



**UNDERSTANDING AND TEACHING
AUSVELS GEOGRAPHY
FOR VICTORIAN PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

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Foreword to the Victorian edition

This edition of *Understanding and Teaching the Australian Curriculum: Geography for Primary Schools* uses the text and terminology of AusVELS, the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority's version of the Australian Curriculum. AusVELS is basically the same as the Australian Curriculum, but some statements have been corrected, others have been clarified and more elaborations have been added.

Alaric Maude

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List of AusVELS symbols

To differentiate between the four subject areas of the Australian Curriculum referenced in this book, symbols have been used to represent each subject. Every time you see one of these symbols, you may refer to the following key:



AusVELS GEOGRAPHY



AusVELS SCIENCE



AusVELS MATHS



AusVELS HISTORY

Introduction

What this book is about

Primary school teachers have a very significant role in the teaching of geography in Australia because they are responsible for seven of the nine years in which the subject will be compulsory in the majority of schools. Yet primary teachers may be unsure what this subject is all about, as few will have done more than a minimal study of geography at the tertiary level. Although some of the content will be familiar to them, having been taught as Studies in Society and Environment or its equivalent in the past, much is likely to be new, and even familiar material will now be taught as geography. The aim of this book is to help these teachers understand the curriculum they are being asked to teach. I hope to show that geography is an interesting and important subject that teaches essential knowledge, understandings and skills, contributes to the personal and social development of young children, and involves a lot more than maps and countries of the world.

As the first chapter of the book, 'Geography and the primary school curriculum', explains, geography should be treated as a separate subject in our schools because it is a distinct discipline, with ways of thinking that are different to history and science. It is important that teachers understand these ways of thinking, so that they can help students to learn how to use them to understand the world. Research in the United Kingdom, where geography has been a separate subject in the primary school curriculum for over two decades, has found that many teachers lack confidence in interpreting the curriculum and as a result allocate very little time to teaching it. *Understanding and Teaching AusVELS Geography for Victorian Primary Schools* has been written to help teachers gain this confidence by explaining the content of the curriculum in some detail. I also hope this book will give teachers knowledge they can use to extend students when they judge this to be appropriate. Primary school teachers tell me that their students can do much more than people generally think, and the book has been written on that assumption.

I am a university geographer, not a school teacher, so the book doesn't have detailed plans for lessons or work units. These are being developed by those with the necessary experience and skills, and some are referred to in the book. But I have been involved in the development and writing of the new Australian Curriculum: Geography from the very beginning – first as Lead Writer for the Shape Paper, and then as Writing Coach during the drafting stage – so I think I have a good knowledge of why the curriculum is structured and written the way it is and what the content descriptions and elaborations mean.

The scope of the book

Understanding and Teaching AusVELS Geography for Victorian Primary Schools discusses every content description and almost every content elaboration in AusVELS Geography. While content descriptions are mandatory to teach, the elaborations are only suggestions. Consequently, the book may cover more material than teachers strictly need to teach. In addition, the guidelines for the writers were to produce a curriculum that was teachable within a time allocation of 2% of total teaching time in Levels F–2 and 4% in Levels 3–6. However, the time allocated to geography is a matter for education authorities and schools to determine, so the book may also have more material than teachers will have the time to teach. How much of the information teachers use, and how they use it, is a matter for their professional judgement.

will slowly learn what they mean from Foundation onwards and will add to their understanding in each Level. They may not be able to explain much about a big concept until the end of primary school or into the secondary school years, but they will know some of the ways it is used in geography.

The aims of AusVELS Geography

This is what the geography curriculum says about its overarching aims:



The AusVELS Geography (Australian Curriculum) Foundation – Level 10 aims to ensure that students develop:

- a sense of wonder, curiosity and respect about places, people, cultures and environments throughout the world
- a deep geographical knowledge of their own locality, Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and the world
- the ability to think geographically, using geographical concepts
- the capacity to be competent, critical and creative users of geographical inquiry methods and skills
- as informed, responsible and active citizens who can contribute to the development of an environmentally and economically sustainable, and socially just world.

Some of these aims may be inappropriate for the primary school years. For example, students won't have developed a deep geographical knowledge of places by the end of Level 6 (and probably not even by the end of Level 10). They will have some understanding of how to use the seven geographical concepts, but their knowledge of them will be uneven. They will probably have no idea of how to contribute to the development of an economically sustainable world, but they ought to have some views on environmental sustainability and social justice. They should also have developed the sense of wonder, curiosity and respect identified in the first aim, since this is a major objective of the primary school curriculum. The teachers on the Advisory Group for the Australian Curriculum: Geography were insistent that this should be the first aim, despite arguments from some outside the Group that it was inappropriate because it could not be assessed.

Note that only one of the aims is about knowledge of places. The rest are about attitudes, understandings, skills and abilities. These are all connected, as wonder and respect support the attitudes needed for engaged citizenship, which in turn depends on knowledge and understanding of the world and the ability to think competently, critically and creatively.

What does geography add to the Australian primary school Curriculum?

The justification for geography's inclusion in the primary school curriculum is that it teaches something educationally useful that other subjects do not; otherwise, there would be no point in adding it to an already crowded curriculum. I think the subject contributes to the education of young Australians in the following ways, the foundations of which are laid in primary school. Geography:

- nurtures curiosity and wonder about the world.
- teaches students about the environment and their dependence on it, and about the meaning of sustainability.
- teaches students distinctive ways of thinking about the world. This is conceptual and analytical knowledge. It is much more powerful than factual knowledge because it can be used to make sense of factual knowledge and to gain an understanding of situations that have not been encountered before.

- teaches students about their own place and how and why it is changing. This provides them with an understanding of some of the influences on their locality and their lives, which is a foundation for informed local citizenship.
- teaches students about aspects of Australia's environment, population, economy and society that are matters of regular public debate not examined in other subjects. This is a foundation for informed national citizenship.
- teaches students about places and countries throughout the world and shows how they are connected to them. This is a foundation for understanding other places – their peoples, cultures and ways of living – and thus for informed global citizenship.

There is yet another reason for including geography in the Australian Curriculum, this one deriving from the work of environmental psychologists. 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. Similarly, Jack (2010, p. 758), a social worker, writes that:

Direct and repeated experiences of places in childhood, together with the social meaning attached to them by children and others (e.g. parents, teachers and peers), tend to have the biggest influence on the subsequent development of place attachments. As with other aspects of child development, place attachments therefore grow out of person-environment interactions.

Further, Jack notes that 'research with children and young people has repeatedly shown that place, identity and well-being are often closely connected'. Spencer goes on to link these ideas with geography:

It is clear that the plausible, intuitively persuasive, case for the importance of place in the development of a complete, rounded self-identity has begun to be made. And it is also clearly arguable that the subject of geography, and its early-years teaching, can have a major role to play in partnership with parents and peers and personal exploration of the neighbourhood. (p. 308)

This is an important but largely neglected contribution of geography to the emotional development of children through their study and experience of place. These ideas are followed up in the Foundation Level of AusVELS Geography, with studies of the places children live in and the places they think of as 'special', but teachers should keep them in mind in subsequent years. For other views on what geography contributes to education, see <http://www.geospace.edu.au/support-units/why-teach-geography/wtg-overview.html>. See also Chapter 2 in Catling, Willy and Butler's *Teaching primary geography for Australian schools* (2013).

Using children's own knowledge and experience

A strong theme in writings on primary school geography is the value of starting with children's own lives and experience. Hutchinson (2007) believes that one of the lessons from educational research is that learning divorced from everyday life may be seen by children as separate from and not relevant to their own lives, and consequently 'left at the classroom door'. Catling, Willy and Butler (2013, p. 48), using their 20 years of experience teaching primary school geography in England, express a similar view when they write:

Research and evaluations appear to indicate that in too many English primary schools children's experience and sense of geography in school are disconnected with their personal, everyday geographies. It is as though primary geography in practice creates discontinuity between the geographies in and of children's own lives and of what and how they study geography in school. This might account for the apparently 'boring' nature of primary geography for too many children, since it does not excite them, rarely engages their experience, perspectives and issues and is largely passively taught through over-reliance on structured geography units and worksheets. If primary geography has greater relevance and connection with children's lived experience, perhaps what children learn would come naturally rather than seem a burden for some.

For this reason, it is important to recognise that the geography described in this chapter can be applied to thinking about and understanding the world that your students live in and experience, whether firsthand or via the media. They are curious about many geographical subjects: the place they live in and why it is the way it is; what

Sustainability

In AusVELS Geography, sustainability is both a concept and a cross-curriculum priority. In geography, sustainability is about maintaining the capacity of the environment to support human life and wellbeing into the future. Ideas about sustainability start in Level 1 with caring for places, which could include caring for their natural features. This is consolidated in Level 3 with a content description about people's feelings about places and how this influences their attitudes towards the protection of some places:



The similarities and differences in individuals' and groups' feelings and perceptions about places, and how they influence views about the protection of these places (ACHGK018)

Level 4 has a major examination of sustainability, including the application of the concept to the use of resources and the management of waste, and teachers are recommended to read the relevant section in that chapter even if they are not teaching that Level. In Level 5, when students investigate the influence of people on Australian environments, teachers could follow up issues discussed in Level 4 by using the concept of sustainability to evaluate the consequences of this influence.

Interconnection

Interconnection is the theme for Level 2, which explores people's connections with other places in Australia and throughout the world. There is the opportunity in this Level to link with the history curriculum and investigate how changes in technology have changed people's connections over one or two generations, which would nicely illustrate the role of technology in overcoming the constraints of distance and contribute to the understanding of the concepts of space and change as well as interconnection. Level 2 also has a content description on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander connections to Country/Place:



The ways in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples maintain special connections to particular Country/Place (ACHGK011)

Interconnection is a significant theme in Level 6, but students now examine how these connections change people and places. One important type of connection for Australian places is through the migration of people from other countries; here, geography could link up with Level 6 studies of migration to Australia in the history curriculum. There is also scope in Level 6 to link geography's investigation of significant events with science's study of sudden geological changes or extreme weather conditions, as these natural hazards are significant events.

Change

Change is not a prominent concept in the primary years but is implied in several content descriptions. For example, when students learn in Foundation that their place previously was (and in fact still is) an Aboriginal place, they are observing change. In Level 1, students will learn that managed and constructed features represent change, in that they have replaced the previous natural features in a place. For example, houses and farms have replaced native vegetation, dams have changed rivers and harbours have changed coasts. In Level 2, as mentioned above, there is the opportunity to examine the effects of changing technologies on people's connections and visits, and Level 5 has content descriptions that examine changes in environments and places. There are also items in history and science that explore similar themes, and these can be used to develop thinking about the ways that environments and places have changed.

Table 2.5 lists the progressions for the concept of change in geography, history and science.

Table 2.5 Progression in the understanding of changeSource: Adapted from AusVELS 2013, <http://ausvels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/>

Level	Content descriptions and elaborations		
	Geography	History	Science
Foundation			Daily and seasonal changes in our environment, including the weather, affect everyday life (ACSSU004)
Level 1	The natural, managed and constructed features of places, their location, how they change and how they can be cared for (ACHGK005)		
Level 2	<p>The influence of purpose, distance and accessibility on the frequency with which people visit places (ACHGK013)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> suggesting what their pattern of visits to places might have been two generations ago and comparing this to their current pattern 	The history of a significant person, building, site or part of the natural environment in the local community and what it reveals about the past (ACHHK044)	
Level 3		ONE important example of change and ONE important example of continuity over time in the local community, region or state/territory; for example, in relation to the areas of transport, work, education, natural and built environments, entertainment, daily life (ACHHK061)	
Level 4			Earth's surface changes over time as a result of natural processes and human activity (ACSSU075)

Level	Content descriptions and elaborations		
	Geography	History	Science
Level 5	<p>The influence of people, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, on the environmental characteristics of Australian places (ACHGK027)</p> <p>The influence people have on the human characteristics of places and the management of spaces within them (ACHGK029)</p>	<p>The nature of convict or colonial presence, including the factors that influenced patterns of development, aspects of the daily life of the inhabitants (including Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples) and how the environment changed. (ACHHK094)</p>	
Level 6			<p>Sudden geological changes or extreme weather conditions can affect Earth's surface (ACSSU096)</p>

Scale

Scale is also not a major concept in the primary years of the geography curriculum, but students are introduced to the idea in several ways. In Level 2, they learn how the address of their home is a hierarchy of places at different scales, and in Level 4 they learn how to use scale in maps in both geography and mathematics. The concept of scale is also implicit in the progression from local to global studies that takes place from Foundation to Level 6. Comparing countries across the world at the global scale is very different to comparing individual places at the local scale, and teachers should make these differences clear in the upper primary years. A particular point to emphasise is how general statements about what a country is like made at a national scale break down when the country is analysed at a regional or local scale. Diversity tends to increase as we go down the scale from global to local. For example, Australia ranks very high on national measures of health, but there are places within Australia where health standards are similar to those in much less developed countries. In Level 6, students can find this out by studying the diversity of the Asia region at different scales and comparing what they learn.

The cross-curriculum priorities

In addition to its seven core concepts, AusVELS Geography is structured according to three 'cross-curriculum priorities' that are common to every subject in the Australian Curriculum:



Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures
Asia and Australia's engagement with Asia, and
Sustainability.

The following sections outline the ways each priority has been incorporated into AusVELS Geography.