

# Ofsted Update on Geography:

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The geography curriculum in schools identifies the knowledge and skills that pupils are to learn. Like many subjects, knowledge in geography can be organised into 2 forms:

Substantive knowledge sets out the content that is to be learned. The national curriculum and other geography education literature presents this through 4 interrelated forms:

- locational knowledge
- place knowledge
- human and physical processes (the geography community also includes 'environmental' as part of this)
- geographical skills.

Disciplinary knowledge is used when pupils consider where geographical knowledge originates, and how they can learn the practices of geographers.

A successful geography curriculum reflects teachers' careful thinking and rationale behind what is taught, the sequencing of learning and the relationships between the forms of knowledge.

While Ofsted recognises that there is no single way of achieving a good geography education, the report identifies some common features of a high-quality curriculum. For example:

- Teachers break down curriculum content into component parts and draw from the breadth of concepts to give pupils the knowledge they need to appreciate the wider subject. When choosing curriculum content, teachers consider pupils' prior knowledge and experiences.
- Teachers recognise that building pupils' knowledge of locations, or 'where's where', helps them build their own

identity and sense of place. Pupils develop an appreciation of distance and scale.

- Pupils gain the knowledge they need to develop an increasingly complex understanding of place. This helps them make a connection between location and geographical processes and personal experience. For example, looking at their own route to school, town or city may lead to more conceptual understanding that they can draw on when looking at regional, national and global scales.
- Fieldwork includes data collection, analysis and presentation. The experience of fieldwork draws together pupils' locational knowledge and that of human and physical processes. It should be practised regularly.
- Pupils see that geography is a dynamic subject where thinking and viewpoints change. Teachers correct pupils' misconceptions through secure subject knowledge and effective teaching approaches.
- Enquiry-based learning in geography can support the development of pupils' disciplinary knowledge. Through careful content selection and teacher guidance, it can increase pupils' capacity to recognise and ask geographical questions, to critique sources and reflect on what they have learned, as well as the methods used.
- When using contemporary media coverage to engage and motivate pupils, teachers ensure that the geographical knowledge to be learned is always at the forefront of their teaching. Teachers check that any media content is geographically accurate.
- Sufficient teaching time is allocated to cover the breadth of subject knowledge, and school leaders give careful thought to how geography is timetabled.

## Organising concepts

The geography community typically refers to ‘concepts’ as a means of categorising geographical knowledge of natural and human phenomena. These concepts can be seen as the ‘grammar’ of geography. They are also described as to be used as a ‘facilitating tool’ that is ‘fundamental to structuring and supporting how people learn geography’.

Concepts are a way in which to group geographical content or ‘a container for geographical ideas or content’ This aligns with Taylor’s ‘basic level’ description of ‘ways of dividing up our experience of a messy world into more manageable units, enabling us to communicate about the things we can’t immediately see’.

There is increasing, although by no means universal, agreement within the geography education community that many high-level concepts are central to a pupil’s geographical education. These include:

- place
- space
- scale
- interdependence
- physical and human processes
- environmental impact
- sustainable development
- cultural awareness
- cultural diversity

Concepts are important in geography as they draw out the links between processes and ideas. To develop their understanding of each of these concepts, pupils need to learn the range of relevant knowledge and skills. It is from this knowledge and development of these skills that pupils gain a more abstract appreciation of the subject. Therefore, it is critical that the content of the curriculum is broken down into component parts (or chunks) that pupils can first comprehend in their own right, before combining different components to gain a fuller conceptual appreciation.

- The geography curriculum identifies sufficient breadth of content and ensures that pupils learn this in sufficient depth.
- Pupils’ geographical education begins in the early years and builds year on year, developing pupils’ expertise.
- The organisation of the curriculum builds knowledge so that pupils can draw on it in future learning. Pupils are increasingly

able to apply generalisations to understand the world around them.

- Teachers are the adjudicators of curriculum content and select it judiciously. They use their good subject knowledge to do this and take into account how pupils build their geographical knowledge over time.
- Geographical expertise is built on substantive geographical knowledge. Drawing from the breadth of concepts gives pupils the knowledge they need to appreciate the whole domain of geography. They understand how common concepts draw different aspects of the subject together.
- Teachers break down the content they wish pupils to learn into component parts. When selecting that content, teachers take into account what their pupils need based on their prior knowledge and experiences.

## **Forms of geographical knowledge**

The national curriculum, since its introduction in 1991 and through its revisions since, has maintained a focus on 4 forms of geographical knowledge:

- locational knowledge
- place knowledge and understanding
- knowledge of environmental, physical and human geography processes
- geographical skills

Looking at each form of substantive knowledge in turn demonstrates both the substance of each and the relationships between them, as illustrated in the graphic below.



## Substantive Knowledge and Disciplinary Knowledge explained:

A high quality curriculum ensures pupils learn both the **substantive knowledge** required to connect prior learning with new, as well as the **disciplinary knowledge** which leads to pupils connecting learning between subject domains.

Substantive knowledge	Disciplinary knowledge
Domain specific Factual content The sequential flow of information required Required subject vocabulary Rules and methods Procedural fluency Structure of learning content within domain	Contextual and related information Big ideas Connecting arguments Opinions and interpretations Associated influences Critical arguments for and against Indirect evidence Inter-disciplinary

## Locational knowledge

- Pupils gain a secure knowledge of distance, orientation, scale and positioning systems, which begins in the early years. This

gives them the framework they need to understand locational knowledge.

- 'Knowing where's where' supports pupils' identity and sense of place and contributes to their understanding of geographical processes.
- Over time, pupils learn and remember more locational knowledge. They become increasingly fluent in identifying specific locations.

## **Place knowledge**

- Place knowledge is prioritised in the geography curriculum. It brings meaning to locations and processes studied.
- The curriculum and teachers' plans build pupils' knowledge of place by linking to places pupils already know or are familiar with. This may be from their personal experience as well as through what they have been taught.
- The curriculum gives pupils the knowledge they need to develop an increasingly complex understanding of place. Their understanding of place helps them to connect different aspects of geography. It also gives them different perspectives through which to consider the content studied.
- The curriculum builds pupils' place knowledge over time. This allows them to make meaningful comparisons.

## **Environmental, physical and human geography**

- Increasingly detailed knowledge of physical and human processes allows pupils to describe and explain different environments. Through this, pupils develop an appreciation of interconnectedness.
- Component knowledge is identified precisely and sequenced so that pupils first learn underpinning phenomena before moving on to more complex, multi-variate processes. This allows pupils to fully understand a wide range of environmental, human and physical processes.

- Over the course of study, pupils learn about processes that they are less familiar with or that are less visible.
- The curriculum ensures that older pupils are able to take a broader view, generalise, and critique models that represent specific processes.

## **Geographical skills and fieldwork**

- Pupils' procedural knowledge (geographical skills) allows them to gather, analyse, present and interpret spatial information. In doing so, they are adept at identifying patterns and trends.
- Pupils have the specific skills they need to represent and interpret geographical data. These skills are integrated into the curriculum so that pupils understand their application.
- Repeated practice of geographical skills improves pupils' fluency and accuracy.
- Fieldwork includes data collection, analysis and presentation. The experience of fieldwork draws together pupils' locational knowledge and that of human and physical processes. It supports pupils to appreciate the interplay between them.

## **A curriculum to 'think like a geographer': choosing, building and linking knowledge**

- Leaders who plan the curriculum appreciate that the body of knowledge covered by geography is vast. They make informed and careful choices about what is taught. This may go beyond the content prescribed in the national curriculum. For example, they may choose to explore particular phenomena that are prevalent in the locality.



- The curriculum includes the most appropriate examples and case studies to demonstrate each aspect being learned. These are always real and relevant to the content.
- When introducing new component knowledge, teachers make sure that pupils can relate this to what they already know, so that they build a strong schema and so remember more. Teachers emphasise this interconnectedness between forms of knowledge to help pupils do this.
- Through careful curriculum design, each form of knowledge receives due consideration. Pupils build their knowledge both within the form and in how each form relates to others. Crucially, the interplay between each develops pupils' secure geographical thinking.
- Leaders appreciate the structure of the subject, so their curriculum plans are constructed effectively to ensure that pupils know more, remember more and are able to do more.

- Over time, curricular goals are increasingly challenging. For example, they may increase in complexity, consider more variables, make multiple comparisons or require the application of abstract ideas.
- Teachers revisit content taught previously in order to introduce new, more complex knowledge to deepen pupils' understanding.
- In cross-subject or thematic approaches, each subject is carefully planned to ensure that pupils can make progress in each subject. The curriculum goals retain subject specificity.
- In planning a thematic curriculum, teachers are aware of the disciplinary nature of the subject. Their plans respect these disciplinary structures.
- Staff who plan thematic approaches are sufficiently expert in each discipline. They have a secure appreciation of how geography relates to other subjects and use this to develop clear plans.



# Selecting examples and case studies

When selecting case studies and examples, leaders and teachers take great care in:

- accurate representation
- avoiding portraying a 'single story'
- ensuring sufficient depth of understanding
- reflecting the dynamic nature of geography
- supporting pupils to see the interconnected nature of the subject
- broadening pupils' knowledge of the world
- fostering a sense of place
- supporting pupils' appreciation of generalisations and models

## Disciplinary knowledge

- The curriculum is designed to allow pupils to see that geography is a dynamic subject where thinking and viewpoints change.
- In developing pupils' disciplinary knowledge, teachers' plans allow pupils to:
  - take a holistic view of the content studied
  - establish whether the geographical questions posed, the methods used, and the answers found are valid
  - recognise the interconnectedness of different geographical content
  - appreciate what it means to be a geographer by asking geographical questions such as 'why is this place like this?', 'how is this place changing?' and 'how are other places affected?'
- Disciplinary knowledge ensures that pupils appreciate the context in which substantive knowledge was generated. This helps pupils to appreciate context and the perspective from which knowledge was created, different standpoints and how views have changed as time has moved on.

# Misconceptions

- Teachers correct pupils' misconceptions through secure subject knowledge and effective teaching approaches. They also ensure that their own teaching is accurate and clear. This means that pupils learn the individual building blocks before moving on to broader composite (or conceptual) knowledge.
- Teachers respect that in many aspects of geography there is a necessary order to the sequence of learning.
- Teachers teach content thoroughly without 'corner-cutting'.

# Curriculum structure

- The knowledge pupils learn is well organised with clear connections between components, which means they are more likely to remember it in the long term.
- The curriculum builds on pupils' prior learning and re-visits the content, which supports pupils in developing strong schemata.

# Pedagogy

- Teachers avoid overloading pupils' working memory. They break larger concepts or ideas into smaller 'bite-size' chunks and teach a small number of these
- Pupils commit knowledge to their long-term memory through recalling and repeated practice
- Pupils are efficient at carrying out tasks such as using grid references because they practise their procedural knowledge regularly

## **Carrying out enquiries and making decisions**

- Pupils are proficient in carrying out enquiries and decision-making exercises because they are secure in the prior knowledge they need for these.
- Carefully structured tasks give pupils sufficient instruction, guidance and support.
- The enquiry approach supports the development of pupils' disciplinary knowledge. For example, it increases their capacity to recognise and ask geographical questions, and to critique sources and reflect on what they have learned, as well as the methods used.

## **Special educational needs and/or disabilities**

- Pupils with SEND generally study the same curriculum scope as other pupils.
- Teachers have the same level of ambition for all pupils. They use specialist advice to adapt their teaching approaches where necessary.
- Teaching assistants are well briefed in the geography that is to be learned and the approaches taken. Teachers and specialists, including the SENCo, support them in their role.
- Classroom resources and fieldwork are adjusted as required to ensure that all pupils take part.

## **Assessment**

- Assessments allow pupils and teachers alike to appreciate what has been learned.
- Teachers are clear about the assessment criteria, which both helps pupils to improve their attainment and motivates them.
- Assessments are designed so that teachers can identify specific gaps in pupils' knowledge and any misconceptions.

- Assessment information flags areas where pupils have a secure knowledge and where they need some aspects to be retaught. If there are common issues, leaders review and adapt the curriculum.
- Teachers recognise that progress is rarely linear due to the cumulative nature of geography.

## **Pupils' motivation and interest**

- Through its very nature, geographical knowledge is stimulating and motivating. Teachers make the most of this and use many thought-provoking aspects of geography in the curriculum.
- Teachers motivate pupils by building on what pupils already know, ensuring that they experience success.
- Events or locations that interest pupils may be chosen to exemplify specific aspects of geography.
- When using personal experiences to generate interest, teachers manage the risks of:
  - narrowing the geographical curriculum
  - politicising teaching
  - losing subjectivity.
- Teachers use examples carefully to compare and contrast, as well as to stimulate interesting discussion.
- When using contemporary media coverage to engage pupils, teachers ensure that the geographical knowledge to be learned is always at the forefront of their teaching. Teachers are alert to the need to check that media content is geographically accurate.