

SUSTAINING PRIMARY GEOGRAPHY

TESSA WILLY



A key component in primary geography, maps bring meaning and purpose into pupils' learning. Photo © Bryan Ledgerd.

In this article, Tessa highlights the importance of sustaining geography teaching in primary schools.

With an increasing focus on the core subjects and the use of topic work to teach the foundation subjects, the explicit teaching of geography can get overlooked.

It is important, therefore, to make sure that we are doing all that we can to sustain and develop the subject in our primary schools. The quotations in Figure 1, taken from policy documents spanning the past 75 years, endorse the importance of the subject and remind us of its value. Try placing them into chronological order: it is not as obvious as it might seem! The answers are at the end of the article.

There is a plethora of compelling arguments for teaching geography; yet, often, the subject is seen as one of the most challenging for many primary practitioners. This appears to be the case for several reasons, including:

- it is just one of 11 NC subjects, and that's not counting RE, PSHE, SMS and all the other curriculum demands being made on primary school teachers
- many teachers gave geography up at 14 years of age, thus they feel less confident about their subject knowledge, and there are those who did take it at GCSE, but still feel that they cannot remember very much about it
- there can be misunderstandings about what geography is. Ask pupils what they have done in geography or what they know about geography and they will often say 'nothing'. However, if you delve a little deeper, pupils will tell you in detail about places that they have visited and learnt about through the media and can convey their own stories of who they are in the world with a keen sense of geographical identity. Yet this is not always recognised as 'geography'
- the contents and concepts of geography can be obscured because it is often taught through topic work, which may contain great geography that is not always made explicit, and

1. 'Even primitive peoples reveal some geographical understanding, for on this depends their ability to eke out a living and to survive in environments fraught with danger.'
2. 'Geography provokes and answers questions about the natural and human worlds, using different scales of enquiry to view them from different perspectives.'
3. 'Geography is one of the essential subjects in equipping the pupil to take his place as a citizen of the world. It creates an understanding of, and sympathetic interest in, the lives of other people, and an appreciation of the kinship and interdependence of the peoples of the world.'
4. 'A high-quality geography education should inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives. Teaching should equip pupils with knowledge about diverse places, people, resources and natural and human environments, together with a deep understanding of Earth's key physical and human processes.'
5. 'Two fundamental conclusions of the greatest importance have been reached. The first of these is that local geography is indispensable because it alone can provide the basis in experience from which all other geographical work proceeds. The second conclusion is that life in other lands can best be made real to pupils by means of vivid, detailed, pictorial presentation of small unit areas. Underlying both is the basic educational principle that all geographical studies should be related to the interests and experiences of the pupils.'

Figure 1: Can you put these quotations from policy documents in chronological order?

- a paucity of specific geography input on many ITE programmes, compounded by a lack of ongoing professional development, especially in effective subject and pedagogical knowledge.

In the interests of providing a coherent curriculum and cultivating pupils' interest in, and their understanding of, geography, how might we overcome some of these issues?

- If you are a novice teacher, try to make the most of the resources that are available on your course and keep them for future reference. Take advantage of the good rates of student membership of the GA, use the library and engage with your tutor and peers to develop and deepen your understanding. Participate in as much geography teaching and learning on school experience as possible, observe others teaching it and take any opportunity to plan, teach and evaluate it yourself. Ask for a meeting with the geography subject lead/co-ordinator, read the school policy and planning, and be acquisitive!
 - Join the Champions Ning on the GA website (see web panel) – an excellent repository of ideas and a forum for the exchange of resources and ideas. Join your local GA branch, and if there is not one in your area then why not think of creating one. You will quickly realise you are not alone!
 - When planning, try to make the geography learning objective explicit. Refer to the geography curriculum that you are using and ensure that you are assessing the pupils in your class using these objectives so that you can see their progress and adapt your teaching to address any misunderstandings. Try to plan collaboratively with other teachers in your school so you can share ideas and subject knowledge.
 - Challenge yourself to do things that do not necessarily come easily to you – mapwork and GIS for example or developing fieldwork skills. Where appropriate learn from the pupils! You could observe someone else in your school teaching an area in which you are less confident or watch a related teaching video.
 - Look for cross-curricular opportunities wherever you can. Teach English and maths in a geographical context. If writing a newspaper report, write it about a topical natural event, and if the pupils are improving their persuasive writing, debate a controversial issue. Pupil-led enquiries can produce a plethora of relevant and topical data for analysis and presentation, engaging pupils and giving meaning to abstract concepts.
- Maps can provide the perfect justification for practising co-ordinates, plotting and finding references, and bring meaning and purpose into pupils' learning.
- Consider your CPD and ensure that there is some geographical input within it; even if it is not directly part of your specific aims, it will help development of all curriculum areas. The GA and RGS-IBG run a range of courses and programmes. Your local GA branch may also offer appropriate after-school events, or you could attend the GA Annual Conference at Easter each year.
 - Plan to teach geography at times when it has to be taught, not always at those vulnerable times, e.g. on a Friday afternoon.
 - Keep reading and researching, and consider conducting an action research project with another member of staff. When possible, be research-informed as well as active; sign up to the Education Endowment Foundation for example, follow some of their free courses and use their evidence to inform your practice. Do try to keep up to date with what is happening in the geography education world; tweets are great in signposting research, but, like everything, these need to be read with a critical eye.
 - If you become the geography subject lead, provide class teachers with the opportunities to develop their own skills by leading twilight sessions. Ensure that you offer a broad and balanced curriculum including plenty of geography and, if yours is an integrated curriculum, ensure that the geography learning objectives are clear and explicit and that all the pupils in the school know what geography is.
 - As subject lead, consider the transition between the Foundation stage and key stage 1 and help teachers to make this as effective as possible. Where possible, develop effective links with secondary schools and try to organise for the pupils to go to a local secondary school or invite their geography teacher to come and plan and teach some sessions with your year 5/6 teachers. This could contribute to an effective transition programme between primary and secondary school (see pages 30-31 of this issue).
 - If you have to leave teaching, ensure that your legacy includes a geographical one; perhaps you could offer to keep in touch with the school and share your adventures and possibly return to tell the pupils what you have done and where you have been.

Achieving the Primary Geography Quality Mark would be an excellent and enduring legacy that would ensure continuation of high quality meaningful geography in your school.

There are myriad ways of keeping geography alive and thriving, and once the subject has a momentum it is much more likely to be able to sustain itself. It is important to make sure you are not the only geographer, because if you leave the geography goes with you. Your legacy must be to ensure that geography is embedded in the school ethos and the pupils' experience irrespective of your presence. Although of course it will always be better if you are there!

Answer to Figure 1

Did you get the chronological order of the quotations right?

3. GA, c.1942; 5. GA, 1949;
1. Marshall-Cornwall and Wooldridge, 1955; 2. DfEE/QCA, 1999; 4. DfE, 2013

Acknowledgement

Thanks to Margaret Mackintosh for finding the early articles quoted here.

References

- DfE (2013) *National Curriculum in England for Key Stages 1 and 2: Framework document*. London: DfEE/QCA.
- DfEE/QCA (1999) *The National Curriculum: Handbook for primary teachers in England*. London: DfEE/QCA.
- Education Endowment Fund (2017) *Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants*. Available at: <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk> (last accessed: 20/2/2107).
- Geographical Association (GA) (c. 1942) *Suggestions for the Teaching of Geography: Pamphlet written by the Geographical Association Primary Committee*. Manchester: GA.
- GA (1949) *Geography in the Primary School: A Report prepared by a special Subcommittee of the Primary School Group and the Training College Group of the Geographical Association*. Manchester: GA.
- Marshall-Cornwall, J. and Wooldridge, S. (1955) 'Geography in education', *The Geographical Journal*, 121, 2, pp. 190–96.

WEB RESOURCES

GA Champions Ning:
<http://geographychampions.ning.com>

Tessa Willy is Lecturer in Education at the UCL Institute of Education, London.