

LEARNING ABOUT THE UK, LEARNING ABOUT OURSELVES

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Here, Stephen argues that geographical studies of the UK and its regions offer opportunities for creativity and cross-curricular thinking, as well as an imaginative and ideologically neutral way to build pupils' ideas on who they are and the country they live in.

Which country is made up of over 6000 islands, has 14 overseas territories, is the twenty-second most populous in the world but is only 1/30th the size of Australia? The answer, of course, is the United Kingdom (UK). Most pupils know a few facts about the UK but they often have trouble putting these facts together in a coherent way. This is hardly surprising: the idea of a country is an abstract notion and it involves multiple perspectives and generalisations. Martyn Barrett (2007) concludes from his review of research evidence that age, culture, ethnicity, social class, overseas travel, personal experience and individual character traits all seem to influence pupils' ideas.

The UK in the National Curriculum

The National Curriculum for geography (DfE, 2013) has a much stronger focus on the UK than it did in the past. At key stage 1, pupils are expected to be able to identify the UK on a world map, name its four countries and their capitals and know about seasonal and daily weather patterns. At key stage 2, they are expected to develop their knowledge and understanding of the UK by learning about the physical and human characteristics of UK regions and how they have changed over time. There are many imaginative ways of addressing these requirements. The following suggestions focus on geography but also have a strong cross-curricular dimension.

Alphabet and acrostics

Can your pupils generate a portrait of the UK selecting a word or phrase for each letter of the alphabet? Use *ABC UK* (Dunn, 2008) as a stimulus. Challenge them to suggest ideas for their own picture book, perhaps working in groups or pairs.



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An alternative approach is to consider UK landmarks. In 2012 the Post Office issued a special set of landmark postage stamps (see web panel) constructed around the alphabet: pupils could decide on and design their own set. Or create an illustrated acrostic using the letters from 'United Kingdom'. These different approaches all raise interesting questions about how we select images.

Coasts

The UK has one of the most varied coastlines in the world, ranging from the chalk cliffs of Dover and the sandy coves of west Wales to the dramatic rock stacks of the Orkney Isles. Ask pupils to compile a presentation consisting of six different coastal images with the locations identified on an outline map of the UK. Get them to say what they think is special about each one.

Famous Britons

Pupils find out about some famous Britons, past and present. They could discover which part of the UK each famous person came from and whether any of them have links with other countries. Is it possible to make a map that relates to each person's life? Why do there seem to be so many more famous men than women? In a poll conducted by the BBC in 2002, Winston Churchill received most votes as 'greatest Briton', followed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel. Consider who decides on the achievements that make people famous. These activities involve both survey work and research.

Immigration

The people who live in the UK today come from many parts of the world. Waves of immigrants arrived at different times in the past including Celts, Romans, Vikings, Normans and Huguenots. There was an influx from Ireland in the nineteenth century, and people from different parts of the British Empire (such as the Caribbean and Indian sub-continent) in the twentieth century. The resulting fusion accounts for the rich and diverse culture in the UK today and is celebrated by Benjamin Zephaniah in his exuberant poem 'The British' (see web panel). Using the idea of a recipe to account for the different elements found in contemporary communities, 'The British' makes powerful points about justice and tolerance. As well as discussing these values, encourage the pupils to devise their own 'recipes' for a healthy community. With older groups there is also be scope for discussing issues relating to immigration and refugees.

Journeys

The journey from Land's End to John O'Groats crosses the length of Britain from the furthest point in the southwest to the furthest in the northeast. Using a road or school atlas, ask pupils to create a route map showing key places and landmarks along the way and the distances between them. Encourage pupils to keep their route reasonably straight to emphasise the idea of a cross-section and to indicate heights at different points. Some twists and turns will be unavoidable, but could lead to a discussion about barriers (e.g. the need to find a bridge over a river, or the way round a hill).

Language

The English language is made up of words from a wide range of countries and cultures. Some of the more obvious ones are Greek, Latin, Norse, French, Dutch, German and Gaelic/Welsh. There are also a significant number of words that have come from India (such as curry, bungalow and pyjamas), which reflect colonial influences. Researching the origins of

different words is a fascinating exercise for older pupils. It can involve the use of dictionaries as well as websites.

Historic buildings

Until the nineteenth century, when steam engines and the railways enabled people to transport heavy materials across the country with relative ease, most buildings were made of local materials. As a result historic houses and other old structures show great regional variation. The limestone houses of the Cotswolds contrast with the cob (mud and straw) houses of the West Country; the brick houses of the English clay vales give way to wooden or half-timbered structures in East Anglia and the Welsh borders. Finding out these differences and regional modes of construction and decoration provides a fascinating insight into both the history and the geography of the local landscape. It also reflects variations in weather and climate.

Landscape paintings

One of the most famous painters in English history, John Constable, has left us with indelible images of the Suffolk countryside. His contemporary, William Turner, is also celebrated for his landscape paintings, particularly sunsets. Both Constable and Turner portray different weather conditions with great skill and sensitivity. Ask the pupils to find out about these painters' work and the scenes that they painted. Can they find other paintings that portray other regions of the UK or different aspects of life? L.S. Lowry, for example, is associated with the mills of Manchester and northern England; David Hockney has produced many paintings of the Yorkshire Wolds. Pupils should find local painters (past and present) who have represented their area in different ways. Conclude with a discussion about what paintings tell us about the geography of places.

Place names

Many of the place names in the UK today can be traced back to their historical roots. For example, *chester* (as in Colchester) is the Latin term for fort; *thorpe* (as in Cleethorpes) is Norse for hamlet; and *wold* (as in Southwold) is German for hill. Pupils enjoy scanning maps of different regions to hunt for names that provide clues to the past. As well as looking at settlements, they could include landscape features such as hills, rivers, woods, plains and valleys in their search (see also Dolan, pages 22–23 of this issue).

British values and traditions

There is much discussion at the moment about British values and British traditions (DfE, 2014). The activities suggested here provide opportunities for learning what it means to be British in ways that can deepen and broaden pupils' understanding.

Exploring the richness and diversity of the UK through topics as varied as language and housing provides pupils with multiple images, which help to challenge crude stereotypes. Finding out about the country in which they live also helps develop pupils' sense of belonging. There is a danger that teaching about nationality, and notions of national identity, will verge into a limiting form of patriotism at either a conscious or an unconscious level. One of the great strengths of geography is that it seeks to explore the world in an impartial way, which avoids radicalisation and ideological bias. A balanced geographical study seeks to include physical, human and environmental perspectives, while acknowledging that our thoughts and ideas are coloured by our location in time and space. Finding out how people have responded to their environment, and how their environment has influenced people at a regional and national scale, helps pupils to develop their understanding of the world and their place within it. This is part of the very essence of geography.

References

- Barrett, M. (2007) *Children's Knowledge, Beliefs and Feelings About National Groups*. Hove: Psychology Press.
- DfE (2013) *Geography Programmes of Study: Key stages 1 and 2*. London: DfE.
- DfE (2014) *Promoting Fundamental British Values as part of SMSC in Schools*. London: DfE.
- Dunn, J. (2008) *ABC UK*. London: Francis Lincoln.



WEB RESOURCES

'The British': www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-british

UK facts: <http://resources.woodlands-junior.kent.sch.uk/customs/questions/ukfacts.htm>

Project Britain: <http://projectbritain.com>

OS meaning of place names: www.ordnancesurvey.co.uk/resources/historical-map-resources/origins-of-placenames.html

Postage stamps of UK landmarks: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2127466/Royal-Mails-class-portrait-Britain-From-A-Z-stamps-landmarks-worth-writing-home-about.html

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