

# Empowering geography – a view from Ofsted

Iain Freeland HMI

**In this article, Iain Freeland HMI offers the Ofsted view that where school leaders and teachers place emphasis on location and place knowledge, we see the empowering nature of the subject on pupils' experience.**

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought back into focus the centrality of geography. The use of a map with proportionate symbols or choropleth shading helps people to visualise the extent and spread of the disease and, sadly, the concentrations of those who have died. As geographers, this is second nature to us. However, for pupils and some colleagues in schools they do not have the benefit of this analytical viewpoint. They, therefore, do not get the depth of insight that those with a geographical understanding do.

## Building locational knowledge

Where school leaders and teachers place emphasis on location and place knowledge, we see the empowering nature of the subject on pupils' experience. For example, in a small primary school that a colleague visited, teachers had devised a curriculum where Reception-aged pupils

were introduced to the concept of locality and scale and used the area surrounding the school to broaden pupils' horizons. As pupils progressed through the school, their conceptual understanding of maps and location was systematically developed and deepened leading to pupils making informed location-based decision-making activities. Therefore, when it came to other subjects, such as history, pupils could use their knowledge of locations and topography (through their mapwork) to enhance their historical knowledge.

However, sometimes pupils do not have the geographical knowledge that would help them to see the big picture; to spot the spatial patterns; to appreciate the landscaping processes; or to consider the human decisions that shape people and places.

In one school I enjoyed a conversation with some primary school pupils about the book they were reading as their class text. The story involved a refugee who had arrived in England during the Second World War. The geographer in me was excited by the thought of journey and the appreciation of the concept of migration. The concept of seeking refuge was understood a little by the pupils; however, their recount of the story had the refugee travelling from Australia to the United Kingdom when in fact she had travelled from Austria. Their locational

knowledge was not strong. Consequently, their appreciation of the journey, through different landscapes and in all weathers, lacked the richness that would have brought the story very much to life.

## Subject knowledge and good curriculum plans

Geography is an empowering subject. The cohesion of curriculum plans is enhanced when pupils gain a secure knowledge of place. The relationships that define the subject are so fundamental, they are life-giving to not only the geography curriculum, but to other subjects as well.

With the arrival of the Education Inspection Framework (EIF) in September 2019, Ofsted inspectors are looking more closely at the reasons that underpin the strengths and any weaknesses in the quality of education. From our research and inspection experience, we know that teachers' subject knowledge is key. Schools that support teachers to have confidence in subject content and how that content might best be taught, are well placed to ensure/help pupils know more and remember more.

The case for a well thought through, carefully organised, geography curriculum has never been stronger. Our pupils deserve to understand where and why things happen, to appreciate the impact of physical and human processes on their lives and on the lives of others. Geography has a major part to play in empowering the curriculum. It also raises a call to arms. Pupils respond to the content we teach. They show greater empathy for others, develop their sense of what is 'right and proper' and build appreciation of the planet on which they live.

Geography is too important a subject to marginalise; to do so is to risk undermining the whole curriculum. The need to ensure teachers receive the training and support they need in both geographical subject knowledge and their understanding of how best to teach it has never been greater.

**Iain Freeland HMI is one of Her Majesty's Inspectors with Ofsted and is the lead inspector for geography. Iain undertakes research into geographical education and leads training about the subject within the inspectorate.**



Exploring places and spaces is an empowering experience for pupils. Photo © Paula Owens.