

# LEADING GEOGRAPHY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

RACHEL ADAMS AND ALAN KINDER

**Rachel and Alan offer their personal reflections and some simple steps for aspiring, new and experienced primary subject co-ordinators.**

## The role of the primary geography leader

More than 20 years ago, the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), defined the core purpose of the subject leader as providing 'professional leadership and management for a subject to secure high-quality teaching, effective use of resources and improved standards of learning and achievement for all pupils' (TTA, 1998). The TTA also identified some attributes of subject leaders (including the ability to lead and manage people towards common goals, plan time effectively and be organised) and the required skills (decision-making and communication).

Although this is still a useful way to begin thinking about the role, it probably does not capture today's full challenge or potential of a primary geography co-ordinator. Recent research (Baars *et al.*, 2016) reaffirms the need for subject leaders to have strong team and interpersonal skills and identifies the need for sound subject knowledge and understanding. Primary geography leaders are 'strongly positioned to help direct and deliver whole-school initiatives such as developing the school grounds, instilling personal attributes and encouraging globally minded pupils' (see GA, web panel) and good subject leaders possess both generic and subject knowledge and skills (Figure 1).

What follows are steps towards good subject leadership that will be useful to you. First, Rachel shares her perspective as a Head teacher (see right).

## Step 1: Establish a vision

A clear sense of what you are trying to achieve, and why, is vital in order to raise achievement, drive improvement or inspire colleagues. One way to approach this is to create a shared vision statement for geography, on which your policy statement is founded. This should articulate how geography supports the culture and ethos of your school and the local community, as well as the distinctive contribution it makes to learning.

Outstanding subject leadership:

- is informed by a high level of subject expertise and vision
- employs best practice in the subject and in education generally in subject reviews, self-evaluation and improvement planning
- inspires confidence and whole-hearted commitment from pupils and colleagues
- sees and promotes out-of-classroom learning within the subject as an entitlement
- ensures geography has a very high profile in the life of the school and is at the cutting edge of initiatives within the school
- makes an excellent contribution to whole-school priorities, including consistent application of literacy and numeracy policies.

Figure 1: Excerpts from Outstanding Subject Leadership. Source: Ofsted, 2013.

## A Head teacher's perspective: what makes a good subject leader?

*Subject leaders often have differing starting points. Some have a passion and knowledge for their subject, others are motivated by career progression. Occasionally subject leadership falls to an overstretched senior leader.*

*Whatever the start point, time and resources are often limited. Subject leaders need the freedom to develop and express their expertise, to ask and have answered the questions they have about their subject and develop a feeling of ownership. The subject leader is part of a community moving forward together, they empower others to teach well and ensure outstanding pupil outcomes.*

*A subject leader needs a clear sense of purpose and an ability to shape the future of their subject based on the current situation. They find hooks and opportunities in other curriculum areas to promote their subject. I expect my subject leaders to be able to speak fluently about their curriculum and what this looks like in practice. They need a complete overview of the setting, which is gained by venturing into every phase, including early years (where some of the best enquiry-based learning takes place). It is so important for a leader to have a clear understanding of what pupils will learn as they progress through the school. Finally, I expect a subject leader to seek ways to improve pedagogy.*

While the subject leader plays a central role in expressing this vision, it is equally important to draw on the views and ideas of colleagues, parents, pupils and others. The GA website (see web panel) suggests the

questions to ask yourself and others when creating such a statement, and Kinder (2005) provides useful tools for 'visioning'. The GA's *Manifesto for Geography* offers another starting point (GA, 2009).

## Step 2: Evaluate and plan for improvement

Subject leaders make a critical contribution to school self-evaluation. Their distinct role is to judge standards, evaluate teaching and learning and secure improvement (DES, 2005). The way in which subject leaders execute this role varies from school to school, but observing lessons, scrutinising pupil work, gathering the views of pupils and analysing a variety of attainment and progress data are now very much part of what subject leaders do.

Effective plans for improvement take account of both the agreed vision and the evaluation evidence collected, as well as wider considerations such as school and national priorities (see Rachel's perspective, right). Actions should be focused on the things that make a difference to primary geography – the curriculum, teaching, leadership and the development of staff. These lead to positive improvements in relation to the key outcomes of subject leadership (Figure 2). Prioritisation is also important: taking account both of the likely impact of specific actions and the likelihood of success, given the very real constraints of resources and time. A pro-forma action plan is available to download with this article (see web panel).

## Step 3: Lead and manage improvement

Subject leaders play a critical role in shaping the geography curriculum. In order to shape a high-quality curriculum – which meets the needs of pupils in a particular school – a range of factors must be taken into account. At the heart of these is the shared vision or rationale for geography, but influences external to the subject (such as school improvement priorities) also need to be considered (Figure 3).

Since sound subject knowledge lies at the heart of good geography lessons, subject leaders are responsible not only for continually developing and improving as a leader and practitioner, but also for supporting colleagues' subject knowledge development. This is a particular challenge in a subject such as geography, where knowledge is frequently updated.

For some colleagues, an enthusiastic and inspirational subject leader allows them to 'draw strength' from the leadership and maintain their own motivation to develop. Ensuring everybody knows they have a part to play is a skilful and often time-consuming task, involving good communication and thoughtful delegation. Expectations of your colleagues need to be realistic, practical and flexible. The GA website contains advice and strategies for tackling improvement challenges around teaching and learning, CPD and knowledge development.

- Pupils who show sustained improvement in their subject knowledge, understanding and skills.
- Teachers who work well together as a team, support the aims of the subject and understand how they relate to the school's aims.
- Parents who are well informed about their child's achievements in the subject.
- Head teachers who understand the needs of the subject.
- Other adults in the school and community who are informed of subject achievements and priorities.

Figure 2: key outcomes of subject leadership. Source: TTA, 1998.

## A Head teacher's perspective: the planning cycle

*In my school, action planning runs from July to July to ensure consistency from one year to the next. By the end of July, whole-school priorities for the following September are apparent and action planning is woven in to support whole-school foci. A robust monitoring system lies at the heart of our leadership, through work sampling, pupil voice, lesson observation and learning walks. Monitoring is cyclical and there is ongoing review, implementation and evaluation throughout the school year. Our action plan is a working document and subject leaders are accountable to senior leaders through half termly meetings, which regularly review and update the plan.*

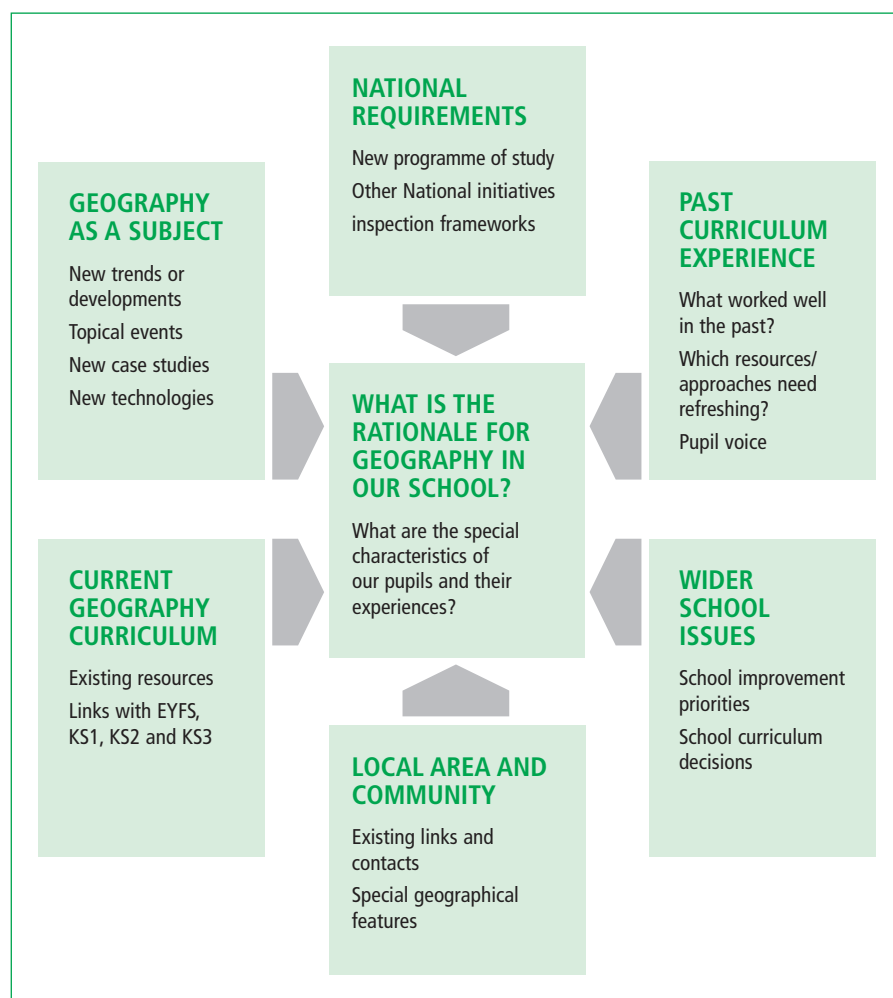


Figure 3: A range of factors needs to be considered in order to shape a high-quality curriculum. After Kinder, 2005.

## A Head teacher's perspective: supporting colleagues

In our school, subject leaders receive bespoke middle leadership training and work collaboratively with a senior leader mentor: someone who champions their development, can model leadership development and engage in critically reflective dialogue. Subject leaders conduct planned joint learning walks with each other and with senior leaders, to ensure action plans are driven and standards met. During the summer term senior leaders observe foundation

subject teaching with a subject co-ordinator in order to address areas of weakness, which then feed into the new action plan. My favourite and the last staff meeting of the year is for subject leader presentations. It is a time of reflection and celebration of what has been achieved by leaders, staff and pupils. It is an emotional time, and listening to the difference that middle leaders make to our pupils certainly makes all the hard work worth it.

## The need for continuous reflection

Effective subject leaders use a systematic and evidenced approach to self-evaluation and action planning (see Rachel's perspective, above). They also build collaborative and reflective dialogue into evaluation and use the process to further develop their leadership skills (Baars et al., 2016).

As the examples from Rachel's school show, planning and improvement are cyclical processes. They are things that subject leaders, senior leaders and teachers need to work on annually, but the difference this makes is well worth all the hard work.

## References

- Baars, S., Parameshwaran, M., Menzies, L. and Chiong, C. (2016) *Firing on all cylinders: What makes an effective middle leader?* London: Teaching Leaders.
- Department for Education and Skills (2005) *Middle leaders' self-evaluation guide*. London: DfES
- Geographical Association (GA) (2009) *A Different View: A manifesto from the Geographical Association*. Sheffield: GA.
- Kinder, A. (2005) 'Leading the geography department', *Teaching Geography*, 30, 2, pp. 101–4.
- Ofsted (2013) *Geography survey visits: Generic grade descriptors and supplementary subject-specific guidance for inspectors*. London: Ofsted.
- Teacher Training Agency (1998) *National Standards for Subject Leaders*. London: TTA



## WEB RESOURCES

GA CPD courses: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Training-and-Events>

GA geography subject leadership: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Geography-Subject-Leadership-in-Primary-and-Secondary-Schools>

GA In the know subject knowledge resources: [www.geography.org.uk/ebooks](http://www.geography.org.uk/ebooks)

Rachel Adams is Headteacher at Hoxton Garden Primary School, Hackney, East London, and Alan Kinder is the Chief Executive of the Geographical Association.

# Leading Primary Geography: The essential handbook for all teachers

Designed to be the definitive guide for all primary geography leaders, class teachers and trainee teachers, this new handbook from the Geographical Association will empower and support readers to lead quality geography in their school or their classroom, and provide a clear statement of what constitutes outstanding primary geography and a convincing rationale for geography's place in the primary curriculum. Additional materials available online will ensure the handbook's future currency and enable ideas and materials to be adapted to changing local and national curriculum requirements.

*Leading Primary Geography* will be available Autumn 2019. To keep up to date with further details and when you can pre-order your copy, sign up for the GA's e-newsletter at: <https://www.geography.org.uk/registration-form>

