

The sustainability of the global fashion industry

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Here, Hayley and Ciara show how the topic of global fashion enables pupils to address their own enquiry questions into where, how and why most clothing is produced in lower-income countries. They also outline how it encourages pupils to consider issues of sustainability and voice their own opinions and views.

The importance of topical geography

Pupils are interested in the wider world and, as a result, have a wide range of geographical questions to ask. As Pike (2016) suggests, the inclusion of topical geography helps pupils understand current issues and the impacts these issues may have on the environment. Pupils' explorations of the global fashion industry can help develop their geographical knowledge and understanding. This topic also provides scope to discuss and explore human rights by focusing on the exploitation of workers in lower-income countries.

Providing real-life examples of the clothing trade and the issues surrounding it allows pupils to make connections to such geographical concepts as space and place, proximity and difference and relational thinking (Figure 1). There are opportunities for the pupils to have agency through their actions by making more sustainable choices regarding the clothes they wear. By doing this, pupils will become knowledgeable citizens, who are aware of local communities in a global setting. Peter Jackson (2016) argues that tracing connections is one of the most powerful ways of making sense of the world in geography. It is our role as teachers to help young pupils negotiate the world they live in. Therefore, the exploration of topical geography will support pupils in critical thinking and decision making. Pupils can gain a sense of empowerment through an exploration of current issues within the global fashion industry that enables them to become active agents promoting the need for positive change.



Figure 1: An enquiry into global fashion enables pupils to make connections to geographical concepts, and provides opportunities to explore the links between the industry and the environment. Photo © B Forenius/Shutterstock.com.

Key concepts and ideas

Teaching sustainability of the global fashion industry enables pupils to explore clothing and consider what materials clothes are made from and how and where they are produced. Furthermore, pupils can study the working environment and lives of lower-income workers in clothing factories. This helps pupils to build an understanding of trade issues associated with the clothes they wear. Pupils may recognise the impact that air miles have on the environment through their geographical enquiries and begin to investigate how reusing clothing can have positive effects on the environment. As a result, these concepts and ideas help pupils foster an appreciation of the ways in which people can make more sustainable choices.

Possible enquiry questions include:

- How and where do our clothes come from?
- Why is fashion considered a global industry?
- How much of our clothing is made overseas?
- How are the people who make clothing treated?

- Why is our clothing imported?
- What can we do to be more sustainable with our clothing?
- What impact does importing clothing have on the environment?

Activities for 5- to 8-year-olds

1. Ask pupils to study a large world map and locate where their jumper/shirt is from. Usually pupils give the name of a shop where the item was bought. This is a common misconception, so ask them where they think their clothes came from before that.
2. Invite the pupils to look at the labels on their own clothes and find the country of origin on the world map. They can annotate it to create a collective map.
3. Pupils can consider recording the journey of their clothes. They may like to draw a flow chart of the process and add some research about the country of origin.
4. The pupils can produce an illustrated class booklet, 'Where our clothes came from'.

This can include images of the clothes, a map showing origins, a flow chart of the journey, information about countries of origin and drawings of the clothes being made.

5. The pupils can participate in an enquiry activity using a resource pack of images that illustrate the growing cycle of a cotton plant and/or how a t-shirt is made. They may work in small groups to discuss and analyse the processes.
6. Use the storybook *Where Do Clothes Come From?* by Christine Butterworth and Lucia Gaggiotti (2015), to strengthen pupil understanding.
7. In the final session, pupils can share ideas of how they may source locally produced clothes.

Activities for 9- to 11-year-olds

1. Invite pupils to generate enquiry questions about the global fashion industry.
2. Share video footage offering an insight into the global fashion industry via *YouTube*.
3. Create photo packs and ask pupils to identify and describe the production chain of the global fashion industry. The pack can contain pictures of a clothing factory, a catwalk, a fashion magazine and a retail shop.
4. A pair of jeans can be used to explore how globalisation contributes to the production of an item of clothing. Invite pupils to examine the jeans in detail and identify the origin of each element, including fabric, buttons, zips, dye, design and threads. The journeys of these elements can be shared on a world map.
5. By looking at the labels on their school uniforms, the pupils can use an online resource (see web panel) to calculate the air miles and carbon footprint of their clothing. Air Miles Calculator, for example, asks pupils to share the export and import countries of goods. It will then provide information regarding miles travelled and kilograms of CO₂ produced. This can lead to a whole-class discussion regarding the impact clothing has on the environment.
6. Once the origin of their clothing has been located, pupils can pin the location on a shared Google Map. This will help the pupils to make connections with the clothing trade and lower-income countries as they discover that many of their pins are located in southern Asia.
7. Pupils can consider exploring working conditions within the clothing trade and/or a case study of a factory worker in Bangladesh via video clips on *YouTube*.
8. First, design a case study based on the news and your own research. Then ask pupils to create a mind map describing the life and working conditions of the factory worker. To strengthen their knowledge of exploiting people, hand out a list of statements from your case study and ask pupils to rank them in order of severity of exploitation.
9. To initiate class discussion or a role-play activity, provide a range of scenarios for the pupils to consider. For example, 'the factory owner cuts the workers' pay', 'the workers go on strike', 'the government passes a law that the factory owners must pay a higher wage'.
10. In a final session, pupils could share ideas of ways to combat exploitation and encourage sustainability within the global fashion trade. These might include:
 - Buying clothing from second hand/charity/local shops, the importance of a school uniform, holding upcycling events
 - Making choices regarding where they purchase their clothes (i.e. their purchasing power) and the impact of fast fashion outlets (e.g. Primark, H&M)
 - P4C discussion – how many clothes does one person need?
 - Designing posters that examine large clothing production/retail companies' sustainability policies and/or writing letters to such companies seeking further explanation of their sustainability policies.

Benefits and problems of teaching this topic

While this topic empowers young pupils to become active agents within an ongoing issue, problems may arise. Teachers need to approach the topic with suitable, age-appropriate resources. Videos are readily available and accessible online on *YouTube*, and short clips from documentaries are ideal, as are newspaper articles. It is important that teachers develop their own subject knowledge to empower pupils' understanding of this challenging theme, and ensure you can support pupils so that they do not feel scared or guilty because of their actions. The overall aims of these lessons are for pupils to become empowered through achievable actions, and, as teachers, we can promote and encourage pupils to consider the personal choices they can make that will have a positive impact on the environment.

Looking at possible and preferable futures

Hicks (2013) suggests a four-dimensional approach to such investigations: knowing, feeling, choosing and acting. We believe this framework creates a safe space in which pupils are confident to share hopes and concerns about the issues surrounding the global clothing industry. We hope the impact of these activities will inspire pupils to take personal responsibility and action in the future.

Conclusion

The geography curriculum creates opportunities for teachers to empower pupils. It is important to recognise that pupils cannot simply be abstracted from the environment they are growing up in and from the events that occur on a daily basis. 'Geography underpins a lifelong conversation about Earth as the home of humankind' (Geographical Association, 2009, p. 5). Undoubtedly, there is a relationship between geography and current events, which pupils can explore through active learning approaches based around their own interests and questions. By educating pupils about the global fashion industry, not only do we offer them a sense of empowerment, but also a sense of agency to take appropriate action to become a more sustainable citizen.

References

- Butterworth, C. and Gaggiotti, L. (2015) *Where Do Clothes Come from?* London: Walker Books.
- Geographical Association (2009) *A Different View*. Sheffield: Geographical Association.
- Hicks, D. (2013) 'A post carbon geography', *Teaching Geography*, 38, 3, pp. 94–7.
- Jackson, P. (2016) 'Geographies of connection', *Primary Geography*, 91, 3, pp. 8–9.
- Pike, S. (2015) *Learning Primary Geography*. Abingdon: Routledge.



Web Resources

Air Miles Calculator:
www.airmilescalculator.com
 Google Maps:
www.google.co.uk/maps/

Hayley Grant and Ciara Leonard are Final Year Bachelor of Education Students at DCU and in the final stages of becoming Primary School teachers. They are so excited to put all their ideas into practice in their future classrooms!