

**An Evaluation of Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Geography at Key Stages 3 and 4.**

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# **An evaluation of secondary school students’ perceptions of geography at Key Stages 3 and 4.**

by

**ALICE BURNETT AND LYNN CROWE**

## **Abstract**

This study is an investigation into (a) how students perceive the teaching of geography at school, and (b) curriculum continuity and progression between Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. The effectiveness of the Geography National Curriculum in achieving its aim to inspire a curiosity and fascination about the world (National Curriculum, 2014) is evaluated.

Pupils' perceptions across three year groups (Years 7, 9 and 11) were collected using a mixed methods approach to collect mainly rich qualitative data, alongside some supporting quantitative data, principally through posters and questionnaires at two schools. Interviews were also conducted with geography staff. Using a phenomenographic approach to analyse the data, the differences between students' perceptions of geography were identified.

The main findings revealed that students' perceptions of geography at school are focused on the everyday study of the world and its relevance to their daily lives. These perceptions originate from a variety of sources, although teachers appear to have the greatest influence. While students do appear to have genuine curiosity and fascination about the topics encompassed in school taught geography, by re-evaluating the balance of the opportunity for productivity and creativity the relationship between students and geography can be heightened.

These findings provide an insight into the potential for improving students' perceptions to learning geography and the skills necessary to continue academic and personal development. Furthermore, this evidence has the potential to be used to implement changes to students' learning processes in secondary education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The key aim of this research paper is to investigate how secondary school pupils perceive geography and implications for the subject. The question ‘What is geography?’ has been debated throughout the years, as the discipline has changed and developed over time. The debate around the content of the subject continues to influence teaching and learning at all levels.

From the age of ten, children have the language skills and cognitive ability to gather information and formulate thoughts that are well organised and thought-out (Lee, 2015). They have the ability to formulate their own opinion on a number of things, including school subjects. However, research suggests that while consultation with students is high on political agendas, perspectives on a key area of the daily school experience – the content of school subjects – is rarely considered (Butt, 2011). Particularly over the last few years, school taught geography has undergone some major changes in the form of a new National Curriculum for geography. This claims to inspire a curiosity and fascination about the world (Department for Education, 2014). Despite this, not all the changes have been deemed effective by researchers. A recent Ofsted report, ‘*Key Stage 3: the wasted years?*’ published in 2015, found that geography teaching at Key Stage 3 often fails to challenge and engage pupils (The Geographical Association, 2015).

This paper examines changes in the geography curriculum and its teaching at secondary school level, and some of the challenges identified by current educational research. Following a review of relevant literature, the following section explains the primary research. A mixed methods approach was used to with a strong emphasis on qualitative techniques to explore school students' own perceptions of the main aims of geography teaching, along with interviews with teaching staff to examine the effectiveness of the teaching curriculum and delivery. The paper concludes with some key findings which have the potential to improve students' enjoyment and learning of geography at this level.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **The need for geographical education research**

Teaching geography plays a key role in helping students to understand the world and their place within it. Stannard (2015) argues that the social sciences have never been more important and should be given more prominence in the curriculum. For many, teaching geography provides an opportunity to teach for a better world (Lambert and Morgan, 2011). However, in secondary education, school taught geography has had mixed reviews. Despite the number of students studying geography having risen for the fourth consecutive year, making it the eighth most popular General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE), Cassidy (2011) found that 11 to 14-year-olds were most likely to complain that their geography lessons were boring. Statistics from 2015 show geography entries decreased for students aged 15 and under (by 11.1%). The performance by students aged 15 and under was also lower than for those aged 16 and over (Weeden, 2015). This suggests a trend of decreasing interest and academic ability in the younger generations of geography students.

Across England there are five stages of education: Early Years, Primary, Secondary, Further Education and Higher Education. The relationship between these stages, year groups and age is shown in Table 1 below.

Stage of Education	Year Group	Key Stage	Age
Early Years	-	-	0-5 years
Primary	Year 1 and Year 2	Key Stage 1	5-7 years
	Year 3, Year 4, Year 5, Year 6	Key Stage 2	7-11 years
Secondary	Year 7, Year 8, Year 9	Key Stage 3	11-14 years
	Year 10 and Year 11	Key Stage 4	14 -16 years
Further Education	Year 12 and Year 13	Key Stage 5	16 -18+ years
Higher Education	Universities and Colleges	-	18+ years

*Table 1: Stages of Education in England (Adapted from Department for Education, 2012)*

‘Key Stage 3: the wasted years?’ (Ofsted, 2015) explores whether students are sufficiently supported and challenged to make the best start to secondary school. The report found that geography at Key Stage 3 often fails to challenge and engage pupils. This in turn, impacts on the take-up of the subject at GCSE. This is supported by Scott (2016) who found that

like students, teachers found year 9 (the last year of Key Stage 3) to be a strange time, when young people do not know who they are and feel everything is changing. But Haubrich (2000) argues that future generations will need a geographical education that stresses key skills as well as enjoyable learning to accomplish the joint goals of personal happiness and the sustainable development of the world.

Walford and Haggett (1995) see the future of the teaching of geography in schools relying on three variables: the effect of legal structures in the curriculum, the extent to which the subject continues to motivate students and the future coherence and rationale for the subject. There is clearly a need for research into students' perceptions of geography addressing these three factors.

### **Geography in the National Curriculum**

The Geography National Curriculum Framework for Key Stage 3 states that:

*'A high-quality geography education should inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives'*. (Department for Education, 2013. p1)

Before the introduction of the National Curriculum, geography was not considered worthy for inclusion as a separate subject in the so called 'core curriculum'. However, geography is today recognised as a 'core academic subject' (Department for Education, 2016). Government policy and public examination boards play an important role in defining the current National Curriculum for geography. The most recent geography curriculum for Key Stages 3 and 4 was published in September 2013 and implemented from September 2014.

There is a diverse set of views on the aims, purpose and implication of the National Curriculum for geography at Key Stages 3 and 4, leading many involved in geographical education to speculate about the future of the subject.

Pupils in England study compulsory geography in primary school (ages 5-11) and for the first three years of secondary school (ages 11-14; Key Stage 3; Year 7-9), after which the study of geography becomes optional (ages 14-16; Key Stage 4; Years 10-11). With the

introduction of the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), geography is now classed as a 'core academic subject' and results are used as a school measure (Department of Education, 2016). Therefore not only geography departments, but schools as a whole, have a vested interest in getting a high intake of students taking geography at GCSE.

Since its establishment in schools, geography has undergone many changes in its nature and delivery. 1968 was a pivotal year in the history of school geography during which the content of secondary school geography changed from a being dominated by regional geography (Taylor, 2009) to study involving the seeking of laws and theories. Graves (2001) states that there is a time lapse between geographical research and its incorporation into school textbooks, arguing that geography in schools tends to follow society, rather than lead it. Hopwood (2014) disagrees with Graves, stating that the shift in emphasis from pupil to society is 'radical' ideology in which education is seen as an agent for social change. It was hoped that the Geography National Curriculum might help to resolve some of these issues within the discipline.

Hamnet (2013) supports the content of the new curriculum stating that if well taught, the content provides a sound basis for later geographical study and knowledge of the key challenges that face our world. However, Lambert (2010) argues that the perceived gap between academic research and the teaching of geography in schools is widening as academic geographers play less of a role in constructing school geography. Rawling (2002) supports this by stating that although getting geography into the National Curriculum was a significant triumph for the subject, geographers paid a high price in a move back to the kind of 'information led' tradition included in the most recent curriculum published in 2014.

The Geographical Association's 2009 manifesto '*A Different View*' acknowledges that because the world changes, so must the curriculum, also suggesting that young people and teachers need to help shape the geography curriculum to secure its success as a discipline. Paying greater attention to how pupils perceive geography will be a key factor in enhancing our understanding of how school taught geography is experienced and engaged with as a context for learning.

## **Students' Perceptions of Geography**

It is important to acknowledge that individual definitions of geography can vary greatly, as geography is an extensive field of science with a large number of subfields. Özgen (2013) defines perceptions of geography as the state of comprehending the interaction between man and environment in accordance with personal senses, opinions and needs.

Research suggests that perceptions of geography as a school subject arise from the process the learner undergoes throughout their geographical education. Hopwood (2014) states that due to the multiplicity of childhoods, childhood should be viewed as a social construction, and therefore, young peoples' views of geography will vary over space and time. He uses the examples of learned economic, cultural, political and environmental geographies, which he believes will reflect in a young person's actions later in life. Schoenfeld (2004) has suggested that deeper understanding of the nature of a subject can help students move away from learning a series of unconnected chunks, towards a more coherent approach, formed of big ideas and links between experiences.

Throughout secondary education, the teaching of geography expands in content and depth. Research into child psychology distinguishes the importance of a sense of chronology in education, as it enables children to place events and periods within time (Hodkinson, 1995). This suggests that continuity and progression throughout the process of learning school geography will result in a deeper understanding. Grossman and Stodolsky (1995) support this, identifying sequencing as one of the five aspects of perceiving a subject (definition, scope, static/dynamic and status of knowledge). The Royal Geographical Society (2015) praise the new curriculum in underpinning the understanding of more complex topics in later stages of study.

When looking at the continuity and progression within and between Key Stages 2 and 3, Chapman (2002) found that when asked 'what is geography?', Key Stage 3 pupils described specific topics rather than a definition of the subject of geography as a whole. The study of the weather, settlements, places where we live, countries and reading maps were all popular answers. Norman and Harrison (2004) also found a varied response in keywords Year 9 pupils associated with geography, including video, textbook, globe, atlas, map, diagram, computer, compass, graph, earthquakes and volcanoes. In comparison, they found that most Key Stage 4 pupils tried to relate the study of geography to possible careers. Similarly to responses from pupils in Key Stage 3, Key Stage 4 pupils underlined natural hazards but also environmental issues including global warming.

However, it is clear that the majority of researchers agree with Lord (2003), who found that studies regarding pupils' perspectives and experiences of school taught subjects encompassed in the humanities, including geography, is lacking.

## **Summary**

This review of the literature draws attention to the fact that the development of geography in schools is an ongoing process, continually changing with regard to the content, nature and assessment methods used. Although there is a lot of research regarding students' experiences of geography as a school subject, very little has been published on the effect of the new national curriculum, as it was only published and implemented in schools in September 2014. Ofsted (2015) has criticised the changes to Key Stage 3 content as failing to challenge and engage pupils, with statistics supporting a dip in uptake and performance of this age group (15 and under) (Weeden, 2015). Key Stage 3 has also been branded as '*the wasted years*' by the Geographical Association (2015).

Although the older literature surrounding students' perceptions of geography cannot be generalised to current classroom experiences, it is important to note that the themes presented, such as the changing nature of school-taught geography and the influence of students' perceptions, are still relevant. This research is an attempt to readdress these propositions within a contemporary context.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The qualitative nature of this study, exploring students' and teachers' perceptions, lends itself to small-scale inductive research. Using Gray's (2014) guide to the relationship between epistemology, theoretical perspectives, methodology and research methods, the position of this research is placed firmly within an interpretivist theoretical perspective and utilising a phenomenographic approach to analyse the collected data.

The research tasks were undertaken in two local schools, during the spring term, 2016. The study design called for largely qualitative data. Semi-structured interviews with the heads of geography at each school were undertaken to explore their perceptions of (i) teaching this topic and (ii) issues relating to the delivery of the curriculum. All the students in the sample groups at each school (142 children in total) were asked to produce a poster to

show what geography is to someone who has never studied it before. Quantitative data was also integrated into the research design through a mixed methods questionnaire completed by the same students at the two schools. The year group and Key Stages of these students, along with the sample size from each group, are shown in Table 2.

Year Group	Number of Students	Key Stage
Year 7	53	Key Stage 3
Year 9	40	
Year 11	49	Key Stage 4

*Table 2 Total Number of Student Participants*

Dowgill (1998) defines phenomenographic analysis as a research method for mapping the qualitatively different ways in which people experience, conceptualise, perceive and understand various aspects of a phenomenon. The analysis of this data looked for patterns and themes within the appropriate Key Stages (3 and 4). The final stage of data analysis involved a cross-comparison of the overall outcome of each research method, in order to aid understanding of the varying perceptions of geography.

Research ethics were a critical consideration in the research, as much of it was based on the ideas and perceptions of young people. Graue and Walsh (1998) state that in research with children, adult researchers must acknowledge that children are the knowledge holders, the permission granters and the rule setters. Ethical considerations that apply to adult research subjects must also apply to children. Sheffield Hallam University's own ethical guidelines were applied (SHU, n.d.), alongside Denscombe's (2003) guide to the ethics for small-scale social research projects. The following three main principles were enforced:

1. The interest of participants should be protected.
2. Researchers should avoid deception or misrepresentation.
3. Participants should give informed consent

On a more practical basis, a DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) certificate was obtained by the researcher. This meant that research could be legally carried out with young people. Following discussion with the selected schools and teachers involved, it was also agreed that their identities should be kept anonymous, as this would allow for freer discussion about the issues.

## MAIN FINDINGS

### Students' Perceptions of Geography as a Subject

The main findings of this research focus on the students' perceptions of geography as a subject at the different Key Stages within their schools.

The student questionnaire asked students at both Key Stages to respond to the question: *How would you describe what you learn in geography to somebody who has never done it before?*

A component analysis of key terms mentioned in response to this question was undertaken as an indication of students' understanding of the subject of geography. This is clearly illustrative only, as many of these terms are subjective. But the analysis does provide some indication of the range of topics understood at each Key Stage.

The most frequent aspects mentioned by KS3 students in response to this question are shown in Table 3 and the most frequent aspects mentioned by KS4 students are shown in Table 4.

Rank	Topic	Frequency
1	World/Earth	48
2	People/Humans	20
3	Physical geography	19
4	Countries	16
5	Human geography	15
6	Culture	14
7	Environment	12
8	Maps	12
9	Nature	10
10	Globalisation	10

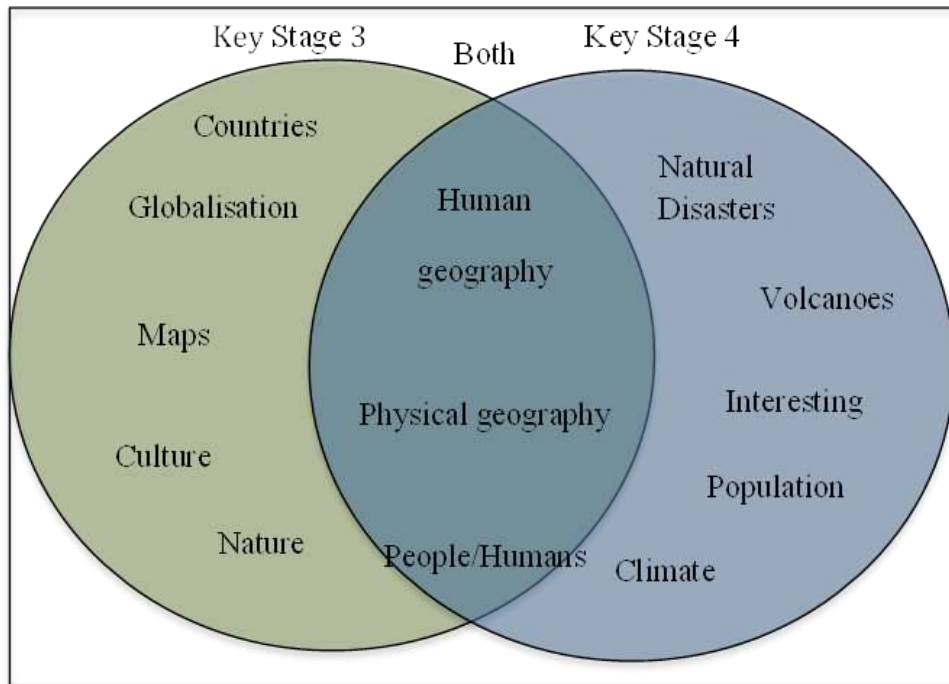
*Table 3 - Most frequently mentioned terms at Key Stage 3*

Rank	Topic	Frequency
1	World/Earth	30
2	Physical geography	13
3	People/Humans	10
4	Human geography	10
5	Volcanoes	8
6	Population	7
7	Climate	7
8	Environment	7
9	Natural disasters	6
10	Interesting	6

*Table 4 - Most frequently mentioned terms at Key Stage 4*

In both Key Stages, ‘Human geography’, ‘Physical geography’, ‘People/Humans’, ‘Environment’ and ‘World/Earth’ were some of the most frequently occurring words in responses to question 1. Differences between the stages include, the inclusion of ‘maps’ in the explanations by Key Stage 3 but not Key Stage 4, and the use of the positive descriptive word, ‘interesting’, by only Key Stage 4 students.

Figure 1 compares the similarities and differences in the topics included by students at each Key Stage, in order to illustrate the progression between levels.



*Figure 1 - Comparison between topics mentioned at Key Stages 3 and 4*

The poster task asked the students to: *Create a poster that shows what geography is to someone who has never studied it before.* The final posters varied greatly, in terms of content as well as formatting (for example, the inclusion of illustrations, sentences, individual words and spider diagrams). Examples of complete posters are shown in Figure 2. As with the questionnaire, a component analysis was undertaken to illustrate the topics most frequently mentioned by the students and thus identify those areas they felt were of most importance in the subject.

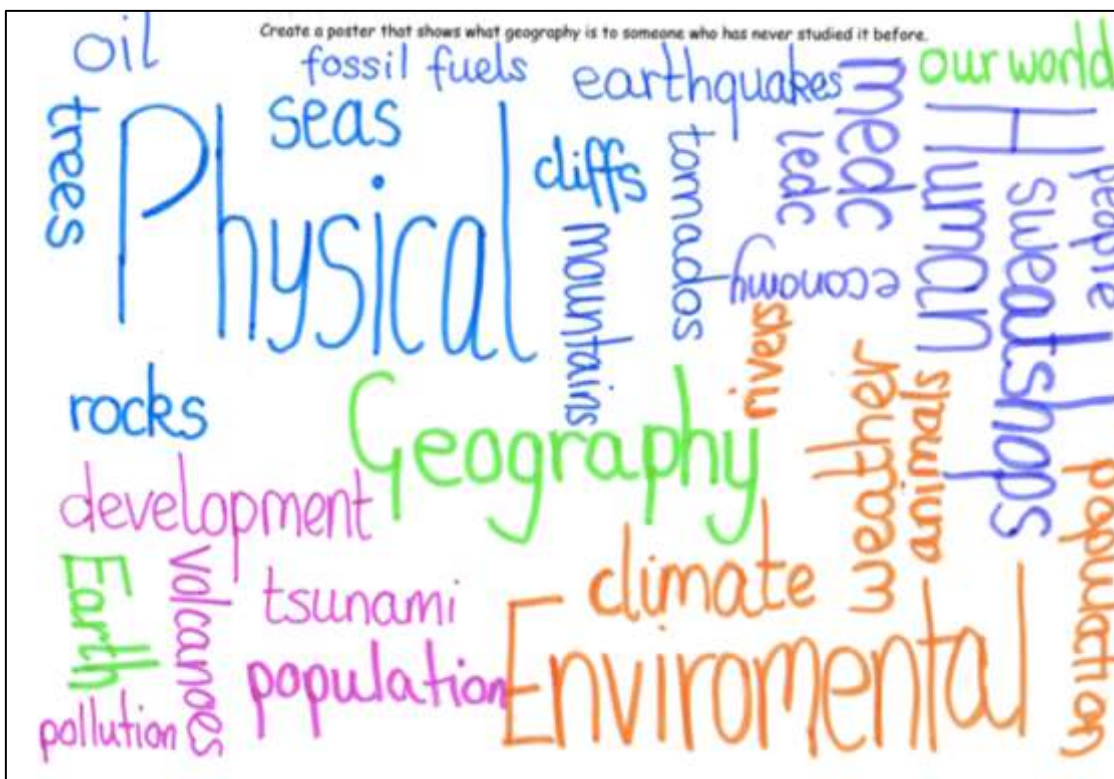
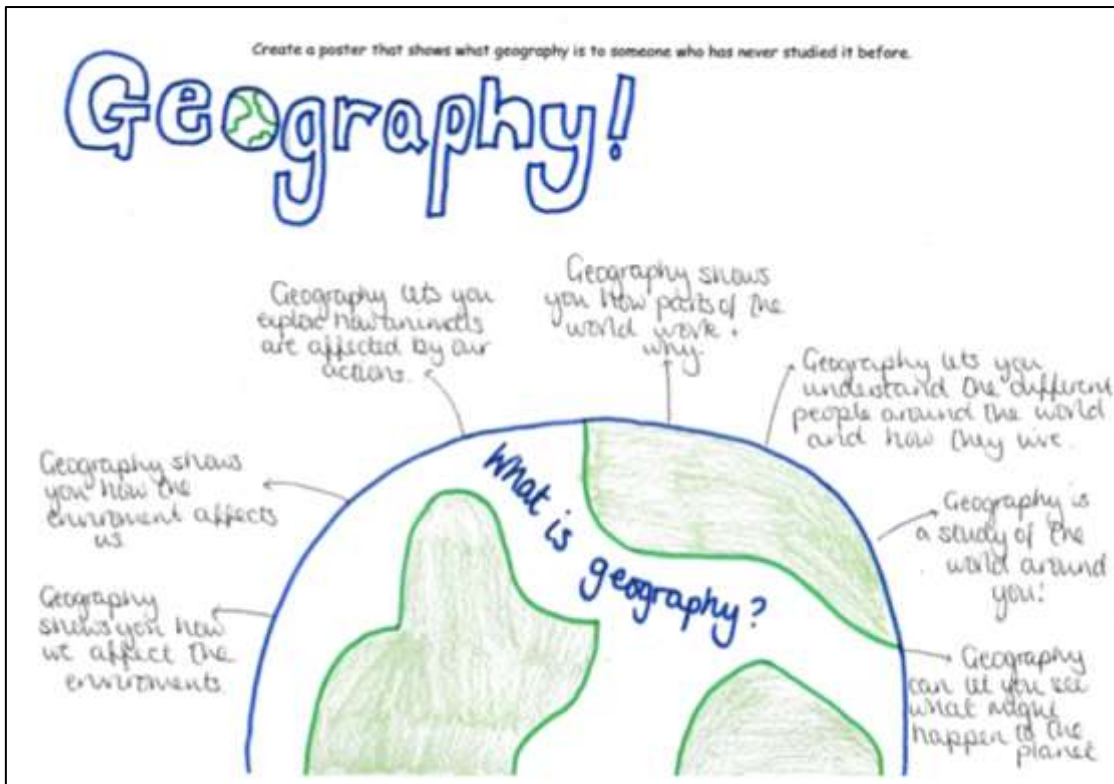


Figure 2 - Examples of Students' Posters

Whilst some students focused on specific aspects of their geographical knowledge, a total of 103 different topics in Key Stage 3 and 84 in Key Stage 4 were recorded from the posters. These components ranged from rainforests and coastal erosion to forms of currency and energy. A component analysis was undertaken to identify the most commonly mentioned topics. This analysis also looked for patterns and themes within each of the Key Stages.

The ten most common components included by Key Stage 3 students are shown in Table 5, those included by Key Stage 4 students in Table 6.

Ranking	Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Globe/Earth/World	78	76
2	Weather	31	30
3	Volcanoes	23	22
4	Human geography	20	19
5	Physical geography	20	19
6	Environment	19	18
7	Animals	18	18
8	People/Humans	18	18
9	Rivers	15	15
10	Map/Atlas	13	13

*Table 5 - Ten most common components at Key Stage 3*

Ranking	Topic	Frequency	Percentage (%)
1	Volcanoes	21	25
2	Globe/Earth/World	21	25
3	Animals	19	23
4	Weather	15	18
5	Rivers	15	18
6	Plants	11	13
7	People/Humans	10	12
8	Human geography	8	10
9	Physical geography	8	10
10	Population	8	10

*Table 6 - Ten most common components at Key Stage 4*

Figure 3 compares these results to show components included by both groups and the distinctions.

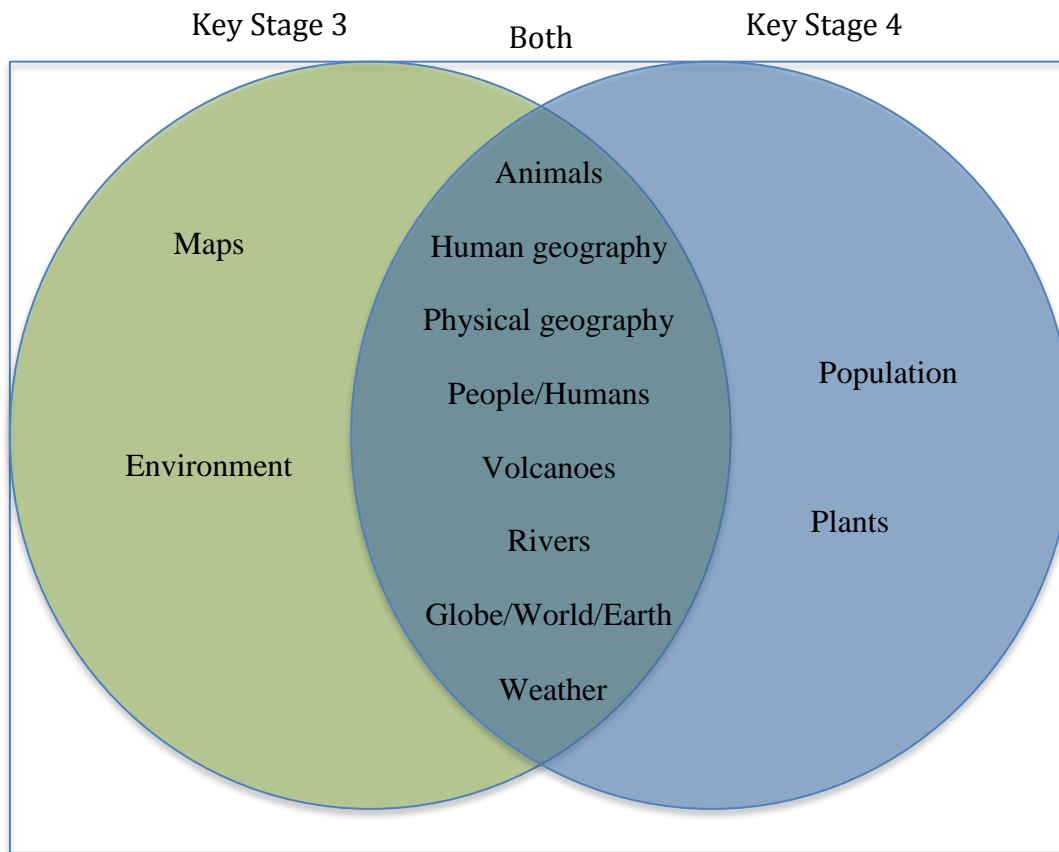
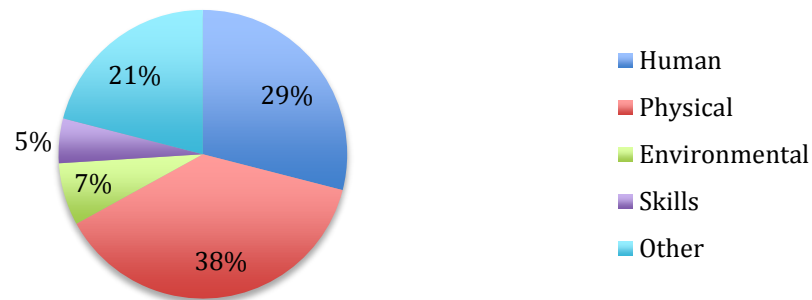


Figure 3 - A comparison of the images and terms included in students' posters

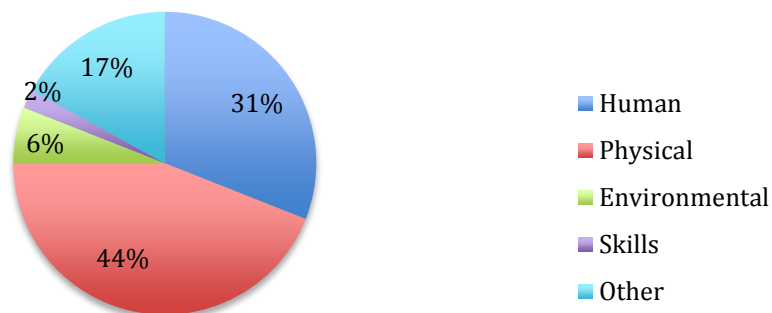
Although there are clear differences between the content of the artwork by students at each Key Stage, there are also a number of similarities. 'Human geography', 'Physical geography', 'People/Humans', 'Weather', 'Rivers', 'Volcanoes', 'Animals', and 'Globe/World/Earth' were all some of the most frequently occurring components in posters by both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4. 'Maps' and 'Environment' were more popular in Key Stage 3 than Key Stage 4. Instead Key Stage 4 posters included a greater amount of content on 'Plants' and 'Population'.

Further analysis of the topics based on different branches of geography (physical, human and environmental geography) was carried out through coding topics and plotting them graphically. This is shown in figures 4 and 5. All three branches can be identified in both Key Stages.

**Figure 4 - Percentage of topics included in poster- task - KS3**



**Figure 5 - Percentage of topics included in poster- task - KS4**



Topics encompassed in physical geography such as ‘biomes’, ‘earthquakes’ and ‘coasts’ accounted for 38% of the posters made by Key Stage 3 and 44% in Key Stage 4. However, topics included from human geography such as currency, development and conflict, were mentioned slightly less, making up 29% of the content from Key Stage 3 and 31% at Key Stage 4. In comparison, environmental topics such as energy, sustainability and pollution made up significantly less than 10% (7% in Key Stage 3 and 6% in Key Stage 4) of the content of the open-ended poster task. This suggests that a more traditional view of geography still dominates students' perceptions of the subject. This is explored further below.

Goudie (1986) provided a commonly used formal definition of the discipline; geography is the study of life on the surface of the earth. However, geography is an extensive field of science with a large number of subfields and therefore definitions of geography vary

greatly from each other. Personal perceptions often drive these interpretations (Özgen, 2013). The traditional explanation of geography clearly dominated students' perceptions in this study. 84% of the 93 posters from Key Stage 3 and 58% of the 36 Key Stage 4 posters included the globe/earth/world as a component. The popularity of the globe/earth/world image in posters at both Key Stages is not a surprise due to its status as geography's icon (Cosgrove, 2006). These findings are supported by Norman and Harrison (2004) who also found that globes were often used by year 9 classes in their descriptions of geography. Wright (2000) argues that although an appreciation of our globe is arguably the most important topic in geography, because lessons are dominated by studying bits of the world, we are in danger of losing this global vision. This statement is supported by the findings of this study.

Dowgill (1998) found that geography, as the study of place, was popular in three-year groups (Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9). However, in this research specific countries were only mentioned by ten students from Key Stage 3 and six students from Key Stage 4. Specific countries were included in only 12% of all the completed posters. Despite this, both teachers introduced students' knowledge of locations when being interviewed. Teacher 1 referred to the study of countries as something '*you obviously have to include*' to '*meet the Key Stage 3 requirements*'. Teacher 2 suggested that the inclusion of countries such as '*Africa, Russia and the Middle East*' was used by curriculum writers to inspire a curiosity and fascination about the world. This suggests that despite the new geography curriculum taking a 'knowledge turn' (Lambert, 2012), and teachers noting this approach, this factual curriculum has not infiltrated the perceptions of secondary school students.

Through the analysis of all of results, the three branches of geography (human, physical and environmental geography) were identified in the perceptions of students from both Key Stages. However, despite the National Curriculum for Geography GCSE (2014) defining '*People and environment: processes and interactions*' as one of the main topics to be included, the actual word '*environment*' was only included in 18% of the artwork by Key Stage 3 and 2% in Key Stage 4. In addition, despite being the 7<sup>th</sup> (KS3) and 8<sup>th</sup> (KS4) most popular topic in the responses to the questionnaire (tables 3 and 4), environmental topics were present in fewer than 10% of all completed posters.

In comparison, topics covered by physical geography received the highest number of mentions in both the questionnaire and poster task. However, despite human geography

topics being less common than physical topics, in both the questionnaire and students' artwork, the results collected from several of the other questions directly contradict these results. Several students stated that human geography was the element that they most enjoyed throughout their geographical education.

*"The human aspects of geography rather than physical or environmental geography."*  
(KS3 questionnaire)

*"I enjoy doing human geography so all of year nine has been good."*  
(KS3 questionnaire)

Interestingly, both teachers used examples of human topics when asked 'can you tell me about an individual lesson that went well with either Key Stage 3 or 4 and why you thought that went well?' The examples given were China's one-child policy and trade. This suggests that possibly teachers perceive lessons on human topics to be more effective.

Perceptions of the skills learnt in geography were less detailed than other factors that make up a geographical education. The personal ambitions mentioned by some pupils include the variety of career possibilities, the desire to travel and learn more. Surprisingly only one student from Key Stage 3 referred to themselves as a 'geographer' despite the term being explicitly used in the GCSE subject content. Kneale (2014) states that it is important for students to remember studying geography is supposed to be exciting and fun as well as challenging.

Although no conclusions can be drawn about students' overall perceptions of geography, this data provides an idea of what students consider to be the most interesting or important aspects of geography.

### **Students' and Teachers' Perceptions of Geography Teaching at School**

Differences in attitudes, interests and aptitudes, rate of learning and the role of environment are all important considerations in educational research. As in Hopwood's (2004) study, this research does not attempt to draw conclusions about the influences of individuals, instead it highlights the dominant influences on students' perceptions of school taught geography throughout Key Stages 3 and 4.

In both Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4, students rated teachers as being highly responsible for their learning. Students mentioned teacher characteristics such as enthusiasm, helpfulness, reliability and the ability to recognise students that are working hard, in both Key Stages.

As well as the characteristics of geography teachers, lessons also appear to influence students' perceptions of school taught geography. Students listed some of the following factors:

*'When the teachers interact with you'*  
(KS3, Questionnaire)

*'When we do more than one thing (for example we watch part of a documentary, then do book work)'*  
(KS4, Questionnaire)

Varied, interesting and interactive lessons were also mentioned by 32% of all the students that took part in the research.

The influence teachers have on students' perceptions of geography was also clear through the teacher interviews. Both teachers agreed that it is better for geography to be taught by teachers with a specialist background in geography as this has a direct influence on students' perceptions of the discipline as a whole. In interview 2, the teacher draws a comparison between the interest and enthusiasm of the teaching staff with the high intake of students choosing geography at GCSE and through to higher education. This success is reinforced by the fact that 90% of Key Stage 4 students said they had enjoyed studying geography in the previous year.

However, as well as enjoyment, it is clear in the analysis of the questionnaires that the pressure of GCSEs greatly affects Key Stage 4 students' perceptions of geography. Exam preparation was included as one of the key differences between students' current and previous year of study. The pressure of achieving good results in Key Stage 4 was further supported by the teacher interviews. In interview 1, the teacher states that *'there is obviously a level of accountability in a sense that GCSE results get scrutinised quite closely'*.

The pressure on teachers to produce good academic results is significantly greater at Key Stage 4 than Key Stage 3. In interview 1, the teacher states that at Key Stage 4, it would

*'be foolish to stray away from the case studies that the exam board recommend'*, describing the reduction in choice of topics at that Key Stage and the content that can be chosen, as prescriptive.

In comparison, both teachers emphasised the ability to influence the content of geography at Key Stage 3 through shortening, deleting and adding new topics, based on students' interests. So much so, that school 2 has actively made the decision to lengthen the period of Key Stage 4 geography by shortening Key Stage 3 from three years to two.

### **Continuity and Progression between Key Stages**

As previously discussed, the continuity and progression between stages may influence students' perceptions and interest in geography.

The teacher interviews highlighted the repetition of several topics such as weather and climate, coasts and natural hazards throughout secondary geography. Interestingly all these topics were something that students from both Key Stages enjoyed learning about.

However, a topic that was previously being taught throughout both Key Stages, population, is being removed from the Key Stage 4 curriculum despite being a topic that 65% of Key Stage 4 students enjoyed. 'Population' was also the 10<sup>th</sup> most common component of the poster task completed by Key Stage 4. The popularity of population as a topic was significantly less in Key Stage 3. This suggests that perhaps the repetition of this topic and the opportunity to study it in more depth may be responsible for prevalence in Key Stage 4 students' enjoyment and overall perceptions of geography. This is supported by the interviews with teachers who showed a willingness to continue this continuity and progression by incorporating the study of population into a Year 8 (Key Stage 3) unit because they believe it to be an important topic.

Lambert (2005) has argued that one particular problem with geography is that its power as an educational resource is not fully realised. This research found that for the majority of students, skills that are learnt throughout secondary school geography, such as statistics and map reading, were more explicitly recognised than personal ambitions like becoming a 'geographer' and travelling. This suggests the possibility that the pressure of education and employability on young people might be removing the passion and love for the world in which we live. Support for this statement can be seen throughout this piece of research in

the review of previous studies on students' perceptions of geography, as well as in the primary research findings.

Corney (2000) found that only after travelling to different countries, did student geography teachers develop an environmental conscience. In this research, only a small percentage of students mentioned the countries of the world in their definition of geography, despite both teachers stressing its importance in the curriculum. The majority of those that did refer to locational geography focused on their local surroundings, with only one student acknowledging that '*geography is everywhere*'. This suggests that perhaps curiosity and fascination is not being inspired beyond a local level. Lambert (2005) states that unlocking the full potential of school taught geography as an education resource can literally change the way we see the world, for example, the meaning of place and the significance of scale (local, regional, national, international and global). The willingness of both Key Stages 3 and 4 students to expand their perceptions is evident through the additional comments made by the students in that watching videos helped them to visualise what it is that they were learning about.

*'You can see for yourself how things are'* (KS3, Questionnaire)

*'Where you can see geography taking place'* (KS4, Questionnaire)

Undoubtedly, school taught geography has been successful with the number of students studying geography having risen for the fourth consecutive year, making it the eighth most popular GCSE (Weeden, 2015). However, it still remains in the bottom half of the top 10 GCSE subjects, beneath history (Weeden, 2015).

On the other hand, responses in this survey suggest that the only subjects Key Stage 4 students rated as more important than geography were science, maths and English. Whereas data from Key Stage 3 shows that as well as science, maths and English, Physical Education (PE) and Information and Communications Technology (ICT) were also rated as more important than geography. In interview 2, the teacher highlighted the success in using ICT to contribute towards students' learning of geography through online research. However, more students mentioned fieldwork/fieldtrips in KS3 (11) and KS4 (2) than computer work, which was not mentioned anywhere in this research. This demonstrates a willingness of students to embrace the curiosity and fascination that geography provides with the opportunity to learn outside the classroom.

## CONCLUSION

This research has resulted in the following key findings:

- Although students' perceptions of geography are similar in many ways, there are significant differences. The majority of Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 students' perceptions of geography are focused on the everyday study of the world and its relevance to their daily lives, but their knowledge beyond a local scale is limited.
- There are evidently many influences on how students perceive geography, including parents, the media and personal experiences. However these findings suggest that teachers appear to have the most significant influence, in relation to the content and delivery of geographical material included in the National Curriculum. Examinations and future prospects also appear to play a role in the perceptions of Key Stage 4 students.
- Curriculum continuity and progression does occur between Key Stage 3 and 4 in secondary school geography. When this is successful (through the four topics mentioned: weather and climate; natural hazards; coasts and population), students enjoy and are more engaged with the content.
- Students are using skills learnt in the early stages of their geographical education. Therefore, describing Key Stage 3 as the 'wasted years' is inaccurate, with topics and skills that allow for continuity and progression being viewed as enjoyable and important by students. Rather, these findings supports the Royal Geographical Society in stating that geography is, in the broadest sense, an education for life and for living (Royal Geographical Society, 2016).
- Achieving the right balance between productivity (exam success) and creativity (such as broader geographical awareness, travelling, and becoming a 'geographer') remains a challenge.
- Leading students through a geographical education, during which their understanding of the subject is broadened, may increase the likelihood of student engagement and encourage them to bring their own interests and experiences to the curriculum.
- By drawing on students' own experiences and issues that interest them through activities they identify as interactive and engaging, the full potential of school taught geography can be achieved.

These findings provide an insight into what students perceive to be geographical knowledge, the factors that influence these perceptions and how this translates practically into the classroom. The extent to which the new geography curriculum will affect students' perceptions of the subject in the future is largely unpredictable. Only by conducting similar research on a local, regional and national level can valuable insights into the balance of a productive but creative relationship between students and the subject matter be discovered. An exciting prospect would be to follow a similar research design on a longitudinal scale, using case-studies of individual students, in order to see the impact of school taught geography on individual perceptions.

As a final conclusion, and as this study was inspired by Hopwood, it seems only right that this research concludes with this quote:

*'We must face up to the fact that conceptions of geography education cannot be straightforwardly reshaped by simply changing what is taught or how. Young people lie at the heart of geography's future and must play a role in shaping it'* (Hopwood, 2011).

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