Geography's Big Ideas or Key Concepts

The study of place is an essential element of geographical study for primary aged children. Reading the extract below from Catlin & Willy might help you to become clearer about what place means in geography.

'Places are physical entities – the town or village where we live – and can be as small as a room in our home or as large as a nation or the Earth. They have physical and human characteristics we can represent in words, pictures and maps. We develop images of places from our direct and indirect encounters with them. From personal experience we develop our perceptions of and feelings and viewpoints about places. In this way we develop a sense of place, how we connect and identify with (or disconnect from) places familiar to us, such as home and our favourite places (or places avoided). Places are real and they exist in our images of them, arising from our experience. Different people hold very different ideas and have very different feelings about the same places.'


The Geographical Association explains place in this way:

Studying real places is an essential context for developing geographical enquiries. Although it is a fundamental idea in geography, its definition is not straightforward. We could, perhaps, settle for 'place is space that carries meaning, often through human occupation or by human interpretation'.

Every place has a particular location and a unique set of physical and human characteristics. These include what a place is like, how it became like this and how it is subject to forces for change. Furthermore, the same place can be represented differently. What we think about places is both shaped by, and shapes, our 'geographical imagination'. Pupils carry with them mental images of places – the world, the country in which they live, the street next door. These form part of their 'geographical imagination'. It is important that pupils recognise that there are many images of places, some of which may conflict with their own.

Geographical Association

Space from a geographical perspective involves thinking about where features, sites and places are located. Catlin & Willy expand on this idea when they explain that studying spatial layout involves exploring 'the interactions between features and places and how they affect each other. Geographers look for the distribution of features and at the patterns they show to see how and why they create networks and what the effect is.' Catling, S. & Willy, T. (2009) Teaching Primary Geography

Mapping is a key tool for representing space because maps provide a very visual way of showing spatial understanding.

Physical and human phenomena are located and are distributed in space. They therefore have relative locations to each other and often interact with each other across space. Any flows or movements between these phenomena, for example migration, create patterns and networks.
You may also have noticed a statement that refers to **pattern & process**, an area of understanding that is linked to what happens in particular spaces. It is often best represented graphically through maps and diagrams.

If you play the PowerPoint presentation you will see that the aerial view changes, from local to national to global. Understanding **scale** is as important for learning about the global dimension as it is in geography.

Virtually any topic, when studied geographically, benefits from a ‘scaled’ approach.

Scale influences the way we represent what we see or experience. We can select different scales from the personal, local and regional to the global. In between, we have the national and international scales, which are very important politically. We cannot, for example, fully understand high street shopping in a locality, or industrial change in a region or country, without comprehending the global context. Choice of scale is therefore important in geographical enquiry, as is the realisation that scale resolutions are interconnected, as if by a zoom lens.

**Environmental impact and sustainability** have achieved greater significance in recent years because of our concerns about issues like, Climate Change and the over-use of natural resources. This is an aspect of geography that can benefit significantly from links to the Global Dimension.

**Culture & diversity** do not feature significantly within the current primary National Curriculum for geography, which is instead largely focused on studying place. This is another area that can be significantly strengthened if we draw on statements that exemplify the Global Dimension (see chart, p. 13 of Developing the Global Dimension, available from: www.globaldimension.org.uk/uploadedFiles/AboutUs/gdw_developing_the_global_dimension.pdf)

Our **connectedness** with others and the way our lives are globally **interconnected** make this a key area for developing our own and children’s understanding about the way the world works.

**Recommended reading:**
- www.geography.org.uk/cpdevents/curriculummaking/glossary