

A critique of the revised Australian primary school geography curriculum

Alaric Maude, Associate Professor of Geography, Flinders University

This document is a detailed critique of the revised Australian curriculum for the F–6 Geography Knowledge and Understanding Strand.

Removal of essential content

Knowledge of the world

The previous curriculum had a sequence of content descriptions that gave students some knowledge of the world beyond Australia, knowledge that was insisted on by the then heads of the education authorities of the states and territories. The content descriptions were:

- The division of the world into hemispheres, continents and oceans (in Year 2).
- The main climate types of the world and the similarities and differences between the climates of different places (in Year 3).
- Australia's neighbouring countries (in Year 3).
- A brief study of the continents and major countries of Africa and South America (in Year 4).
- A brief study of the continents and major countries of Europe and North America (in Year 5).
- The geographical diversity of the Asia region (in Year 6).
- Differences in the economic, demographic and social characteristics of countries across the world (in Year 6).
- The world's cultural diversity, including that of its indigenous peoples (in Year 6).

In the revision, the only world knowledge retained is the study of Australia's neighbouring countries in Year 3 and Asia in Year 6. Consequently students will learn nothing about the division of the world into continents and oceans, or about four of the continents. They will learn nothing of some of the countries Australia is closely connected to through history, trade, migration, alliances, and government and non-government aid, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and countries in Europe. The inclusion of this world knowledge in the original curriculum was insisted on by the then heads of the state and territory education bureaucracies, who regarded it as essential content. Students will also learn nothing about the economic, demographic, social and cultural differences between the countries of the world,

and will have no sense of the world as a whole. This is a significant loss of knowledge that future citizens should have.

It might be argued that some of this is common knowledge and that, for example, everyone knows that there are seven continents. However, outside the English-speaking countries children are taught that there are six continents, with either Europe and Asia, or North and South America combined. There are also equally logical five and four-continent models. Students could learn from all this that geographical definitions are human constructs, and may differ between countries and cultures.

Knowledge of their place

Place is the dominant concept in the primary school geography curriculum. While places are parts of the Earth's surface that have been defined, named and given meaning by people, the concept of place is about ways of thinking about and explaining places and their significance to us. The content on place in the revised curriculum is disappointing.

For example, in Foundation this content description in the previous curriculum:

The places people live in and belong to, their familiar features and why they are important to people

has been replaced with this one:

the features of familiar places they belong to, why some places are special and how places can be looked after

The revised content description has a significant change of focus.

1. The change removes the emphasis on 'the places people live in and belong to', and puts it on features. The aim of the previous content description was to give students an understanding of the meaning of a place by thinking of where they live as a place, so it started with the place that children live in and

belong to, and then examined its features. In the revision the focus on the place children live in is further reduced by the words 'familiar places they belong to', which implies more than one place, and by this new elaboration:

identifying reasons why people live in or visit places, such as the provision of basic needs (water, food, shelter), to enhance lives (holiday places, places for recreation, for religious observance) and to maintain cultural connections to Country/Place

This elaboration replaces this one in the previous curriculum:

identifying how places provide people with their basic needs (for example, water, food and shelter) and why they should be looked after for the future

The revised elaboration adds places that people visit, which was originally a content description in Year 2 that has been deleted, and makes the content more complicated than is appropriate for Foundation students. Adding 'reasons why people live in or visit places' to the elaboration makes it even more complex, as well as confusing. In the elaboration in the previous curriculum students were asked to think about how places provided them with their basic needs, and it complimented a content description in Year 1 Science. The revised elaboration implies that the reason people live in places is to provide their basic needs, which changes the meaning completely and is nonsense.

2. The revised content description removes the words 'and why they are important to people'. This eliminates much of the point of the content description in the previous curriculum, which was to get children to think about the significance of their place in their lives, for the reasons explained below. The retention of this content description in Foundation:

the importance of Country/Place to First Nations Australians and the Country/Place on which the school is located

suggests that the revisers of the curriculum recognise place as only being significant for First Nations children.

3. The revision misuses the idea of a 'special place'. In the primary school geography education literature a special place is a place such as a child's bedroom, cubby house, play area, neighbourhood playground or holiday location. It is not the place they live in, or their community, as stated in this revised elaboration:

identifying the places, communities, Country/Place they live in and belong to, and why that place may be special to them; for example, a neighbourhood, suburb, town or rural locality, or community

Why do these changes matter? They matter because they have removed the focus on the place that children live in, and why that place is important to them. Becoming familiar with the place you live in, and developing an attachment to it, contributes to the emotional development of children. Jack, a British social work academic, concludes from research in the UK that 'place continues to play an important role in the development of personal identity, feelings of security and a sense of belonging in the modern world' (Jack, 2015: 417). Spencer (2005, p. 305), a psychologist, argues that in 'doing geography' with children, the teacher is facilitating 'the child's very personal development of self-identity which will shape much of their lives, their values, sense of belonging and self-worth'. This occurs through the development of a child's familiarity with and sense of attachment to their place. It is an important but largely neglected contribution of primary school geography to the development of children. This contribution has been severely reduced in the revised curriculum.

Several other aspects of the concept of place have been deleted in the revision.

1. In the previous curriculum Year 2 had this content description:

The idea that places are parts of Earth's surface that have been named by people, and how places can be defined at a variety of scales

In the revision the first part, which asked students to think a bit more deeply about the concept of place, has been removed. Earlier versions of the curriculum described places as parts of the Earth's surface that have been given meaning by people, which is an even deeper idea and one worth returning to the curriculum.

2. In the previous curriculum Year 3 had this content description:

The similarities and differences between places in terms of their type of settlement, demographic characteristics and the lives of the people who live there, and people's perceptions of these places

This content further developed an understanding of places by studying them as settlements, populations and communities, and it also provided an opportunity or students to learn how to use

ABS statistics to find out about their own place and others that they were interested in. This is a task well within the capacity of Year 3 students. The previous content description also had this elaboration:

exploring people's feelings for place and the factors that influence people's attachment to place, through reading and viewing poems, songs, paintings and stories

It encouraged students to think and talk about their emotional connections to their places, and to places that they might have lived in before.

3. In the previous curriculum Year 5 had this content description:

The environmental and human influences on the location and characteristics of a place and the management of spaces within them

This was intended to complete the sequence of content descriptions developing the concept of place by examining ways of explaining the characteristics of a place, and thinking about how the spaces within it are managed. It provided an opportunity for students to learn more about their own place, and to engage with local planning issues and conflicts. It could even get them involved in making a submission to their local government. It showed students how their understanding of places could be applied to real world issues.

The content of this content description is partly included in this content description in the revised curriculum:

the influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place

This revision no longer includes reference to the management of the spaces within a place.

The previous curriculum had a recognisable, but by no means perfect, progression in understanding the concept of place, from the place the child lives in and its features and characteristics, to the importance of places for people, their feelings for and attachment to places, the meaning of a place, the settlement and population characteristics of places, and the environmental and human influences on what places are like, including the actions of local people. Most of the links in this progression have been weakened or deleted, and the understanding of places and their significance to young people has been greatly reduced.

Climate

In Year 3 a content description on the main climate types of the world and the similarities and differences between the climates of different places has been removed. Climate is not in the primary school Science curriculum, so students will not learn of the difference between weather and climate, something that is frequently misunderstood and which confuses people's understanding of climate change. For example, there are regular letters to the Editor of The Australian asking how can global warming be happening when the weather is so cold. They will also learn nothing about the climates around the world, knowledge which is an important part of world knowledge and is required to understand the different biotic regions or biomes of the world studied in Year 9 geography.

Addition or retention of unnecessary content

1. Year 2 has this content description:

the interconnections of First Nations Australians to a local Country/Place

Year 3 has a very similar content description:

the ways First Nations Australians in different parts of Australia are interconnected with Country/Place

Both have been refined from the previous curriculum. The only difference between them seems to be whether people are connected to a local Country/Place or to non-local Countries/Places. Having two content descriptions on much the same topic should be avoided when so much content has been deleted, and the two could easily be combined.

2. In Year 5 this revised content description:

the management of Australian environments, including managing severe weather events such as bushfires, floods, droughts or cyclones, and their consequences

has replaced this one from the previous curriculum:

The impact of bushfires or floods on environments and communities, and how people can respond

The old content description was added following a recommendation of the Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. It was solely about reducing the impacts of bushfires or floods, and quite limited. Its three elaborations were:

mapping and explaining the location, frequency and severity of bushfires or flooding in Australia

explaining the impacts of fire on Australian vegetation and the significance of fire damage on communities

researching how the application of principles of prevention, mitigation and preparedness minimises the harmful effects of bushfires or flooding

The revision has broadened the content to be about the management of Australian environments, and removed the references to communities and how people can respond to natural hazards. This change is carried through in the two elaborations:

exploring how environments are used and managed, the practices and laws that aim to manage human impact, the use of zoning to manage local environments, creation of wildlife corridors and national parks

examining how changes due to environmental practices create issues, such as water shortages and increased floods and bushfires, the impact of issues on places and communities, and how people can mitigate the impacts through building codes, zoning, firebreaks and controlled burns, and efficient irrigation

Now teachers are asked to cover a wide range of environmental management practices, almost as many as in the Year 10 unit on environmental change and management. At the same time the principles of prevention, mitigation and preparedness that would help students to grasp the range of practices that can be adopted to manage the impact of bushfires or floods have been deleted. How this change contributes to stripping back the curriculum is unclear.

Reduced conceptual level

1. In Year 3, this content description in the revised curriculum:

sustainable use and management of renewable and non-renewable resources, including the custodial responsibility First Nations Australians have for Country/Place

has only two very long elaborations:

exploring how some resources are used and managed in sustainable and non-sustainable ways; for example, auditing use of renewable and non-renewable resources in the classroom, investigating recycling and waste disposal of non-renewable resources in the school and by local government, reducing waste through “nude food” lunch boxes and using recycled toilet paper, examining how renewable resources such as timber are managed

investigating how First Nations Australians adapted ways of living using knowledge and practices linked to the sustainable use of resources and environments (for example, rotational use and harvesting of resources; mutton-bird harvesting in Tasmania; the use of fire; the use of vegetation endemic in the local area for food, shelter, medicine, tools and weapons; and the collection of bush food from semi-arid rangelands), and how this knowledge can be taught through stories and songs, reflecting their inherent custodial responsibilities

A major problem with the first elaboration is that there is nothing in it about the meaning of sustainability, or about the principles that can be applied to decide if the use of a renewable resource, or the disposal of a waste, is sustainable. There are only references to some individual actions that may help sustainability, whatever that might be. This was also a deficiency in the previous curriculum, partly produced by the resistance of at least one state to any reference to definitive statements about sustainability. Unless students understand what sustainability means as a concept, and how to apply that meaning in practice, they will have little understanding of what we need to do to become sustainable, and why.

2. Similarly, a major weakness with the second elaboration is that it does not explain the meaning of custodial responsibility, which would seem to be essential, and how it produces sustainable practices. Furthermore, the last two of the practices described in the second elaboration are not about sustainable resource use. More relevant practices that could be included are prohibitions on hunting and burning in specific areas and at specific times, prohibitions on catching animals when they are breeding, and prohibitions on harvesting plants that are seeding. Without an understanding of the concepts of sustainability and custodial responsibility, students are left with a collection of facts about practices, and little understanding of the logic underlying them.
3. Because of the deletions and changes to the content on places noted earlier, students will have a much poorer understanding of the concept of place, the dominant one in primary school geography.
4. In Year 2 a content description on activities in the local place and reasons for their location has been removed, while in Year 3 a content description on the influence of purpose, distance and accessibility on the frequency with which people visit places has also been removed. Their elimination deletes

the two main content items that developed understanding of the concept of location, including why things are located where they are, and the influence of location and accessibility on people's activities. These were in the curriculum to get students thinking about the effects of location and distance on their lives, and about where things should be located, as location is a core geographical concept. The Year 3 content description also asked students to look for patterns in their visits to places by investigating the relationship between the distance to places, the purpose of visiting them, and the frequency of visits. This is an exercise in making a generalisation and discovering a principle.

Errors and inconsistencies

Scale

Year 2 in the revised curriculum has this content description:

how places can be spatially represented in geographical divisions from local to regional to state/territory, and how people and places are interconnected across those scales

Its elaborations are:

investigating the places locally and at a broader scale that they and their families visit for shopping, health, recreation, religious or ceremonial activities, or other reasons

identifying links they and other people in their community have with people and places at the regional and/or state/territory scale; for example, where produce in their supermarket comes from or produce from their farms goes to, relatives they visit, places they go for holidays

describing how communication and transport technologies connect their place to other places at the regional and/or state/territory level; for example, online communication, phone, road, rail, planes, ferries

Both the content description and these elaborations are confused about scale. The visits, links and connections they describe are between individual places, as each one clearly states, and are therefore at the same scale. They are not visits, links and connections between a place and a region or a state, but between a place and other places that are located in another region or state. They are connections across distance, and not across scales.

Features

The term 'features' is used in Foundation and Years 1 and 2, and is defined in the Glossary as the:

Visible elements of a place; classified as natural (e.g. rivers), managed (e.g. parks, farms) and constructed or built (e.g. home, a city).

Features are tangible things that can be observed, do not change rapidly, and can be located on a map. The term 'characteristics' adds intangible elements, such as weather and population composition, and is used instead of features from Year 3 onwards.

Year 1 in the revised curriculum has this content description:

the natural, managed and constructed features of local places, and their location

Two of the elaborations for this content description are:

identifying natural features (for example, hills, rivers, native vegetation and weather), managed features (for example, farms, parks and gardens) and constructed features (for example, roads and buildings) and locating them on a map

describing the daily and seasonal weather of their place using simple terms such as "rainy", "hot", "cold", "windy" and "cloudy", and comparing it with the weather of other places that they know or are aware of; for example, "It was windy at the beach but not at my house", "It is colder on the mountain", "It is rainy in the winter", "It is hot in the summer"

The problem with both elaborations is that the definition of 'features' in the glossary quoted above does not include weather, as it is an intangible concept, changes rapidly, and does not have a fixed location, as is required by the content description.

Elaborations that don't match their content description

Elaborations should describe ways that teachers can teach the content description to which they belong. The following are instances where the elaborations appear to be incompatible with their content description.

1. Year 1 in the revised curriculum has this content description:

how places change and how they can be cared for by different groups including First Nations Australians

Two of its elaborations are:

identifying which resources they can recycle, reduce, re-use or none of these, and what local spaces and

systems support these activities; for example, rules, signs, waste collection truck routes

describing how local places change due to changing weather and seasons, and how we can care for places because of those changes; for example, not walking in muddy areas during wet weather, and watering plants in dry weather

The first elaboration is only tenuously linked to the idea of caring for places, while the second has no link. It is about regular seasonal changes, and not about permanent changes such as new buildings, structures or land clearing.

2. Year 3 of the revised curriculum has this content description:

the similarities and differences between places in Australia and neighbouring countries in terms of their natural, managed and constructed features

Two of its elaborations are:

investigating differences in the type of housing that people use in different climates and environments

exploring different types of settlement and classifying them into hierarchical categories, such as isolated dwellings, outstations, villages, towns, regional centres and large cities

To be compatible with the content description the first elaboration should be limited to the neighbouring countries. The second elaboration has been imported from a content description in the previous curriculum on types of settlement that has been deleted, and has no relationship with the revised content description.

3. Year 6 of the revised curriculum has this content description:

the geographical diversity and location of places in the Asia region, and its location in relation to Australia

It looks similar to this one in the previous curriculum:

The geographical diversity of the Asia region and the location of its major countries in relation to Australia

However, the revised content description is now about the diversity of places, and not of the diversity of the region as a whole. It is also about places, not countries, yet these changes are not matched in several of the elaborations, which continue to about the diversity of the region and about countries. Two other elaborations are:

comparing the daily lives of people in other countries, in terms of food, clothing, personal and household goods, housing and education, and differences between the wealthy and poor in a country

researching the proportion of the Australian population and of the population from their local area who were born in each world cultural region, using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, and then comparing aspects of selected cultures

They have both been imported from content descriptions that have been deleted. The first covers the world while the second is only about Australia; neither belong to a content description that is about the Asia region.

4. Also in Year 6, this content description in the revised curriculum:

Australia's interconnections with other countries and how these change people and places

is the same as in the old curriculum, but this elaboration has been added:

using geospatial tools such as a globe, wall map or a digital application, to identify the geographical divisions of the world, including the Asia and Pacific regions

This has no relationship with the content description, which is about countries, not the geographical divisions of the world into continents and oceans, and has been imported from a deleted content description in Year 2 of the previous curriculum. Its addition to this Year 6 content description is inexplicable, as this is knowledge that should have been learned early in primary school, and not in Year 6.

Removal of human aspects of places

In two content descriptions and their elaborations there has been an elimination of the human aspects of places.

1. This Year 3 content description in the revised curriculum:

the similarities and differences between places in Australia and neighbouring countries in terms of their natural, managed and constructed features

replaces this one in the previous curriculum:

The location of Australia's neighbouring countries and the diverse characteristics of their places

Three of the elaborations in the revised content description are:

identifying and locating examples of the main climatic types in Australia and neighbouring countries

(for example, equatorial, tropical, arid, semi-arid, temperate) and the features of those climate types and their impact on other natural features

identifying and describing the similarities and differences between places in Australia and places in neighbouring countries, such as Indonesia and Pacific Island nations, in their natural features; for example, rocks, landforms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation and animal life

choosing a place in a neighbouring country, such as Indonesia or Pacific Island nations, to compare with a place in Australia in terms of managed and built features, to explore the reasons for similarities and differences

There are three issues here. One is that a content description on climate and climatic types has been deleted from the revised curriculum, yet is needed for students to understand what a climate is and how it differs from weather. The second is that the revised content description is about features, and climate is not a feature of a place according to the definition noted earlier. The third is that the previous content description was about characteristics, which are both physical and human, but in the new elaborations there is no mention of human characteristics such as populations, cultures, economies and ways of living. Instead, it is suggested that teachers focus on 'rocks, landforms, bodies of water, climate, soils, natural vegetation and animal life,' and on 'managed and built features.' This is another inexplicable change.

2. A similar change has been made in Year 5. The previous curriculum had this content description:

The environmental and human influences on the location and characteristics of a place and the management of spaces within them

The content of this content description is partly included in this one in the revised curriculum:

the influence of people, including First Nations Australians and people in other countries, on the characteristics of a place

Three of its elaborations are:

identifying how First Nations Australian communities altered the environment and sustained ways of living through their methods of land and resource management; for example, firestick farming

exploring the extent of change in the local environment over time (for example, through vegetation clearance, fencing, urban development, drainage, irrigation, erosion, farming, the introduction of grazing livestock such as sheep and cattle, forest plantations or mining), and evaluating the effects of change on economic development and environmental sustainability

exploring examples of positive influences people have on the characteristics of places; for example, reforestation, land-care groups, rehabilitating former mining, industrial or waste disposal sites

These elaborations are only about the environmental characteristics of a place, so once again learning about the human characteristics of a place has been removed.

References

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Alaric Maude
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