

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL FIND KEY IDEAS ON
ASSESSMENT • CONCEPTS • FOUNDATION STAGE • GOOD PRACTICE • SCHOOL JOURNEYS

Young children making sense of their place in the world

The Foundation Stage applies to children aged between three and five years in a variety of settings such as nurseries, playgroups and schools. In these important early years, children are forming values and attitudes that will colour their perception of the world around them and predispose them to learning about it. This is a crucial period in which educators need to ply their craft appropriately if they are to lay secure foundations for future development. One of the main aims of the Foundation Stage curriculum is to make children aware of their place in the world and help them to make sense of it. As a result geography is at the very heart of early learning, encompassing as it does aspects of social, physical and cultural worlds that are necessary for meaningful understanding of our surroundings.

This chapter outlines the principles, provision and processes that facilitate the learning and teaching of geography in the Early Years. The Foundation Stage curriculum is organised into six areas of learning. While we recognise that geography is subsumed under the area entitled 'Knowledge and Understanding of the World', we use the term 'geography' throughout this chapter for two reasons. First, geography can be found in all of the six areas of learning, and

second, practitioners need to know what experiences and skills are essentially geographical within all areas of the curriculum in order to promote a balanced approach to geographical learning.

Principles underpinning early geographical learning experiences

A principle is an important underlying assumption or belief that shapes the way we act. The Geographical Association has identified three core principles that underpin all learning in the Foundation Stage, namely:



Illustration | From 'Handa's Surprise' by Eileen Browne. © 1994, Eileen Browne. Reproduced by permission of Walker Books Ltd, London SE11 5HJ.



Photo | Kathy Alcock and John Collar.

- Young children learn best through self-initiated and supported play.
- Links should be made between the 'areas of learning' to reflect a holistic approach in the education of young children.
- Young children learn best when they feel valued, secure and are able to build positive relationships with peers and other adults. (Geographical Association, 2003).

Research findings strongly suggest that young children learn best in situations that promote self-initiated and self-directed activities, in other words, play (David, 1999). Young children need time to freely explore the world around them and try out a range of responses in order to investigate, discover, reflect on and evaluate a range of learning experiences. First-hand experience and sensory interaction are vital components in play, as is appropriate intervention to reinforce, extend or challenge newly emerging concepts. The skill of the practitioner lies in the provision of stimulating and appropriate materials, resources and contexts and the ability to intervene at the optimum moment for learning. This skill is necessary for both child-initiated and supported play.

Play is a rich and varied activity that knows no subject boundaries, but rather encompasses a range of different learning categories in which common and specific skills will need to be learnt and practised. Skills are often subject transferable. For example, the enquiry skills used by geographers are also appropriate tools for many other areas of learning. We believe that it is beneficial to children's learning that the value of skills acquisition and their role in learning is flagged up by practitioners. Thus one key part of early geographical learning is to teach essential skills in holistic learning contexts, thereby enabling children to reflect on what they have done and how they have done it.

Young children are enabled to make sense of their place in the world best when:

- They are inspired to think about their own place in the world, their values, and their rights and responsibilities to other people and the environment (DfEE, 1999, p. 14) and given opportunities to actively participate;
- Their wealth of knowledge, understandings and feelings about people and places are drawn on by practitioners;
- They are supported and encouraged to construct their own meanings about people and places;
- They are encouraged to identify with other people and places in positive ways;
- Practitioners recognise that children's sense of identity is rooted in the places where they live and play;
- Their home areas, families and communities are valued; and
- They actively experience a range of high quality, stimulating environments.

We recognise the specialised skills that parents and practitioners have that allow them to intervene sensitively and appropriately, as partners in children's learning.

The best practitioners impart the message that the child is valued for who he or she is and what she or he already knows. Children who feel valued in this way are more confident and will be more inclined to try new and different things and more willing to share their findings with others. We can, and should, model the value that we place on the lives and backgrounds of others. As recent research by Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2002) has shown, Early Years practitioners are powerful role models for the young children in their care.

Figure 1 | Principles underpinning the Geographical Association Position statement on geography in the Foundation Stage. Source: Geographical Association, 2003.

Geography starts when we begin to value our place, and that of others, in the world and acknowledge the importance of our actions within it. The specific principles that we believe underpin this process are outlined in Figure 1.

The importance of allowing children to participate actively in real learning contexts has been shown by Hart (1997). He argued that children's concern for the environment was born out of their affective unmediated contact with it and that the best outcomes were achieved when children's opinions were genuinely valued by adults. Indeed, it seems that even very young children are capable of making and enacting decisions about their environment with appropriate support. This of course stresses the value of first-hand experience in the outdoors. It is a requirement of the Foundation Stage that children have regular and structured outdoor experiences and desirable that the outdoors is used whenever appropriate to stimulate and facilitate geographical learning. Outdoor provision should include a range of stimulating materials and settings in which pupils are encouraged to actively enquire, reflect and participate in desired change. Such learning is all the more valuable because of the pupils' role within it and renders it meaningful and relevant. Catling (2003) rightly questions the lack of voice that young children often have within our society and calls for this to be corrected.



Photo | Paula Owens.

Children's early experiences of place may vary enormously but they all bring some awareness and understanding of geographical concepts to early learning contexts. Research by Blades and Spencer (1987, cited in Matthews, 1992) has shown that children as young as three were able to use simple maps in a rudimentary way, while Spencer and Darvizeh (1981, cited in Matthews, 1992) demonstrated that children of this age were capable of recalling routes travelled just once, using given photographs. The practitioner can build on this burgeoning understanding by actively teaching relevant skills inherent in observation, enquiry, communication, reflection and evaluation.

It is also important, when building on children's knowledge, to take opportunities to reinforce positive concepts and challenge negative ones. In fact the early years are the best time to challenge stereotypical thinking. As Scoffham (1999) observes, children's attitudes become entrenched as they get older and are harder to change. For this reason it is important that children have access to positive images of other peoples and cultures in global and local contexts. These images may be gleaned through a range of resources and first-hand experiences. Appropriate examples include:

- Experiencing the story *Handa's Surprise* (Browne, 1997) coupled with the opportunity to taste a range of delicious fruits.
- A visit from a parent who may show artefacts and talk about their culture and beliefs.
- An e-mail link with a school or institution from another country in which photographs and/or drawings can be exchanged.

While geographers tend to draw out similarities and differences between our own and other cultures and places, with very young children it is more fruitful to dwell on aspects of similarity. As practitioners, we have a duty to encourage tolerance, understanding, responsibility and respect, with a view to developing global citizens who will have the confidence, knowledge and skills to act fairly, capably and equably in the world they will inherit. These attitudes for learning need to be started early.



Figure 2 | The cycle of learning.
 Source: Geographical Association, 2003. Photo: Kathy Alcock and John Collar.

The process of learning

We have already stated our belief that play is central to young children's learning. The Geographical Association (2003) sets out a model for learning that has play at the core (Figure 2). The model suggests that learning can be seen as a cycle that uses children's present levels of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes as a starting point.

We see the model as a flexible planning tool. A cycle of learning may be of

different lengths, ranging from a single activity to a sequence undertaken over several weeks or more. We also recognise that within this process there is a constant cycle of learning that reflects the enquiry process (see Chapter 7), as new knowledge becomes existing knowledge and the process starts again. In addition, children need to revisit stages in the cycle in order to consolidate what they have learned. So while it may be possible to progress through the stages in a linear fashion such a progression is likely to lead to shallow learning that lacks meaningful roots. The rationale for this model is as follows:

1. Why start with prior knowledge and understanding?

All teachers are aware of the importance of establishing what their pupils already know, understand and can do before embarking on new learning. This helps to ensure that, whether activities are pupil-initiated or teacher-led, the work that you plan is at a suitable level and pupils have a cognitive framework into which the new learning can be accommodated.

2. Why is it important to develop attitudes as a base for new learning?

The Foundation Stage stresses the importance of engaging young children's curiosity by drawing on their existing knowledge and fostering their motivation to learn new things. It sees children as eager, willing learners and has a number of aims, all of which involve attitudes and values. These include:

- Encouraging and supporting children's natural curiosity in the world around them
- Developing respect for and positive attitudes towards self, other peoples and cultures
- Developing a sense of wonder at the beauty of natural and built environments
- Encouraging and developing a sense of responsibility for the environment and their actions within it

In establishing the values base for learning it is important to consider the ethos of the school, the provision that is made available, and the example provided by teachers and other role models. You also need to make the most of opportunities as they arise, whether stemming from pupils' current interests and ideas, or from an opportunity identified by a practitioner. For example, take your pupils on a walk to observe the changes in autumn, giving them the opportunity to play in the leaves and to select some to take back to school to use as they wish.

Figure 3 | Opportunities for geographical experiences can be found in all aspects of the Foundation Stage curriculum.

Opportunities can be found here...

Knowledge and understanding of the world (KUW)

Use a range of first-hand experiences to:

- Explore a range of real and created environments – school grounds, local facilities, model farm
- Observe similarities and differences in environmental and social contexts – compare our home to a place in a story
- Record the world around us in a variety of ways – models, maps, sounds, pictures
- Develop enquiry skills – develop curiosity through asking questions, make predictions, make informed choices, model research techniques using non-fiction books, CD-Roms

Physical development (PD)

- Enjoy and take part in physical challenges – follow routes, climb up/down hills, up/down climbing frame, negotiate obstacles
- Use relevant vocabulary – movement, direction, distance, location, speed
- Use spaces around them – control physical movements (forward/backward, left/right, up/down), find personal space in which to work, play or sit
- Take part in a range of activities in places outdoors – dig and plant, experience weather, visit wildlife area/other place, and indoors – use small world toys to create new or improve existing small worlds and environments; role play travel agents, garden centre staff, airport staff, weather reporters

Personal, social and emotional development (PSE)

- Develop positive attitudes towards, and a respect for, people, places and cultures
- Embrace ethnic and cultural diversity through positive images – displays, stories, pictures, non-fiction texts, visits and visitors
- Show awe and wonder in response to places and events in the environment – rainbows, waterfalls, mountains, sunsets, waves, skyscrapers, bridges, places of worship
- Become curious about the world around them – Where do rivers begin and end? Where does rain come from? Why does it get dark?

There...

Creative development (CD)

- Explore environments using all their senses – street, playground, supermarket, station, park, countryside, beach
 - Explore resources from a variety of cultures and climates – artefacts, pictures, music, foods, clothing, poetry, story
 - Employ natural materials creatively – clay, straw, wool, wood, shells, sand, twigs, leaves, water
 - Appreciate the creativity of others' religions and cultures through visits, festivals, architecture, dance
 - Use natural events as a stimulus for creative responses – waves, wind, rain, thunder

Holistic View of Learning

And everywhere...

Communication, language and literacy (CLL)

- Look at, and listen to, stories, non-fiction or rhymes about weather, places, people, cultures, journeys
- Make and read signs and symbols – label places (quiet area, messy area), label features in the room, look at symbols and signs in the environment, make personal pictorial representations, become familiar with other symbolic languages (e.g. Braille)
- Use a range of vocabulary to communicate knowledge and understanding of the world – naming, describing, positional vocabulary
- Talk about the world for a variety of purposes – discuss likes and dislikes, plan a journey, give instructions for a route to follow, describe pictures/features, investigate/enquire/ask questions about the environment
- Communicate own views and listen to those of others – Where shall we put the bird table?

Mathematical development (MD)

- Observe, recognise and sort number, patterns and symbols in a range of environments – shapes in buildings, brick patterns, sorting and making symbols for outdoor play area
- Measure, order and record the world around us – distances in footsteps, pebbles and rocks by size, weight, types of transport
- Use positional vocabulary – on, in, under, next to, near, far away, through
- Use and give a range of directions – using control technology, e.g. roamer to programme left, right, forwards, backwards

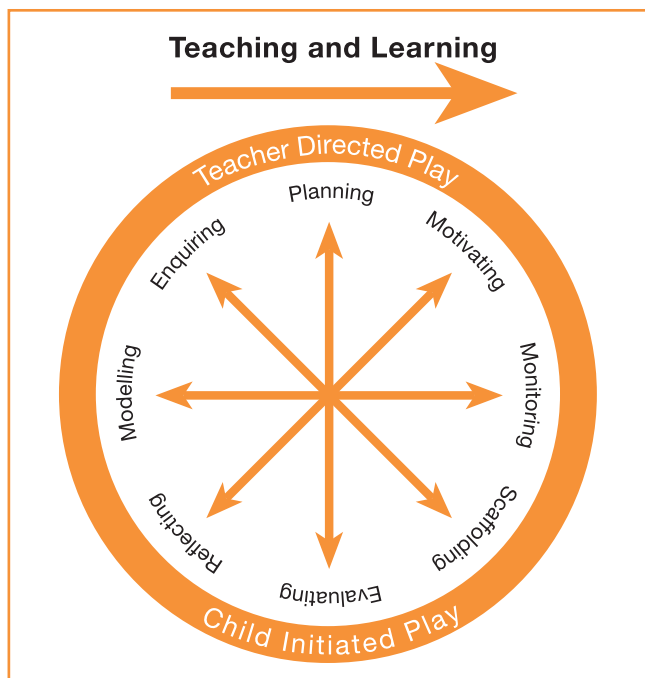


Figure 4 | Enablers for learning.

3. Why skills next?

Investigating the world using a multi-sensory approach, developing an enquiring mind, making connections and exploring varied modes of communication are key elements in the Foundation Stage curriculum. If children are to accommodate new learning they need to refine and develop new skills. In working towards the overall goal of helping children make sense of their place in the world, they will be learning to input information about the world (asking questions, observing, recording, etc.) and learning to output information about the world (communication).

Try to develop awareness of skills and how they are used (metacognition) through

teaching, practising, sharing and valuing. For example, a pupil making a painting as a means of exploring different colours and shapes of leaves is also encouraged to talk about the painting – colours chosen, why and how it was painted.

4. Why put new and emerging knowledge at the end of the cycle?

The Foundation Stage aims to:

- Develop knowledge and understanding about places and peoples, near and far.
- Provide a range of positive experiences in varied and challenging environments.

We believe that children acquire new knowledge as a result of motivation and skills acquisition. Recognising new learning, and having existing/uncertain knowledge challenged in supportive ways are important elements in this process.

The teacher's role will be to challenge existing knowledge, to reinforce and to extend knowledge as appropriate. This must go together with applying knowledge. For example, ask the pupil 'If you were making a book on autumn what might you include and what materials might you use?'



Photo | Kathy Alcock and John Collar.

Geographical learning in the Foundation Stage curriculum

The way in which geographical experiences can be developed in all of the six areas of learning in the Foundation Stage curriculum is shown in Figure 3. Recognising what 'counts' as geography will not only help practitioners, it will also ease pupils in their transition from one stage to the next.

While it is important to plan for pupil-initiated and teacher-directed activities, ideally these two modes of experience should mesh seamlessly into a unified learning process. We have identified eight key enablers for learning (Figure 4), that describe different approaches a practitioner might take to intercept periods

Teacher and child role	Enabling strategy	Stage in learning cycle
1. Teacher directed Take the children for a walk around the outside area and gather interesting items, e.g. autumn would be a good time to gather different coloured leaves, and different sized twigs and sticks, although seasonal and landscape variations will pose different collection opportunities. Use stopping points en route to discuss what can be seen, heard and so on. Find out what children know and think about their outdoor area.	Planning Motivating Enquiring Reflecting	Building on existing knowledge. Beginning to foster attitudes, e.g. curiosity, wonder.
2. Teacher directed Model some of the creative possibilities using found materials, e.g. create simple radiating patterns using twigs. Encourage language of shape, colour, texture.	Planning Motivating Modelling Reflecting	Teaching skills of observation, sorting, describing using existing and new vocabulary. Developing new knowledge (lower order level).
3. Child initiated Provide a table with a range of natural materials, including found objects from the walk and other media such as masking tape, glue, and paper. Teacher and peer scaffolding may take place as children explore, discuss and create patterns and sculptures.	Scaffolding Enquiring Monitoring Evaluating	Encourage and support creative exploration, curiosity, vocabulary and technique as children make 'environmental sculptures'. Reinforce new language.
4. Teacher directed Discuss with children about the patterns, colours, shapes, textures used. Ask children where in the outdoors they could place finished work and introduce concept of a route.	Reflecting Enquiring Planning	Reinforcing skills and new vocabulary. Modelling value, of work created and children's choice in locating work.
5a. Teacher directed Show children different sites outside, model locational language.	Modelling Scaffolding Enquiring Reflecting Planning	Building on value of work created to foster critical skills of evaluation and extending new knowledge of location and vocabulary.
5b. Child initiated Explore outdoors and discuss with peers where work should go.		
6. Child initiated Children play freely outside, walking the trail and having opportunities to look at and discuss their displayed work with peers. Teacher to monitor activities and talk. Freedom to add to/ change display and exchange new ideas about outdoor area.	Reflecting Evaluating Monitoring	Building on existing knowledge, reinforcing and extending value and participatory skills.
7. Teacher directed Discuss the outcomes of the trail. Encourage children to say how/why the trail has improved their environment.	Reflection Evaluation	Emerging new knowledge and understanding and values.

Figure 5 | Cycle of learning: Creating a sculpture trail.



Photo | Paula Owens.

of pupil-initiated and teacher-directed play. In practice there is no ideal prescribed order or combination in which enablers might be utilised. Rather we see them as flexible and sensitive tools in a vibrant learning environment. The subsequent examples illustrate how they might be used and demonstrate their wider relevance.

Cycle of learning: example 1 Evaluating and developing the outdoor area by creating a sculpture trail

We have chosen this as our first example of a cycle of learning because it utilises first-hand experience of the outdoors, builds on prior knowledge and encourages pupil participation.

Teacher and child role	Enabling strategy	Stage in learning cycle
1. Teacher directed Gather all the waste generated in the nursery/reception classroom over the course of a single day. Next day, with children, look at the waste (health and safety regulations important here) and consider the implications for what happens to it/ where it goes/possible impact on environment.	Planning Motivating Reflecting	Building on existing knowledge. Beginning to foster attitudes.
2. Teacher directed With maximum child involvement consider what needs to be done to change home corner area so that it becomes a 'waste management' area, encouraging recycling, reusing and repairing of waste from the home.	Planning Scaffolding Enquiring Reflecting	Using design-and-make skills to create waste management area Developing new knowledge (lower order).
3. Child-initiated 'Free' play in home waste management area. Children talk and play out some ideas generated during the planning and making phase. Peer scaffolding may be taking place here with the teacher acting as an observer	Modelling Enquiring Monitoring Evaluating	Using recently gained new knowledge. Using skills of sorting. Fostering attitudes and values.
4. Teacher directed Circle time discussion to gain children's ideas about what they have been doing in the waste management area, how they feel about it, whether any changes are needed, does it 'work', roles generated.	Reflecting Evaluating Planning	Reinforcing skills, values, knowledge and understanding (key concepts).
5a. Teacher directed Teacher role plays with children in the home corner, modelling roles/questions/activities.	Modelling Scaffolding Monitoring Evaluating	Building on existing knowledge. Extending skills and understanding of key concepts (higher order).
5b. Child-initiated Child role plays and teacher monitors whether play has changed as a result of circle time discussion.	Planning	
6. Teacher directed Discuss and evaluate the use of the waste management area over the last week(s) and consider why it is important and relate to real life and waste centres.	Evaluating Assessing Planning	Emerging new knowledge and understanding and values.

Figure 6 | Cycle of learning: Waste management.

Overall aims of the sequence of activities

To develop skills of observation, communication and evaluation and enable the acquisition of relevant vocabulary and, as a result, to encourage critical decision making in the design of part of the outdoor area.

Learning objectives

- Develop enquiry and investigation skills (KUW)
- Develop co-operation and decision-making skills (PSE)
- Acquire a range of relevant vocabulary (CLL)
- Express responses to outdoor settings in a range of media (CD)
- Plan a simple route (KUW)
- Be able to take action to improve the environment (KUW/PSE)
- Express views about aspects of the environment (KUW/CLL)

This activity (Figure 5) could take place at different times of the year using different found and gathered materials.

Cycle of learning:

example 2

Using the home corner area as an example of waste management in the home

We have chosen this as our second example because there is encouragement from the

government for citizenship and sustainable development to be integrated into learning at all levels of education. We believe that geographical learning provides an excellent context for these cross-curricular themes and that their emphasis on positive action has the potential to lead to some really purposeful and deep learning.

Key geographical concepts	
Sense of place	What is this place like?
Similarity and difference	How is it like your kitchen? How is it different to your kitchen at home?
Location and spatial pattern	Where are the waste bins? Are they easy to get to?
Change and continuity	Is there anything you would like to change in our area? What would you like to keep the same?
Cause and effect	Why did we change our home corner area? What difference has it made? If we didn't sort all our rubbish like this what would happen to it?
Appreciation	How does this help us look after our place?
Roles, responsibility and participation	Who decided to change our home corner area? Why did we decide to do it? Do any of you do this at home?

Figure 7 | Developing key geographical concepts.

Overall aims of the sequence of activities

To involve pupils in redesigning the home corner area in order to promote ideas about recycling and the re-use of materials as necessary for waste reduction, thus developing the knowledge, understanding and skills for them to take positive action to improve the environment.

Learning objectives

- Develop enquiry and investigation skills (KUW)
- Understand what a home is like – inputs and outputs (KUW)
- Understand the effects human activity can have on places (positive and negative) (KUW)
- Be able to sort materials into categories – recycle, re-use and repair (KUW/MD)
- Be able to take action to improve the environment (KUW/PSE)
- Plan out and then make the waste management area in home corner (CD/MD)
- Be able to re-use materials creatively (CD)
- Use vocabulary related to home and waste management (CLL)
- Ask and respond to questions about place (adaptation of home corner) (KUW/CLL)
- Talk about the world they are 'manipulating' using increasingly complex sentences (CLL)
- Understand symbols for recycling/re-using/repairing – standard and ones generated by themselves (CLL)



Photo | Kathy Alcock and John Collar.

Resources

- Usual home-corner kitchen items, e.g. sink, cooker, washing machine
- Waste area – different bins labelled for recycling packaging, re-using packaging and recycling food waste with one bin for anything that cannot be recycled, repaired or re-used
- Posters/symbols to put around the area in appropriate places

Activities

Figure 6 sets out a sequence of activities which may take place over a week or more. As well as indicating the relationship between learning that is teacher-led and that which is child-initiated, it also shows which enabling strategies can be used (see Figure 4) and which stage in the learning cycle each activity relates to (see Figure 2).



Photo | Kathy Alcock and John Collar.

The teacher's role

These two examples of developing a sculpture trail and a waste management project show how the teacher's role shifts from directing and leading tasks to observing and monitoring pupil-initiated activity and back again. The enabling strategies used at any point will depend on the stage of learning.

In the waste management project the teacher draws on pupils' existing knowledge, using it to help them think in a way that they may not have considered before. They all know that we throw

rubbish away during the school day, but they may not have thought about the amount we dispose of and the effect this is having on the environment. The discussion and activity aims to stimulate the pupils' interest in what is to follow. Depending on how the pupils respond, the teacher will adapt the loose plans for the next activity to take account of general and individual needs. For example, some pupils may need to develop subject-specific vocabulary, others may have misconceptions about the names and types of materials involved.

As far as planning is concerned the teacher's role will clearly shift from week to week. At the start of a project there needs to be an overall plan that sets out some clear learning objectives and indicates the range of activities that might take place, including a possible sequence. It is also important to relate the work to the six areas of learning in the Foundation Stage curriculum, identifying the resources required and the points at which pupils' learning can be monitored (for example, through recorded observations that have a clear focus). Short-term planning is also needed, on a day-to-day and weekly basis, which takes account of observations and evaluation of the pupils' activity and learning. In any learning experience pupils will be operating at a number of different stages in terms of their development, skills, knowledge and understanding.

In the examples cited in this chapter it is not necessary to plan different activities to match pupils' abilities. The activities are open-ended and it is possible for each pupil to act out roles, interact with others and use vocabulary that is appropriate for their level of understanding. The key role of the practitioner, therefore, will be to differentiate through intervention and scaffolding – varying the types of questions asked of each pupil, and making suggestions for further play based on careful observation of the previous activity.

Using targeted intervention to scaffold learning means that assessment has a critical part to play in the learning process. It also requires a certain level of knowledge on the part of the practitioner – i.e. the knowledge to be able to recognise what is taking place, to link it with frameworks for knowledge, understanding and attitudes, and therefore to identify what to do or say next that will best support each pupil.

One way of prompting pupils and helping to direct their thoughts is by asking appropriate questions. This approach is particularly compatible with geography which makes extensive use of enquiry questions to structure learning. Figure 7 identifies some key geographical concepts and shows how they can be developed. Further advice on asking questions is given throughout this handbook (see index).

Conclusion

The teaching and learning of very young children can be likened to a wheel that is forever turning, albeit at different speeds, and which rotates through periods of pupil-initiated and teacher-directed play. Although these periods will be planned for, it is essential that the settings chosen for Foundation Stage geographical studies are flexible enough to allow for unexpected opportunities and demands as they arise. For example, a pupil may return after a holiday and bring in postcards and objects that prompt curiosity in the class, or an unusual weather event may provoke a raft of questions.

Good provision for learning in the Foundation Stage will also involve a range of indoor and outdoor settings, a variety of resources and a clear underpinning ethic. Young children need to be exposed to a range of experiences that encourage curiosity, invite physical and sensory exploration, and provide opportunities for them to evaluate and change their environment. Research shows that even very young children are capable of making decisions about their surroundings and enacting change when supported by peers and adults, (Owens, 2003). Personal involvement is one of the best ways of developing values and is a powerful motivator for learning. Geography, because it taps into a range of skills and different ways of thinking, is uniquely placed to develop this. When children begin to value themselves and others and make meaningful connections about their actions within physical and social spheres both near and far, then they truly begin to make sense of their place within the world.

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