

The 2010 White Paper *The Importance of Teaching*

Initial Response from the Geographical Association with particular emphasis on the National Curriculum Review announced in January 2011

This paper is an initial briefing for Special Interest Groups of the GA and the wider membership. It is for discussion. This, and the discussion it generates, will form the basis for forming the GA's response to the National Curriculum Review.

a) The White Paper recognises the contribution of geography in a national curriculum that is broad and balanced. The GA welcomes this.

The GA recommends that within the school curriculum, geographical education should be a statutory entitlement (essential) for all children in all the Key Stages from early years up to and including KS3, and available for all who want it at KS4.

b) The development of an English Baccalaureate is likely to result in greater opportunities for children to study geography at KS4.

The GA recommends that whilst geography may not become a compulsory part of the KS4 curriculum, steps should be taken to widen its appeal. This should include exploring the possibility of offering a joint history and geography GCSE for those students who are not inclined to do a full GCSE in one of these. Development work on this may be taken forward in partnership with the Better History Group and Historical Association.

c) The refocusing of teaching and learning on 'traditional subject knowledge' provides an opportunity to review and strengthen the contribution of knowledge within geography as a school subject discipline.

The GA recommends that the definition of subject 'knowledge' is taken (as is set out in the Consultation Document) to include the concepts, processes and issues for a range of topics that underpin the subject as an academic discipline.

The GA recommends distinguishing conceptual disciplinary knowledge from core knowledge. The latter refers to extensive, factual knowledge which can serve to provide depth of understanding and context. The former is more intensive and more open to debate and contestation. Both are important, and in the words of the GA's 2009 Manifesto¹, are like the vocabulary and the grammar of the subject.

The GA recognises that there are challenges in identifying and writing clear statements of such 'knowledge' in ways that create coherence in the subject and are based on sound criteria for selection.

¹ www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview [see the section on 'thinking geographically']

d) The idea of identifying 'core knowledge' that is presented progressively contains some merits.

The GA recommends that any such list of 'core knowledge' should be neither over-prescriptive nor inflexible in either style or the order in which it must be taught. A stripped down national curriculum programme of study may be supported by a non-statutory illustration of geographical core knowledge, sequenced from Early Years to the end of KS3

e) The assessment of subject knowledge to provide benchmarks provides an opportunity to bring greater clarity of standards within subject work.

The GA recommends that the present Attainment Targets (written as Level Descriptions) should be reviewed to provide greater clarity of expectations and standards. It would be retrograde to replace level description with simple, statutory recall tests of core knowledge (that focus solely on basic location and other factual knowledge). The enabling value² of core knowledge in geography is its role in enhancing understanding - and developing cultural, environmental and global literacies. Assessment should focus on students applying geographical knowledge and understanding in real world contexts.

f) The GA welcomes and strongly endorses references in the White Paper aimed to encourage teachers to use their professional skills and experience in making decisions about how to organise the curriculum and in how curriculum content should be taught.

The GA recommends that the best of current practices in this regard are reviewed and provided as exemplification in order to demonstrate how the subject can be taught to the highest standard in various contexts and curriculum structures. To do this we can draw from 'Curriculum Making'³ methodologies explored and practised in the 2006-11 Action Plan for Geography and which underpin the GA's 2009 Manifesto.

The GA will develop a series of practical real-time online CPD opportunities to support schools and departments in this work

g) The idea of drawing on international experiences is interesting and may generate additional ideas for improving both teaching and learning in the subject.

The GA recommends that considerable care is taken when drawing conclusions about the characteristics of subject work in other countries and on how standards are defined and assessed. It is important that the current strengths of the English approaches to curriculum and pedagogy within the subject are retained and refined. The Geography Quality Marks⁴ are designed to underpin good and best practice in this way.

² See www.catholiceducation.org/articles/education/ed0396.htm This is a supportive outline of Hirsch and the key aspects of his arguments about core knowledge.

³ www.geographyteachingtoday.org.uk/curriculum-making/introduction

⁴ www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryqualitymark
www.geography.org.uk/11-19/secondaryqualitymark