

# KEY ISSUES FOR SUBJECT LEADERS

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## John provides a personal view on the challenges subject leaders face and the support available to them.

Since the publication of the original 1991 National Curriculum Orders, many books (e.g. Halocha, 1997), journal articles and resource packs have been written to support teachers with responsibility for leading the subject. They include practical ideas about developing resources, leading staff and promoting the subject; however, many are now looking dated.

The purpose of this article is not to go over these topics again: there are other up-to-date resources available, such as the subject leader sections on the GA website (see web panel), and the GA's forthcoming publication *Leading Primary Geography* (Autumn 2019), which cover such practicalities. The intention here is to focus on two areas of particular interest to the author in relation to the current context of geography in primary schools:

- supporting the use of the latest technology (not always labelled as 'geographical'), and
- developing pupils' understanding of controversial issues.

The Ofsted *Handbook for Inspecting Schools* (2015) states that in high-quality geography lessons, 'pupils are curious, interested learners who seek out and use information to develop, consolidate and deepen their own knowledge, understanding and skills [about the world]'. How might these two aspects be used to achieve those goals?

## Supporting the use of the latest technology

There has never before been such a wide range of technology easily available to support geographical learning as there is technologies. As many are not normally labelled as geography teaching resources, the busy subject leader may find it helpful to spend some time thinking creatively about where to find them and how to use them.

One of the most useful starting points is 'Webwatch' (written by Alan Parkinson), in *GA Magazine*. Below are a range of ideas Alan has described to get you thinking about how resources can be used to support the Ofsted objectives. These are a world away from the ready-prepared worksheets and handouts readily available on the internet.

'Newspapermap' (see web panel) allows you and your pupils to access newspapers from all over the world, which have been translated into English. With careful use, these could cover many aspects of the current geography National Curriculum, providing up-to-date information and ideas about our modern world. The website also provides a starting point to encourage pupil thinking about how people around the world have particular interests, concerns and views about many issues. Pupils could compare how a particular issue is seen around the world. For example, regarding changes in sea levels, pupils could compare articles on erosion of the east coast of England with ones from flood areas in Bangladesh, and discuss similarities and differences.

There has been a huge upsurge in the awareness and use of virtual reality (VR) (Figure 1) and some of your pupils may use headsets at home, probably for gaming! There are now, however, many VR websites (e.g. Google Expeditions – see web panel) available for geographical enquiries. Commercial organisations now also provide resources for use with headsets. Look up the Nescafe 360 smartphone app, which provides a virtual tour around one of their coffee plantations. For more ideas and links to these fascinating VR resources see Parkinson (2017).

David Attenborough's documentary series 'Blue Planet II' greatly increased public awareness of, and interest in, the growing volume of plastic in the world's oceans (Figure 2). A practical way to get pupils involved is to visit the Greenpeace website (see web panel) where pupils and teachers can calculate the impact of their use of plastic bottles over a year.

As you become more confident in using such resources in ways relevant to the National Curriculum, you may start to make links with other issues. An example here is to develop a discussion with pupils about the organisation that created a website and any bias or views conveyed within it.

Finally, keep a look out for other websites that are not labelled as geographical, but which provide a wonderful insight into how our world works. One example of this is Flightradar24 (see web panel). This website provides a real-time window into all the aircraft currently in flight around the globe. With a little creative thinking, you and your pupils can use it to explore many lines of geographical enquiry. You may be surprised by just how much you discover. The editors of Flightradar24 flag up important or interesting information about current flights or passengers (e.g. the tours of the Pope are always indicated) and flights



Figure 1: Virtual reality is no longer a futuristic fantasy, and has many applications to assist with geographical enquiry. Image © jamesteohart/Shutterstock.com.



**Figure 2: Heightened awareness of issues such as plastic waste can provide a starting point for links to other issues such as bias and reliability. Photo © Vaidehi Shah.**

of unique aircraft, such as the Antonov 225 (the only 8-wheeled aircraft in the world), are listed. As information is given on arrival and departure airports, the site could also lead into an exploration of controversial issues, e.g. by considering our global reliance on flying and its impact on the environment.

## Developing pupils' understanding of controversial issues

If you and your colleagues are going to plan geographical experiences that will be highly rated according to current Ofsted criteria, it is highly likely that it will not be possible to avoid discussing contemporary controversial issues with a clear geographical focus. A number of examples come to mind at the time of writing (autumn 2018), including:

- Should one nation consider building a wall to control where and how human beings may move around the planet?
- In a world where energy resources are in huge demand, should we allow 'fracking' to increase our access to oil and gas?

Thinking of differentiation, some pupils could take the latter enquiry further by considering national energy security and the UK's reliance on other nations to supply some of our energy.

As government and other sources often state that we need to build many more homes in England, consider the questions 'Where should these homes be built?' and 'Who decides on this?' The National Curriculum requires considerable use of maps and other related resources and their

associated skills. This issue would provide an excellent starting point at a range of scales to be thinking both about the local area and the nation as whole.

Hopefully, these examples will get you thinking in a creative way about including up-to-date controversial issues in your geography curriculum.

## Practicalities

There are, however, a number of practical points a geography subject leader needs to think carefully about in order to have the confidence to promote the use of controversial issues in teaching geography.

You need to be prepared for how your ideas may be met! If you do think controversial issues could be a powerful learning tool the first stage may be to list your practical and philosophical ideas and beliefs.

The second stage is to study the other curriculum and policy documents in use in your school. Read these with your 'controversial issues' glasses on and you may be surprised by the links you can make with what already occurs in school. Find out what your colleagues think by listening to chat in the staffroom – this can often be a good approach, especially when the news is discussed!

The third stage is to discuss your ideas with the head and senior leadership. Have examples ready and back them up with possible resources (found through looking creatively at new IT-based resources, as outlined above). The governing body may be involved in discussions and you will need them on side if you are going to be successful.

The fourth, staff development, stage in your role as a subject leader is now crucial.

I am sure you will already have had questions and concerns. 'How do we work with parents?', 'Is it possible it may upset local organisations (e.g. building contractors)?', 'How do we ensure that teachers' bias is avoided in their teaching strategies?', and 'How do we ensure a balanced range of teaching resources are used across the school?' are just a few examples of things to consider.

There is a wide range of online resources available to support your own learning and to provide up-to-date materials for staff development. One example is Oxfam's 'Teaching Controversial Issues' (see web panel). Eventually, controversial issues should become embedded, where relevant and powerful, within the curriculum.

The fifth, and final, stage for you is the medium- to long-term monitoring of practical examples. Encourage colleagues to keep examples, such as videos of pupil discussion, records of how types of resources are used and the learning outcomes achieved. These will also be useful in providing clear evidence to Ofsted to demonstrate how your geography curriculum provides excellent access to the wider world for your 'curious, interested learners' (Ofsted, 2015). Good luck!

## References

- Halocha, J. (1997) *Co-ordinating geography across the primary school*. London: Falmer.
- Ofsted (2015) *Handbook for Inspecting Schools in England Under Section 5 of the Education Act 2005*. Available at: [www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-inspection-handbook-from-september-2015) (last accessed 29/11/2018).
- Parkinson, A. (2017) 'Webwatch', *GA Magazine*, 35, pp. 32–3.



## WEB RESOURCES

Flightradar24: [www.flightradar24.com](http://www.flightradar24.com)

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

Google Expeditions: <https://www.google.com/edu/expeditions/>

Greenpeace: <https://secure.greenpeace.org.uk/page/content/plastics-calculator-v1>

Newspapermap: [www.newspapermap.com](http://www.newspapermap.com)

Oxfam's Teaching Controversial Issues: <https://www.oxfam.org.uk/educationresources/teaching-controversial-issues>

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