



## English lessons: the changing nature of geography curriculum and assessment in England

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### Abstract

Recent reforms to the national geography curriculum in England have been far reaching. Through “knowledge-led” reforms leading to the creation of a “core knowledge” geography curriculum, policy makers have emphasised both greater rigour and increased curriculum freedom for teachers. As a consequence, the way in which teachers approach geographical knowledge, particularly place knowledge, is under re-examination. At the same time, the removal of a nationally-agreed set of progression statements means that standards for 5-14 year olds have effectively become a local matter. The English experience therefore presents us with an opportunity to trace broad and international ideas in education, such as the “knowledge turn”, on national policies and subsequently on the pedagogy and assessment enacted by geography teachers.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Core, Curriculum, England, Knowledge, National, Reform

### 1. Introduction

For teachers of geography in England, the current school year (September 2016 – July 2016) presents a number of significant challenges. Reformed national curriculum Programmes of Study (PoS) for geography, which apply in maintained schools to pupils from 5-14 years, are barely a year old, and consequently much planning work remains in order to address their requirements. At the same time, a fundamental rethink is underway in terms of pupil assessment (Geographical Association – GA, 2015).

These changes may be seen as the culmination of the process put in train following the election

of a Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition Government in 2010. A changed emphasis in policy towards education swiftly followed, articulated by the 2010 White Paper The importance of teaching (DfE, 2010), enacted by legislation in 2011 (HM Government, 2011) and espoused by a reform-minded Secretary of State for Education (Gove, 2013). Whilst the scope of these educational reforms was very wide, in relation to curriculum two particularly influential sources may be identified.

## 2. Curriculum influences

The first of these influences was a research paper, *Could do better: Using international comparisons to refine the National Curriculum in England* (Oates, 2010). Described in its foreword by the Secretary of State as “fascinating and insightful” (ibid.), its author Tim Oates argued that the most effective curricula internationally:

- employ sparsely-stated concepts, principles, fundamental operations and key knowledge to underpin processes focused on deep learning and valid assessment;
- give freedom to schools to design teaching around these;
- but also align curriculum (aims, content etc.) with other “control factors” e.g. learning materials, inspection arrangements etc.

It seems clear that ministers’ thinking was also influenced by the work of E.D. Hirsch, and in particular his Core Knowledge Sequence ([www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org)), which identified in a very precise way the domain – and age – specific knowledge that Hirsch argued was needed by pupils to develop deeper forms of understanding. The curriculum reforms might also be viewed as a response to concerns that England’s education system was falling behind other jurisdictions internationally, that a shift of emphasis away from “traditional subject disciplines” meant school leavers in England were not equipped with the knowledge they needed to succeed in the workplace or higher education, and that the National Curriculum itself, as a “project to reverse national economic and social decline” (Hopkin, 2013a), might have faltered. It is therefore highly significant that the 2014 National Curriculum for England described itself as “an introduction to the essential knowledge [students] need to be educated citizens... to the best that has been thought and said” (DfE, 2014), a marked change from its “recent trajectory... towards a relatively loose entitlement framework” (Hopkin, 2013a).

## 3. A knowledge-led geography curriculum

In geography, the PoS are arranged into “Key Stages” for students of different age ranges, with the content of each structured around a “purpose

of study” statement, “aims” and various content categories: “locational knowledge”, “human and physical geography” and “geographical skills and fieldwork” (DfE, 2013). These revised PoS now employ the kind of sparse language advocated by Oates, and contain a number of highly prescriptive (if not always precise) requirements for teaching (Table 1). Place and locational knowledge have a renewed emphasis, alongside knowledge of human and physical processes and some technical procedures, such as map skills – a so-called “places, processes and procedures” curriculum (Kinder, 2013a).

5-6 years	7-10 years	11-14 years
- name and locate the world’s seven continents and five oceans	- position and significance of latitude, longitude, Equator	- extend knowledge of the world’s major countries and physical and human features
- use basic geographical vocabulary (beach, cliff, city, town...)	- human and physical geography of a region of the UK, in a European country, and within North or South America	- key processes in physical and human geography e.g. glaciation
- use simple compass directions		

Table 1. Excerpts from the English national curriculum PoS for geography.

Source: Department for Education (DfE), 2013.

## 4. The impact of the new curriculum

Assessing the impact of the new national curriculum in geography at this point in time is difficult, and not only because it is only around a year old. Whilst it has been observed over many years that the PoS were frameworks for planning rather than curricula as such (Boardman, 1995; Rawling, 1995; Westaway and Rawling, 2002; Rawling, 2008), it has more recently been argued that this edition of the national curriculum exerts particularly weak influence on the geography content selected for teaching, since the “essential core” approach (Figure 1) creates a good deal of curriculum content variation between schools (Kinder, 2013a) and other control factors are now more influential in schools (Mitchell, 2013). Furthermore, Martin (2014)

points out that since new Academies and Free Schools are exempt from following the PoS, less than half the pupils aged over 11 years in England are even taught the national curriculum. So, whilst the PoS have stimulated interest in and teaching of some aspects of geography (the Americas and glaciation being notable examples, judging by the popularity of GA publications and training courses for teachers on these topics) it seems that the geography national curriculum in England, despite its name, no longer plays the strong national or curriculum-shaping function it once did.

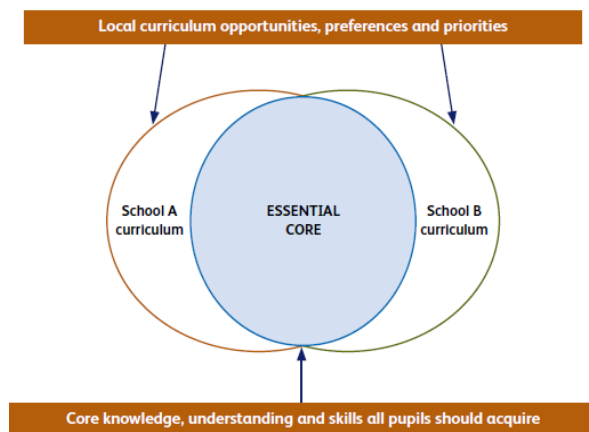


Figure 1. The relationship between the essential core and the content selected in two schools. Source: Kinder, 2013a. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Geographical Association.

### 5. Curriculum debates

What the national curriculum does seem to have done is stimulate professional debate, particularly around the status of knowledge in geography education. The question was much discussed during the curriculum-writing process (Morgan, 2011; Hopkin, 2011; Kinder and Lambert, 2011) and during this period the GA ran its own curriculum writing and consultation exercises, culminating in a draft “knowledge-led” curriculum document which elicited feedback from over two hundred teachers. One of the more thought-provoking aspects of the final feedback report was the observation that a “false debate” had influenced the thinking of some teachers, one in which “the ‘subject’ [of geography] is equated with sterile tradition and inert

knowledge whilst ‘pupil interests’ are seen as the sole source of engagement, albeit transient and lacking in substance” (Kinder, 2012). In other words, prior to these reforms, some teachers seem to have come to regard their own specialist subject knowledge as having limited educational potential.

The national educational debate about knowledge (or more accurately concerns about a knowledge deficit) had also coalesced in geography to some degree around the issue of place and locational knowledge. A national report by the school inspectorate stated that the “majority of students, especially in... weaker schools, had poorly developed core knowledge in geography. Their mental images of places and the world around them were often confused and lacked spatial coherence” (Ofsted, 2011), whilst Hopkin (2012) noted how requirements for locational knowledge had been reduced with successive iterations of the national curriculum (Table 2).

PoS	Locational knowledge requirement
1991	Identify features on six maps
1995	Identify features on three maps
1999	Detailed list of exemplars e.g. nine largest world cities
2007	Unspecified
2013	Specific world regions sequenced to create a “whole world map” by 14 years

Table 2. Locational knowledge requirements in the English national curriculum PoS for geography. Source: Kinder, 2013a. Reproduced with the kind permission of the Geographical Association.

The GA’s curriculum consultation exercises demonstrated very clearly that teachers were anxious about the prescription of place knowledge within a national curriculum, as for many this was an aspect of professional choice and freedom they valued highly (and used to deploy their own expert knowledge as well as connect with students’ experiences). Coupled to this was a fear that the teaching of location neces-

sarily involved didactic teaching, or the teacher acting in transmission mode, with consequently low levels of engagement and knowledge retention.

The subsequent publication of the statutory national curriculum document in 2013 prompted a range of responses from teachers, which did include excitement and a sense of liberation and challenge (Aston and Renshaw, 2014; Cook, 2014; Larkin and Goldup, 2014). Although the PoS made “no attempt to define knowledge, justify its importance to learning or distinguish between requirements to know and understand aspects of the content” (Kinder, 2013b) it seems that some teachers re-evaluated their specialist subject knowledge not as dry, irrelevant or disengaging to young people, but as a resource or a “source of energy” in the classroom – something the GA describes in its take on curriculum making (GA, 2009). The GA also advocated a more productive line of thinking with regard to locational knowledge, arguing that “knowing the location of a place is one of the prerequisites to understanding its characteristics, the ways in which it is changing or even why people might feel attached to it” (Kinder, 2013a), that a coherent framework of locational knowledge is needed to “use the uniqueness of places to explain why the outcomes of universal environmental and human processes may vary, and why similar problems may require different strategies in different places” (Lambert et al., 2012, p. 3) whilst also acknowledging that “the challenge will be to find new and engaging ways of [teaching locational knowledge], as well as the means to ensure [it] contributes to thinking geographically (rather than to the creation of a gazetteer of countries, cities, rivers and other features)” (Kinder, 2013a). There is some evidence that teachers are responding to this challenge (May, 2014).

## 6. The “vexed question” of assessment

Assessment of the new curriculum has also generated a great deal of professional debate. In England, a great deal of energy is now expended on the “accountability agenda”: assessing the quality of teaching, monitoring the progress of individual pupils and groups of pupils, preparing for periodic inspections and ensuring each school meets a variety of performance measures,

particularly the outcomes of assessments and examinations. In geography, the curriculum had been accompanied for nearly 20 years by Attainment Target(s) (ATs). These were outcome statements, known also as Level Descriptors, which provided a national set of expectations against which teachers were able to plan and summatively assess their pupils. Over the years, concerns grew that the broad and abstract language of the AT was being misused, by being applied to pupils’ everyday work and being used to set inappropriate improvement targets based on numbers (the Levels) rather than qualitative actions. The increased pressure of accountability also meant that teachers were being judged on the “performance” of pupils in terms of Levels, which applied upwards pressure to the Level at which pupils’ work was then assessed (Hopkin, 2006).

The new national curriculum had “remarkably little to say about expected outcomes, requiring only that pupils “know, apply and understand the matters, skills and processes specified in the relevant programme of study” (Kinder, 2013b). Instead, the Department for Education (DfE) declared schools free to devise their own assessment systems, implying that standards and expectations were “destined to become local, rather than national matters” (ibid.). Given the educational culture and context described above, this freedom rather put the cat amongst the proverbial pigeons, with many schools and teachers still presently struggling to reconcile the pressure to record attainment frequently and at fine levels of detail, with this new official encouragement to separate day-to-day or formative assessment from reporting overall achievement and progress. The GA’s response is summarised in a new assessment and progression framework for geography (GA, 2014), which advises teachers to be more cautious about judging and reporting overall attainment but which also offers a new set of broad benchmarks for assessing progress, based on three aspects of students’ achievement in geography:

- contextual world knowledge of locations, places and geographical features;
- understanding of the conditions, processes and interactions that explain geographical features, distribution patterns, and changes

over time and space;

- competence in geographical enquiry, and the application of skills in observing, collecting, analysing, evaluating and communicating geographical information.

Tentatively, new assessment practices are emerging, incorporating teachers' contextualised understanding of expected standards and in some cases tied to the theme or context in which the student is working – implicitly and occasionally explicitly acknowledging the non-linear nature of progress in geography and the spiral nature of its curriculum (Harris, 2015; Weeden and Hopkin, 2014).

## 7. Conclusions

So, rather like the French Revolution, it may be too early to tell precisely what the impact of the 2014 English National Curriculum will be. However, it has prompted some teachers to reflect on the range of places they teach, the role of place and locational knowledge in their teaching and (for some) the status of knowledge in geography education. It has certainly prompted a debate about expectations, progress and standards in school geography, and appears to be produced new approaches to assessment in which the non-linear nature of progress in the subject is better acknowledged. Each of these outcomes illustrates to some extent how the international “knowledge turn” in higher education has found its way into English curriculum debates and ultimately into negotiations over the content of the geography national curriculum for England. This process therefore gives us an fascinating example of the way in which international and intellectual debates can influence national educational policy, and subsequently impact on the pedagogy and assessment enacted by geography teachers.

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