

Ofsted research into curriculum and curriculum design – summary of evidence from the Geographical Association

July 2017 and September 2018

In January 2017, HMCI commissioned Ofsted research into the curriculum in schools, with the following aims:

- influence wider thinking on the role and importance of the curriculum in education
- inform inspection policy and future framework development
- inform policy making in the DfE.

This research was conducted throughout 2017 and most of 2018. The below summary of key arguments and materials from the Geographical Association, with reference to the importance of **curriculum thinking** in schools, was submitted to Ofsted as part of that research exercise.

1. The scope of the GA's support for curriculum

1.1 The Geographical Association (GA) is the subject community for teachers of geography. Our charitable mission is to further geographical knowledge and understanding through education and our expertise lies in:

- geography teaching and learning,
- the geography curriculum throughout all stages of schooling,
- professional standards for geography teaching,
- progression in and assessment of geographical understanding,
- initial teacher education, the development of new entrants to the profession and the continuing professional development of teachers throughout their professional career (see [The specialist role of the GA](#)).

1.2 In its support for schools, the GA seeks coherence in relation to its: curriculum guidance, advice on curriculum development, curriculum materials for schools and quality frameworks, such as the Geography Quality Mark.

2. The importance of subjects in curriculum thinking

2.1 The GA has consistently articulated a robust and rigorous view of the significance of subjects in education. Our aim is to help teachers and schools understand why subjects – and specifically geography – *matter* in education.

2.2 The GA's articulation of the importance of subjects is illustrated in a keynote lecture by GA Chief Executive Alan Kinder to the New Zealand Geographical Society:

'subject disciplines play a critical role in taking young people beyond what they already know and preparing them intellectually, by enabling them to:

- acquire the knowledge and the means to think theoretically and systematically

- discern the reliability of knowledge and argument by putting reported fact and information about the world into a conceptual frame and thereby detect falsehoods or inadequacies in what they read or hear
- to sustain argument, independent thought and therefore to make choices about how to live and become productive citizens.'

2.3 This position references Michael Young's notion of powerful knowledge, which may also be thought of as disciplinary knowledge i.e. knowledge which is:

- evidence based
- conceptual
- part of a system of thought
- reliable - but dynamic, evolving and changing
- testable and open to challenge
- [sometimes] counter-intuitive
- exists outside the direct experience of the teacher and the learner
- discipline based (in domains that are not arbitrary or transient).

Such a definition of knowledge counteracts the misconception in some schools that 'subjects' are accidental, anachronistic, traditional and inert bodies of knowledge with limited 'relevance' in the 21st Century. Rather, it reveals subjects to be the most reliable means we have for enabling young people to build their understanding of and relationship with the world, through systematic thought.

2.4 The GA has made available to schools a wide variety of materials in support of this stance. Some of this is via our journal articles for members, but we also make materials freely available:

- [The Purpose and Quality of Education in England - response from the Geographical Association to the Commons Education Committee call for evidence](#), 25 January 2016
- [Learning to be human and the English Baccalaureate - Geography and history: evidence from the Geographical Association](#)
- [Subjects for the Future](#)

3. Articulating the scope and purpose of geography in education

3.1 The GA has produced important materials to help articulate the potential and purpose of geography in education. Our *Manifesto for geography* (2009) is a document to help teachers, parents, senior leaders and governors, as well as young people themselves, better understand the scope of the subject and its contribution to the education of children and young people. See <http://www.geography.org.uk/resources/adifferentview/#top>.

3.2 Between 2013-17, the GA was a partner in the Geo- Capabilities II project, funded by the European Union. This project developed ideas about disciplinary rigour in geography education and the role of teachers in shaping the curriculum. The project materials, linked from the GA



website, focus on developing subject specialist teachers as curriculum leaders. See <http://www.geography.org.uk/projects/geo-capabilities/> and <http://www.geocapabilities.org/>.

4. Curriculum making and the professional knowledge needed to teach

4.1 In a position document entitled: [*The specialist role of the Geographical Association*](#) the GA is clear about teachers' responsibilities for re-contextualising subject knowledge for teaching. We state:

'Effective teachers of geography possess a unique combination of professional qualities which they deploy in an ethical manner for the benefit of the education of children and young people, namely:

- rigorous subject knowledge, which draws from the discipline but which is re-contextualised as knowledge used in the education of children and young people
- pedagogical knowledge, which includes a rationale for approaches to classroom practice that are appropriate to subject teaching and learning
- knowledge of how the subject is learned by children and young people and the challenges they encounter in doing so.'

We contend that such a position is central to effective curriculum planning and development and as such, is crucial to effective teaching and learning. Without it, education risks either denying young people the opportunity to go beyond their own experiences or, at the other extreme, neglecting the teacher's role in ensuring subject knowledge is pitched appropriately, engages the learner but also takes them beyond what they already know.

4.2 The GA recognises that any school (primary or secondary) must take responsibility for curriculum arrangements and so the curriculum for younger children (and within the EYFS) might be arranged differently than for older students. The GA's position is that the key to an effective curriculum is for schools to draw on the knowledge they have of the students they teach and to then utilise subjects, as coherent systems of thought (rather than accumulations of material), as the basis for planning. So whilst the GA is not dogmatic about the form of the school curriculum, nor geography's precise position within it, it is critical of tokenistic or incoherent efforts to teach through topics (in primary schools) or poorly-executed approaches to Project Based Learning etc (in secondaries).

4.3 Our position emphasises the importance of subject specialists who understand how children learn particular subjects and so has significant implications for initial teacher education, teacher recruitment and retention and teacher deployment (see for example our [*Letter to the Department for Education in response to specialist and non-specialist teaching in England*](#), December 2016).

4.4 Equally important is an understanding of the *subject-specific* knowledge teachers need in order to teach. A general description is provided by Kinder & Lambert (2011) [*The National Curriculum*](#)

[Review: what geography should we teach?](#) More detailed examples are provided throughout the GA's materials for teachers, through journal articles, publications and training courses.

4.5 With regard to curriculum thinking, planning and development, the GA's work accords with some of the concepts currently being used by Ofsted to underpin its curriculum survey work. For example, most of our professional materials distinguish between the prescribed, planned, taught, received and hidden curricula (see for example

<http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/curriculum/curriculummaking/glossary>).

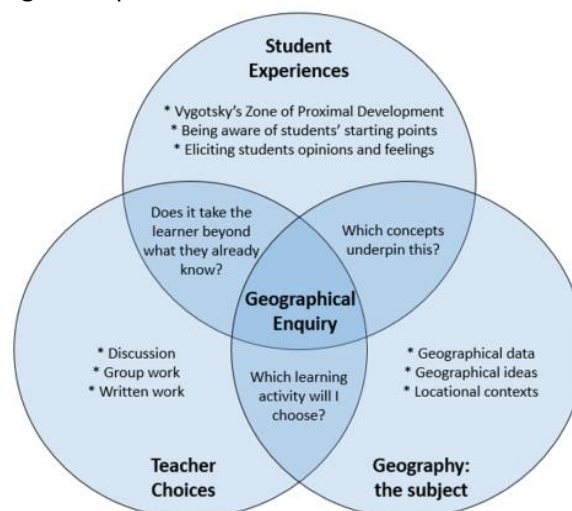
4.6 The following two references are of particular interest:

- Biddulph, M. (2017) 'What do we mean by curriculum' [Handbook of Secondary Geography](#). In this chapter, Mary invites teachers think more critically about the curriculum through an examination of different curriculum models: transmission, objective-led and process-led curriculum approaches, as well as the idea of curriculum making (see below). Teachers' understanding of curriculum theory and how it relates to practice is central to the discussions.
- Rawling, E. (2007) *Planning your key stage 3 geography curriculum*. In this book, Eleanor explores curriculum planning and development, and concept-led planning and she bridges the theory and practice of curriculum design.

4.4 A good deal of the GA's advice and guidance to (and materials for) teachers is based on the concept of curriculum making.

<http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/curriculum/curriculummaking/>

By curriculum making, the GA refers to the creation of interesting, engaging and challenging educational encounters which draw on three interlocking dimensions: teachers' professional knowledge and skills, the experiences of students and the valuable subject resources of geography. This diagram captures this view:



In this diagram we position the teacher as a knowledgeable professional, endowed with choices of what to teach and how to teach it. Our experience shows that curriculum making helps to unlock a good deal of energy and creativity in schools, and (re-)introduces teachers to curriculum theory in an accessible way.

All three curriculum concepts – planning, development and making are, we argue, dependent on the intellectual engagement of teachers in the subject they are teaching, regardless of the age group.

5. Curriculum materials

5.1 The GA vests teachers with considerable curriculum agency to make appropriate choices over curriculum content, contexts for study and the organisation of teaching. However, we acknowledge that this role is neither self-evident nor straightforward, but requires specialist knowledge and skills. A key part of our role is to provide a reliable source of specialist content and pedagogical knowledge, via training courses, journals, web materials and publications.

5.2 The *Key Stage 3 Geography Teachers' Toolkit* series illustrates 5.1 above. The Toolkit series is designed to help teachers create an exciting and challenging curriculum for their students. Each Toolkit provides material for immediate and direct use with students. Materials can also be adapted and extended. Each book explains how teaching strategies have been applied to a particular curriculum context, providing a rich source of teacher-to-teacher advice. Links to further resources and reading encourages even the highest-attaining students to be challenged. The series also provides a template for writing new curriculum materials. Unit summaries, curriculum maps linked to geographical knowledge, processes and skills, assessment frameworks, glossaries, lesson plans and other materials are included as exemplars of rigorous curriculum planning. By using tools from the kit, teachers gain the confidence to develop their own ideas and shape a curriculum to meet the needs and interests of their own students.

The GA publishes these professional Toolkits across all key stages 1-4, with an amended approach post-16.

6. Assessment and professional review

6.1 Given that the 'teaching cycle' (of planning, teaching, assessing and re-planning) is continuous, the GA also pays great attention to assessment matters – both for students and teachers. In terms of curriculum, we are probably the only body to set out our clear expectations regarding the geography curriculum. As HMCI acknowledged in her Wellington speech, '[r]ather than carrying the weight it should, alongside teaching, assessment and leadership itself, [curriculum] can end up as a needle in the haystack.'

6.2 The GA's Primary and Secondary Geography Quality Marks

(<http://www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/qualitymarks/>) recognise quality and progress in geography leadership, **curriculum provision**, learning and teaching in school. As well as

acknowledging excellence within a whole school, they also indicate effective team leadership and high quality geography teaching. They are self-assessment frameworks that can be used to review the school or department and can identify areas where geography teaching and learning can be improved. The GA is about to make its 1000th award since the QM was launched 11 years ago.

6.3 Our guidance to teachers on assessment matters is extensive (see for example <http://www.geography.org.uk/news/2014nationalcurriculum/assessment/>). Of most relevance to this review is our *[Assessment and progression framework for geography](#)*, which helps teachers to plan the curriculum, achieve an appropriate level of pitch (challenge, support) as well as assess progress and provide improvement advice. It is a tool for curriculum review as much as for the individual.