is a weakness acknowledged by the school and is an area identified for improvement.

Quality of the curriculum in geography

The quality of the curriculum in geography is outstanding.

- The planned for curriculum provides good coverage of a range of places and geographical concepts. It is enriched by a strong focus on sustainability and the environment as well as through focused cross curricular themes which develop literacy but also support good learning in geography. For example, through the rainforest project in Year 3/4 or the work in Reception/Year 1 which produced an excellent exploration and interpretation of 'We're going on a Bear Hunt'?

- Fieldwork is well planned and is seen as a key entitlement for every pupil. It is very well integrated into the scheme of work and provides a rich stimulus for both classroom and cross-curricular work.
- There is a strong focus on the global dimension which is enhanced by the strong link with a partner school in Kenya and growing links with schools in Derbyshire and France.
- There is a strong focus on local geography and the local environment which permeates the curriculum across the school. The excellent relationships with the local community and a wide range of individuals and agencies, particularly in the field of sustainability, support a strong curriculum.

Effectiveness of leadership and management in geography

The effectiveness of leadership and management in geography is outstanding.

- Strong leadership in the subject has created a culture where geography, and particularly sustainability, is very high profile in the life of the school. The school is at the cutting edge of sustainability and environmental learning and has a high national profile in this area of work.
- Leadership is well informed and has a good level of subject expertise. This has been used well to provide guidance for non-specialists and raise their confidence to teach the subject.
- A regular system of audit review provides the subject leader with a clear indication of strengths and weaknesses in provision. This leads to focused support where required.
- A good range of resources, including a range of maps, is available to support provision and good learning in the subject.
- The school is aware of the support and resources provided by the subject associations and uses these where appropriate. The sharing of expertise and dissemination of ideas nationally linked to sustainability have been a commonplace process, for example through providing the Theatrical Lecture at the Royal Geographical Society relating to the potential impact of melting icecaps on the world environment.

Areas for improvement, which we discussed, include:

- redesigning some units of work, such as those on Mexico and Australia, to ensure greater depth of study of places
- identifying more opportunities to improve pupils' locational knowledge
- developing a portfolio of exemplification materials to support teacher assessment and provide evidence to secure next steps in learning.

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

As 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. A copy of this letter is also being sent to your local authority.

Yours sincerely

Leszek Iwaskow
Her Majesty's Inspector