

## Where Is It? – What is it? Why does it matter?

### *Locational knowledge in geography teaching*

The geography national curriculum requires teachers to ensure pupils ‘develop contextual knowledge of the location of globally significant places’, which presumably includes their own nation (DfE, 2013, 214). It has always been part of studying geography. Good reasons include helping people place themselves in the World, from the local to globally; appreciating where are the places and events mentioned in the news, leisure events, stories and much else; and having a balanced sense of the range of places and features of our planet. Such place knowledge helps us make sense of the World, but it is more than this.



*Simon Catling is Professor Emeritus of Primary Education at Oxford Brookes University.*

*His specialist interest is in geographical education and particularly in primary geography.*

*He is a Past President of the Geographical Association.*

Just knowing where places are is of rather limited use. It is vital to know something of what the places we know about are like. The requirements in the DfE’s national curriculum from 2014 make this point by emphasising that places have characteristics (see Figure 1). Indeed, the programmes of study extend what needs to be understood through its aspects of *place knowledge* and *human and physical geography*. However, what is stated under locational knowledge can be interpreted in ways which at one end limit what is studied to simple stereotypes about locations and features, and at the other end could form an ever-expanding level of detail and wider and wide range of characteristics.

#### **Key Stage 1**

- Name, locate and identify the characteristics of the 4 countries and capital cities of the UK, and its surrounding seas.
- Name and locate the World’s 7 continents and 5 oceans.

#### **Key Stage 2**

- Name and locate countries and cities of the UK, and its geographical regions. Identify their human and physical characteristics, key topographical features (include: hills, mountains, coasts, rivers), and land use patterns. Understand how some of these aspects have changed over time.
- Locate the World’s leading countries, using maps focusing on Europe (include Russia) and North and South America. Concentrate on their environmental regions, key human and physical characteristics, countries and major cities.
- Identify the position and significance of latitude, longitude, Equator, Northern and Southern Hemispheres, Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, Arctic and Antarctic Circles, Prime/Greenwich Meridian, and time zones (including day and night).

#### **Key Stage 3**

- Extend their locational knowledge and deepen their spatial awareness of the World’s countries. Use maps of the World to focus on Africa, Asia (including China and India), the Middle East and Russia. Focus on their environmental regions, including polar and hot deserts, key human and physical characteristics, countries and major cities.

**Figure 1:** *Locational knowledge in the 2014 plus geography national curriculum programmes of study.*

So, what is it that needs to be thought about? It is not the purpose here to set out what ought to be included in such geographical studies, or teaching activities. A few teaching approaches are indicated but there are other sources to go to for these (eg Catling, 202, 2013). What do we need to be aware of when teaching about, in Wiegand's (1992) words, the stated 'World to be known', which was presented in detail in the first geography national curriculum iteration (DES, 1991).

### **Some matters to consider**

To have a sense of where they are in the World it is vital that young pupils know where they are locally and how their locality links to significant places nearby and nationally. Here *significant* refers to what is important for and matters to the village, town or city communities, not necessarily places in politicians' minds.

Just as vital is that children know what their place is like. Is it an area of housing, and/or are these mixed with businesses of various sorts? Is it a rural area where a type of farming predominates? Even in a highly urbanised area, what are its physical features: in a river valley, on the slopes of a hill, sunny or shaded in good weather? Are there parks and playgrounds? What is transport like? Where do people travel to for work and for shopping and leisure activities? Which of its features identify uses and activities? Are some clearly old and others recent or new? What evidence of change is there?

Indicating the characteristics of countries and capital cities might involve using a variety of sources, from how the country or city 'sells' itself through its website(s), the image(s) its wants to project. What other perspectives are there? What is stated in an encyclopaedia, or in a travel guide? Depending on the age of the pupils, what is included in an information book? What can pupils find out through Google searches? How much do they believe and accept. An approach is to prepare, in teams, a 'quick guide' or 'rough guide' to the country or city. How might the approach of different teams compare, and why is this? Should these be uncritical?

This requires the use of maps and atlas maps, which demands that pupils learn how to use the contents and index, to find and locate places using alpha-numeric grids and latitude and longitude, to recognise symbols and to begin to appreciate and use scale measures, and more (Wiegand, 2006). This needs practice, which can be a constant part of place and environmental studies rather than as separate 'exercises'. It means having appropriate first, junior/primary or secondary atlases readily to hand, as well as wall maps – and local large and medium scale OS maps and street maps.

We are always encountering places. Creating a wall map or keeping a personal map record is one way to be able to notice what is recorded and where it is. It is also a way to gain a sense of the balance of our encounters, whether these are through news media, places we visit to shop or holiday (so local region, nationally, continentally and globally), where friends and relatives live, and such like. Can we provide a vignette of some of these places so we know them as more than a series of map points?

Personal connections can be enlightening, not least in the gaps that remain on our maps. Teams might consider what they do to fill in those gaps. Perhaps there really is a large cold or hot desert there, but what is it like? Oceans can look empty or sparse areas, but what is in them – not just islands, but currents, shipping routes, rubbish gyres, and more. What can teams find out about an ocean?

We (should) garner much place information and locational knowledge during each key stage. What do we really know of places at the end of this time? Perhaps a 'spot quiz' might help pupils recognise what they know, or not. It does not have to be the teacher who creates it; it can be an individual and team activity – but the team has to know the answers!

A challenge is to ask pupils or teams to create a regional, national and/or global map which shows places which matter to them. This means that they must justify their selection. They might be asked to identify 20, 30 or 50 place locations, perhaps using a variety of types of features. They might apply criteria such as personal connections, in the media, historical events, disasters and such like. They have to be places which mean something to each individual or across the team. Again, ask them to

create such a map with someone else in mind: what would be significant for the Queen or for a media star or a sports journalist? Then ask them to whittle them down to 10 or 5 sites/features/events, with reasons why these survive.

Give pupils the locational knowledge requirements for their key stage, and ask them to justify why they have been included in the required programme of study. What would they want to map? What are these *characteristics* which are referred to? What is a physical geography and a human geography feature/activity/event? Give pupils the chance to work this out, to find out and contribute to decisions about what they include and exclude. Justifications and the articulation of these are essential. They can make presentations to justify their views and decisions, including where they disagree! They might have grounds for making suggestions to the Secretary of State for Education, or the Geographical Association!

Some aspects of locational knowledge involve abstractions, such as the equator and the lines of longitude, and their significance. While we can view the line symbols showing them, pupils need to be introduced to what they represent and why they were developed and are useful to a variety of people and for various purposes. Webcams can be a useful way to show Earth-rotation and day/night around the World, with links to time zones. Here *significance* means the planet's daily round and the role that these 'unseen' features play in our lives and on maps – why they matter.

## Key understandings

The foundation for working in this way is that locational knowledge is a matter of reflection and decision-making, not of adherence to some distant individual or committee, expert or not. It does matter that we know about our World, not just what goes on but where it happens and where things are. There are *four principles* that can be use here, beyond those of good quality teaching decisions.

*We should all know where the places we study are*, however much in passing or deeply. This is about using local and atlas maps, having them constantly available for reference. Of course these can be digital and virtual, not just in paper and book form, though handling an atlas and skimming back and forth through it from the youngest ages is fascinating for very many pupils and is to be encouraged.

*We should know something of what the places we 'meet' are like*, however scantily or generally, whether a city or a rural area, a desert or rainforest, and a coastline – and that people live, work and play there. Asking pupils' views about places they encounter can expose misconceptions and misinformation – something to tackle, even briefly, better than leaving it to mislead someone for years to come.

*We need to know about the World, not just a few bits of it.* Syllabuses can be constraining, even highly limiting of knowledge, Eurocentric and infer that other places matter little or not at all. We must think about the balance pupils encounter across the key stages and beyond into examination classes. Why do key stages 2 and 3 appear to ignore parts of the World, such as Australasia? Where will we really explore in Asia: do the '-stans' get ignored, and could that be convenient – and if so, why?

*Where does it matter we know about, and why?* For any one of us this will produce different responses. What are these and how do they vary between pupils – and staff – and what, perhaps, should be challenged? We might ask what the affect would be if we did not know where anywhere was – other than where we happened to go locally – and how readily we could be manipulated, misled, deceived and exploited if we were to be ignorant of the World. This might appear extreme, but geographical ignorance is a dangerous matter. We would not think about where we polluted, what is happening with the climate,

that floods affect people (unless its us, of course), and that resources we use daily from elsewhere are in short or dwindling supply. There are so many more examples.

We have nine school years in which to help pupils develop their locational knowledge and to give their growing sense of the World geographical context. It is not isolated knowledge, for pub/TV quiz use. It is vital in not just a globalised World but also for making the most of our local, regional and national lives. We ignore locations, our knowledge of what they are like and their interrelationships at our peril.

Make it a matter of course in teaching geography that when anywhere is mentioned its location is checked, and it is contextualised for every pupil. As Ofsted (2011) indicated, we have not consistently done this well. Let's change that now.

## References

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