



Australian
Human Rights
Commission

everyone, everywhere, everyday

Strengthening human rights education in the geography curriculum

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Recommendations on *Shape of the Australian
Curriculum: Geography*

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1 Introduction

The Australian Human Rights Commission welcomes the development of a national school curriculum (the Curriculum). We believe that the development of the Curriculum is a unique opportunity to ensure all young Australians develop an understanding and appreciation for human rights.

The Commission congratulates the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) on the first steps taken to incorporate human rights into the *Shape of the Australian Curriculum: Geography* (released in January 2011) (Shape Paper). The Shape Paper includes many elements supporting a focus on human rights education, particularly through relevant general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. The Commission previously provided suggestions to ACARA regarding how human rights can be integrated into the geography curriculum and is pleased to see many of these suggestions reflected in the Shape Paper.

Geography is an inter-disciplinary subject that encourages a strong focus on human relations and social justice issues. The explanations in the Shape Paper of the links between the general capabilities on 'ethical behaviour', 'personal and social competence' and 'intercultural understanding', as well as the three cross-curriculum priorities, reflect an understanding of the importance of a focus on human rights and social justice to the geography curriculum. It is, however, the Commission's view that the focus on human rights can be further strengthened and integrated into all stages of the geography curriculum through:

- Strengthening and fully integrating relevant general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities
- Inclusion of relevant human rights examples and issues.

Following is an elaboration of these recommendations and suggestions for how this could be achieved.

2 Strengthening and fully integrating relevant general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities

The Shape Paper correctly conveys the importance and central relevance of geography as a vehicle for conveying a rich understanding of the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities. Specifically, geography can convey a strong appreciation for:

- ethical principles (including human rights)
- inter-cultural understanding
- personal and social competence
- the three cross-curriculum priorities.

Following are specific suggestions for further strengthening the descriptions of the links between the general capabilities and the geography curriculum. We also include

a broader suggestion for ensuring the cross-curriculum priorities and general capabilities outlined above are better integrated into the entire geography curriculum.

2.1 Strengthening the descriptions of the links between the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities

(a) Ethical behaviour

The interconnections between place, space and environment in the geography curriculum encourages engagement in ethical considerations. An awareness of oneself and one's impact on the built and natural environment heightens individual awareness of everyone's role in ensuring a just society today and in the future.

The overview of the relevance of the general capability focused on ethical behaviour for geography emphasises the importance of evaluating findings against the criteria of environmental sustainability, economic viability, and social justice. It correctly highlights that these considerations will raise ethical questions about human rights and citizenship, such as who bears the costs and who gains the benefits, and about group and personal responsibilities.

The Commission recommends that the geography curriculum also encourage students to investigate geographical events using an ethical lens to illuminate the ethical dimensions of human interaction with the built and natural environment as well as the differential impact of ecological and environmental changes on different groups of people. Approaching geographical inquiry in this way will further strengthen students understanding of their role in creating a just and human rights-respecting society.

(b) Personal and social competence

The emphasis on questioning and inquiry as a mode of learning in the geography curriculum illustrates how students can positively influence their world as active citizens locally, nationally and globally. As the overview on the relevance of the general capability on personal and social competence points out, students learn to respect and appreciate different perspectives and opinions and understand how these are shaped by the context in which people live.

The Commission recommends that the process of learning to respect and appreciate difference should also encourage students to develop empathy for others. Empathy is an important aspect of developing human rights awareness and can be fostered through developing an understanding and appreciation for the different experiences of groups of people, and in turn an understanding of one's responsibility to respect the dignity of others and treat them with respect. Empathy is also a critical step in developing a sense of one's role in positively improving the situation of others (active citizenship).

(c) *Inter-cultural understanding*

By examining local, national and global contexts, students gain an understanding and appreciation for difference between peoples and cultures in Australia and globally. As the overview on the relevance of the general capability focused on inter-cultural understanding to geography highlights, geography can assist to dispel stereotypes about different places and groups of people.

The Commission recommends, that in addition to assisting students to understand why people in other places may see and construct the world differently, it should also clearly aim to foster an appreciation, valuing and respect for these differences. The curriculum is an important opportunity to also develop an understanding of the commonalities between the underlying values across all cultures including human rights values.

2.2 More consistent integration of relevant general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities throughout the geography curriculum

The descriptions in the Shape Paper of the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities reflect an appreciation for their important place in the geography curriculum. The Commission recommends that the remaining sections outlining the structure, scope and sequence of the geography curriculum could better reflect the important place of the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities in the geography curriculum. The general capabilities on ethical understanding, personal and social competence and intercultural understanding could be more fully integrated into these sections to reflect their importance and provide further guidance on their relevance and application to different areas of the geography curriculum. For example, while 'ethical considerations' is specifically mentioned for Years 7-10, it is not clearly articulated as a priority for earlier stages of learning. The Commission suggests that the focus on 'human themes' and 'human characteristics' in Years 7-10 could be introduced earlier in the learning sequence to enable a greater focus on ethical considerations in earlier years.

The Commission recommends that the relevance of the general capabilities on 'ethical understanding', 'personal and social competence' and 'inter-cultural understanding' to each stage of schooling be clearly explained.

Following are some suggestions for additional topics of study for each stage of schooling in the geography curriculum which would assist the integration of the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities in the Curriculum:

Foundation to Year 2:

Included in the topic on local places could be a specific focus on learning about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures in the students' local area as well as gaining an awareness of the differences in the way people live in the local area.

Years 3 – 4:

In considering the topic of how people have changed the environment of a place, students could examine Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' relationship to the land.

Topics should also enable students to investigate the differences between people in their community including in terms of culture and language and developing an understanding and appreciation for this diversity and the importance of inclusivity.

Years 5 – 6:

In considering the topic of environmental consequences of urban development, personal travel and household consumption, students could consider the ethical dimensions of such decisions including, the differing impact on groups and differing ability of groups to affect changes because of their specific identity (for example, socio-economic status or prejudices based on their race, ethnicity, sex or any other status).

In considering the topic of adaptations to the risks of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, students could also consider ethical dimensions including who lives in high-risk areas and their ability to mitigate the danger to them and their community. This is part of developing an understanding of different groups of peoples' ability to influence their natural and built environment because of factors such as their social and economic status, where they live or other factors (for example sex or disability).

Years 7-10:

In Year 7, the focus on weather and water could encourage an exploration of inequalities around water distribution and usage globally and nationally. Similarly, the focus on weather hazards could encourage an exploration of the differential impact of weather hazards on different groups of people. It could also support a focus on investigating and explaining the challenges faced by environmental refugees through the study of recent or current movements. The focus on population change, migration and mobility could encourage an understanding of why people migrate, the challenges faced by migrants and asylum seekers, the rights of migrants, responsibilities of the state as well as all society towards migrants and the value of diversity in our community.

In Year 8, the focus on biotic life could encourage an exploration of the role of everyone in shaping the natural and built environment around them and the rights and responsibilities that accompany this to bring about a fair and just society and world. The focus on settlement could also encompass an examination of the impact of rural and urban settlement on the enjoyment of human rights and the responsibility of the state to balance competing rights and ensure the enjoyment of the rights of all communities.

In Year 9, the focus on landscapes and resources could support an exploration of concepts of privilege, disadvantage, equality and discrimination in the context of inequality in access to and distribution of resources and socio-economic rights. For example, comparing the situation of rural and urban communities in Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and/or developed and developing

countries. The focus on economic geography also supports an examination of global inequalities and human rights.

In Year 10, the focus on environment sustainability could encompass an exploration of the responsibility to respect the environment and natural environment in the context of unequal access to and enjoyment of resources. The focus on human well-being also supports a detailed examination of critical human rights and social justice concerns including an understanding of how inequality and discrimination contribute to differences in economic and social wellbeing.

3 Inclusion of relevant human rights examples and issues

To assist teachers to reflect a focus on the general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities that highlight human rights concerns, it will be important to include focuses for study in each stage of learning that demonstrate how teachers can bring attention to critical human rights issues. For example, a focus on a global refugee crises (such as the famine crises in Eritrea) could be used as a lens for highlighting the close relationship between the natural environment and human settlement, the impact of power imbalances, and the roles and responsibilities of different actors in creating and mitigating such humanitarian disasters. Also important, are examples from Australia and abroad, that allow students to explore the differences between groups of people's ability to influence their natural and built environment because of factors such as their social and economic status, where they live, and barriers arising from their specific identity (for example, race, ethnicity, sex, disability or any other status).

Examples have been provided in the section above. Additionally, if ACARA would value more detailed suggestions on how human rights could be incorporated into the next stages of the Geography curriculum drafting then please contact Dr. Annie Pettitt, Director, Community Engagement, annie.pettitt@humanrights.gov.au or Ph: (02) 9284 9806.