

How to 'read' the National Curriculum for Geography

By Professor David Lambert

We should think about this question: how is the national curriculum programme of study for geography to be read?

Is it, for example, a set of precise and detailed instructions to teachers, telling them what to teach? If so, the teacher's job is presumably quite straightforward: our job is simply to deliver the curriculum as effectively as possible.

Even a cursory glance at the geography programme of study shows us that this interpretation is unsustainable. It is precise. But it is not detailed. Just to pick one example randomly from KS3: what on earth does it mean to deliver 'glaciation' to 11–14 year olds?

It is possible that some teachers will *assume* that what is meant is some form of content they dimly remember from their own schooling, maybe at A Level. Good luck to them. But it may be more helpful to think this through more creatively and imaginatively.

So, to help think more productively about the question, we can start with a riddle: *when is a curriculum not a curriculum?* Answer: when it is the national curriculum!

In its narrowest sense 'curriculum' may carry similar meaning to syllabus or specification. But many educationalists see it in a much broader sense and argue that a curriculum embodies a philosophy of education which includes a justification of the subject (in this case geography) and what it contributes to the educated young person. The curriculum may therefore be thought of as a plan or as a process, rather than a set of instructions. We have to ask ourselves, what we want to achieve. We then work out how we shall attempt to do this – and we do so within the context and overall remit of the so-called national curriculum. The national curriculum begins to answer some of these questions, but it leaves most of them to the professional judgement of teachers.

Getting back to 'glaciation'. The state has merely stated that in geography, at KS3, children should be exposed to this topic. But it is for (specialist) teachers to work out why (probably supported by the wider community such as the GA, textbook writers etc.). It is for teachers to select what aspects of this topic are appropriate (content), in what geographical context (place and location) through which methods and media (pedagogy) and with what kinds of productive links with other topics (for example climate change or landscape change).

We should read the knowledge-led national curriculum as the high level framework – or core of essential knowledge. We should read it as an invitation to specialist geography teachers to interpret with enthusiasm and verve. It invests more responsibility on teachers – as the curriculum makers.

The significance of...

The national curriculum programme of study alludes to many particular content topics, themes and places.

In order to interpret the potential of these it is helpful to start with notions of their 'significance'. This will help us select what to teach, and at what level of breadth or depth. It will also help us to build a coherent curriculum experience where topics mesh and link effectively with each other. To pick an obvious example: would you really try to teach 'geological timescales' as a discrete topic? Or would you embed this into more than one other topic – such as glaciation, soils or distinctive landscapes.

Or, is it feasible to 'cover' the regional focus of KS3 (Africa, South and East Asia, the Middle East and Russia) evenly in some kind of old fashioned 'regional geography'? Or can you select and explicitly differentiate extensive geographical knowledge from more intensive 'detailed place based exemplars'?

The following gives two examples of exploring significance in this way – a physical geography example and a regional geography example.

The significance of 'glaciation'

'I cannot teach glaciation to my students (in Whitechapel) because they will never encounter it. It is nothing to do with their lives and they do not see the relevance.'

This is a quotation from a trainee teacher in an inner urban school (dated 4 March 2013). It is disturbing because it argues, perhaps inadvertently, for the removal of geography (and a whole lot more besides) from the curriculum. It also makes assumptions about the students which are almost certainly wrong (that they will never travel for example, or that they cannot use their imaginations). In short, it reveals a very narrow conception of geography's contribution to the education of young people. It may even imply an assumption that academic content in the curriculum has no place in an inner urban school in the east end of London. There is no doubt that teaching glaciation to young teenagers requires ingenuity, for there are abstract ideas (such as geological time) and other difficulties (such as conceptualising the thickness and spatial extent of ice accumulations and its erosive power) to overcome. But the topic can inspire and enthrall. And more to the point it can be the 'way in' to a deeper understanding of for example:

- why London is sinking (isostatic adjustment)
- why sea levels (including in the Thames estuary) are rising
- climate change
- the appearance of landscapes across much of the northern hemisphere

In this context, which shows the potential significance of the topic, it is possible to argue that it is *because* they may think that glaciation is 'nothing to do with their lives' that it deserves a place in the (geography) school curriculum. However, the anecdotal example is also used here to illustrate the significance of *curriculum making*: it is the curriculum thinking that underpins the practical art of curriculum making that enables us to make the appropriate connections – and to be able to assert the 'relevance' to all children growing up today of glaciation as a topic.

The significance of the Middle East

'For whom is this the 'middle east?'

This question expresses a sentiment heard quite frequently, not least by individuals who live in the region known as the Middle East. The question is loaded. The answer may result in geographers referencing the Greenwich meridian – but this in itself does not necessarily neutralise debates about western hegemony!

However, this is an interesting 'big question' way-in to studying aspects of a region that has a significant presence in the daily news. We may legitimately ask what geographical knowledge may help young teenagers assimilate information that comes their way about this region – without necessarily thinking we need 'tackle' the immensely complex political and other instabilities that exist (and which make it so newsworthy).

There are perhaps two kinds of knowledge. First, the extensive and more superficial facts including countries, place names etc. For this reason a good wall map and/or regular use of atlases would be beneficial. Secondly, we can identify more intensive knowledge around a particular theme or issue – chosen from the national curriculum programme of study. Possibly a leading contender would be the use of natural resources, which could be oil or water.

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