

# GEOGRAPHY IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS

## – the new Australian Curriculum

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**At last! We have a marvellous, new opportunity to interest young children – the Australian Curriculum: Geography has now been published. Now there is a carefully formulated curriculum for Geography from Foundation to Year 10.**

The Australian Curriculum: Geography reflects a huge amount of research, analysis, consultation and imagination to produce not only a structure for teaching Geography, but also plenty of ideas and inspiration. It encourages teachers to think about methodology, learning, and standards of achievement. But, best of all, it is stimulating and exciting! It contains so much of the geography that is appropriate for younger children and taps into their interests while at the same time extending their understanding of the world.

### The AGTA GeogSpace Project

To provide teachers with support with the new curriculum, the Australian Geography Teachers' Association (AGTA) has been involved in developing the GeogSpace project with Education Services Australia (ESA). It has resulted in a comprehensive set of materials available freely online as a support for implementing the new curriculum. It contains material of all kinds on teaching Geography as well as specific exemplars on every level of the curriculum from Foundation to Year 10. More details of GeogSpace are given later in this article.

### Progression through the years

In the Australian Curriculum: Geography there is a clearly labelled progression through the primary years, from Foundation to Year 6. It is visible in the key ideas shown below:

**Foundation Year** – People live in places

**Year 1** – Places have distinctive features

**Year 2** – People are connected to many places

**Year 3** – Places are both similar and different

**Year 4** – The earth's environment sustains all life

**Year 5** – Features that shape the human and environmental characteristics of places

**Year 6** – A diverse and connected world.

As can be seen from these statements, there is a progression in complexity from a simple understanding of places that are close and well-known through the comparisons and contrasts of places to the consideration of the Earth's environment and the diversity within the whole world.

This does not mean that children only look at local examples in the early years. The curriculum recognises that children find fascination in far-off places, and that they want to inquire into these just as much (and sometimes more) as they want to know about the place in which they live.

A feature of the Australian Curriculum: Geography that teachers and parents will appreciate is that there is an attempt to prevent the wasteful and boring repetition of examples and case studies which has bedevilled teaching in some school situations. For example, in Year 4 there is an emphasis on Africa and South America, in Year 5 it is Europe and North America, and in Year 6 it is Asia. This does not mean that other places cannot be taught, and it does not mean that the approach to Geography is regional; it just means that there is a structure to help teachers organise their teaching.

### Progressive methodology

The primary years of the Australian Curriculum: Geography are clearly based on an understanding of children's development through these years. In the supporting AGTA GeogSpace material, there is also a clear pattern of choosing exemplars which use methodology appropriate to each of the developmental levels.

In the Foundation Year, much of the children's learning is done through play-based activities. Hands-on techniques are commonly used, as are children's toys and role-play activities. The two illustrations (exemplars) in GeogSpace for this level are: ***Making a model of a place like mine*** and ***Mental maps of home and school***. Figure 1 is a photograph of a model town as in the first illustration for this level.

**Fig 1:** A model town made with toys



In Years 1 and 2, children can learn the basic skills of maps through drawing sketch maps and looking at maps associated with stories. They can manage simple observations and recordings of things they see in the school-yard. Globes and maps of the world should be used often. All of these can be used in simple inquiry activities. The two illustrations in GeogSpace for Year 1 are: ***My place (using sketch maps and***

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taking photographs) and *Investigating the weather (using simple recording charts)*. For Year 2 they are: *Our place on the globe (using the globe creatively)* and *Mapping world interconnections (family, travel, media, possessions)*.

**Fig 2:** Orienting a globe to show day and night, and the length and direction of a shadow at Adelaide



By Years 3 and 4, children will be able to use maps and resources of different kinds, and make deeper inquiries into all kinds of questions. They are able to work together in groups to produce results, and have the skills of reading and writing needed to be developed in depth and breadth in all subjects. The two illustrations in GeogSpace for Year 3 are: *Making your own atlas (making a personal or group selection of maps of Australia)* and *Children in different places (a drama activity which uses 16 role cards about children in neighboring countries)*. In Year 4 they are: *Habitats for animals – an inquiry (beginning with a child's favourite animals)* and *The GeoSix and the swamp monster (an interactive story about pollution and waste)*.

**Fig 3:** An excerpt from 'The GeoSix and the swamp monster' in GeogSpace

## The GeoSix and the swamp monster

### Chapter One

#### 'My sneakers are ruined!'

Sophie was horrified as she stared at her sneakers. They were covered in thick purple slime.

'How did that happen?' asked Antonia.

'I was walking across the vacant block where we always walk, but something has happened there. You know that there is always rubbish there, but today there seemed to be slime oozing from the ground, and the rain has turned the block into a swamp.'

'Perhaps there is a swamp monster there!' said Joshua, 'I would like to see a black speckled swamp monster with breath so poisonous that it gives off a horrible smell!'

'No,' said Hannah, 'there is no such thing as a swamp monster – at least not in our town! I wonder if somebody has dumped some horrible goo there?'

'Let's find out what has happened!' said Jonty.

The others agreed. The six cousins had already had a few adventures together, and they called themselves the GeoSix because they particularly liked adventures related to the geography of their surroundings. They were pleased to have a new challenge.

*At this point you might think about the causes other than a swamp monster for the slime and the smell.*

In the upper primary years of 5 and 6, fieldwork activities in the local area and further away can be done, ICT can be used as a major source of information and a method of creating maps. Children can be asked to assess current situations and suggest improvements, and group interaction can be used to promote deeper and clearer thinking. To support these methodologies, the GeogSpace illustrations for Year 5 are: *The GeoSix and the bushfire (another interactive story using children of Year 5 age)* and *Planning your local place (an issue-based activity using fieldwork and beyond)*. For Year 6 the illustrations are: *Using geography thought-provokers (a set of cards with statements which have to be evaluated for relevance)* and *Using your computer to discover an unequal world (an introduction to using Worldmapper and Gapminder)*

**Fig 4:** Excerpt from a thought-provoker card in GeogSpace

## Thought-provoker question 2: Why are many of my clothes made in China?

Read the following statements carefully. All of them are factually correct, but not all of them are relevant to answering the question.

When you have read the question:

- select those statements that are relevant
- put them in a logical order
- then use them to write an answer to the question.

*China is the largest producer of cotton in the world.*

*China has about 7,500 companies producing cotton cloth.*

*The growing of cotton needs large amounts of irrigation water.*

*Xinjiang is China's largest cotton producing area.*

*China is Australia's largest trading partner.*

*Australia exports mainly coal, iron ore and natural gas to China.*

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*China has a long tradition of clothing manufacture.  
Workers in Chinese factories are generally paid less than those in Australian factories.  
Australia has good relations with China.  
Many famous European and USA clothing labels use Chinese factories to make their garments.  
China has a population of 1.3 billion people.  
China has had a 'one-child' policy since the 1980s.  
China has one of the world's fastest growing economies.  
China has the world's largest number of mobile phone users.  
China is a low-cost manufacturing country*

## The inquiry approach

Within these examples there are many mentions of inquiry because this is one of the key approaches in the curriculum. The use of inquiry for effective learning is explained in *Teaching Primary Geography Australian Schools* (a new book commissioned and endorsed by AGTA) as:

There is good evidence that, in a number of situations, enquiry can be particularly advantageous, such as:

- in developing observation and investigative skills when working out of the classroom, particularly for very young children;
- when employing increasingly complex questions to develop children's geographical understanding;
- where the children are involved in generating an enquiry through their own questions because it is relevant and meaningful to them and their lives;
- when children are involved in real-world enquiries, linked to their own environment, involving engaging fieldwork, analysing and using the results, e.g. to run a 'public enquiry' where they work collaboratively, and express their own feelings, attitudes and views;
- being provided with opportunities to articulate their preferred future for a development and to have their say in determining what places should look like;
- using enquiry skills to investigate what is not always immediately obvious and so look for the interconnections between seemingly disparate issues and link them together to gain a more holistic and coherent understanding – this has the bonus of stimulating their curiosity and encouraging them to find out more.

(extract from page 85 of *Teaching Primary Geography for Australian Schools* by Simon Catling, Tessa Willy, John Butler 2013)

In the Australian Curriculum: Geography, the inquiry approach is described as progressing through the following actions:

- observing, questioning and planning
- collecting, recording, evaluating and representing
- interpreting, analysing and concluding
- communicating
- reflecting and responding.

This process is similar to that outlined in the Australian Curriculum: Science, and Australian Curriculum: History. For the teacher of primary years, this gives a unity to connections within the curriculum as a whole.

## Having fun with Geography

The world is full of amazing contrasts. It is not hard to come up with a list of dozens of spectacular landforms, city sights, weather phenomena, different cultures, and human activities. This fascinating world is what we are trying to bring into the classroom, so that each child finds particularly interesting things which stimulate further inquiry.

To achieve this, it is essential to make the Geography lessons in primary school enjoyable, so that children develop a positive attitude to them. Fortunately the learning of Geography lends itself to the incorporation of plenty of activities which are enjoyable to children as well as being effective vehicles of learning. These include games, songs, atlas and map games, quizzes, drawing pictures for a purpose, role playing, thinking games and group activities.

In addition to these, the range of methods that are common to all Geography teaching and learning can be employed as children progress through the primary years. These include all kinds of fieldwork, map drawing, map using, ICT map creation, surveys, model-making, observations, problem solving, creative thinking and decision-making. This variety of learning activities is an essential part of Geography, and is also sound pedagogy in that it caters for different learning styles.

**Fig 5:** Making a model of a savanna landscape, with toy animals and cut-outs



## Help for the Primary Teacher

As well as the illustrations of practice described on the GeogSpace website, there are sections on teaching the key understandings, the skills and the inquiries of all levels of geography, and a more general section with help on ICT, fieldwork, assessment, and five other aspects of Geography teaching.

AGTA has also commissioned and endorsed *Teaching Primary Geography for Australian Schools*, which is based on a UK resource for teachers, but has been adapted and updated for use with the new Australian Curriculum: Geography.

No doubt there will be much more material from publishers, associations and individuals published in the next year, but clearly there are already diverse resources available to support and encourage teachers of Primary Geography.