

A nation alone: The dangers of allowing children to drop history at 13

Inspectors reveal that more than 100 state schools in England failed to enter a single candidate for history GCSE last year. And they warn that the subject could be squeezed out of primary schools in favour of maths and English

By Richard Garner, Education Editor

Sunday, 13 March 2011

England is the only country in Europe to allow its youngsters to abandon history by the age of 13, inspectors reveal today. Ignoring the axiom that without history there can be no future, more than 100 state schools last year failed to enter a single candidate for the subject at GCSE – a 25 per cent increase on the previous year. A breakdown of candidates reveals that the Government's flagship academies are the worst offenders, with just 20 per cent of pupils entered for the subject.

But history is thriving in independent schools, with 48 per cent of pupils taking the subject. The average for the state sector is 30 per cent.

The report, by Ofsted – the education standards watchdog – also shows that youngsters can go through their entire education without ever being taught by a specialist history teacher.

"Given that history in primary schools is taught mostly by non-specialists, this means that an increasing number of students are taught by a specialist history teacher for no more than two or three years of compulsory education," it says.

The subject is a compulsory part of the curriculum for Key Stage 3 – usually for those aged 11 to 14. However, many schools are squeezing KS3 into two years to allow pupils to start their GCSE options a year earlier, which means pupils can stop studying the subject at 13.

"England is unique in Europe in this respect," the report adds. "In almost all European Union countries it is compulsory to study history until at least the ages of 15 and 16. History is compulsory until the age of 14 in Northern Ireland, the Netherlands and Wales, and all pupils study history as part of their broad general education in Scotland until they are 15."

The report warns: "If non-specialists also teach some of these [KS3] groups as well, it is entirely possible for students not to be taught history by a specialist history teacher at all during their school career."

The report, though, does say that where the subject is taught it is taught well.

"History continues to be popular ... at Key Stage 4 [for 14- to 16-year-olds] and, during the three-year period of the survey, there were more examination entries for history than for any other optional subject at GCSE level apart from design and technology." Other optional subjects include modern foreign languages and geography.

"The curriculum at GCSE and A-level was good or outstanding in all of the schools visited," it concluded. In all, inspectors visited 166 schools – 83 primary and 83 secondary.

The report also debunks the myth that little is taught about British history in schools. "Pupils in the schools visited studied a considerable amount of British history and knew a great deal about the particular topics covered," it said. "However, the large majority of the time was spent on English history rather than wider British history."

Inspectors voiced concern that youngsters can repeat the study of modern world history at GCSE and A-level – although they added that "it is a popular and inaccurate myth that students at GCSE and A-level only study Hitler".

There were concerns, too, that subjects such as history were being squeezed out of the curriculum for 10- and 11-year-olds in some schools as their national curriculum tests in maths and English loomed on the horizon.

"In Year 6 [the last year in primary school], teachers said to inspectors that the foundation subjects [all bar the core of English, maths and science] were 'not a priority'."

The Independent - Print Article

Christine Gilbert, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector, has said: "Focusing too much on the three core subjects can have negative effects on the curriculum in terms of breadth, balance and pupils' enjoyment."

The report also criticised primary teachers for lacking a sense of chronology in their teaching of history.

Commenting on today's report, Ms Gilbert added: "The report presents a positive picture of the standards and teaching in history in schools.

"However, [it] also found that some primary teachers find it difficult to establish a clear picture of the past so that pupils can develop a secure understanding of chronology."

The report also calls on the Government's national curriculum review to ensure enough time for history lessons for 11- to 14-year-olds.

Ministers believe their new English Baccalaureate, to be awarded to any youngster with five A* to C grade passes at GCSE in English, maths, a science, an ancient or modern language and a humanities subject – history or geography – will persuade more schools to focus on the subject.