

Big ideas across the curriculum

Introductory note

'What's the big idea?' This is a key question in curriculum planning – what are the essential generalisations we intend to present and to communicate, the key concepts we want learners to understand and make their own? In this paper there are notes on six sets of big ideas, as listed below. The ideas are connected to each other and overlap but can be separated and given names, for the sake of convenience. They are as follows:

- Shared humanity
- Identity, belonging and difference
- Globalisation and the global village
- Learning from other places and times
- Conflict resolution and justice
- Open and closed minds.

These ideas can be taught in all subjects and at all ages. Further, they can be taught through a school's general ethos and atmosphere, not just formally and directly through what used to be called chalk and talk. Also, they can be taught through the illustrative material to which reference is made in skills-based subjects.

1) Shared humanity

Human beings belong to a single race, the human race. At all times in history and in all cultural traditions, they have had, and continue to have, certain basic tasks, problems, aspirations and needs in common – there is a shared humanity. Because all have the same underlying humanity, all are of equal value. All should be treated fairly and all should have the same basic human rights.

Art, drama, history, music, novels, poetry, religion and stories all explore humankind's basic humanity. In science, pupils learn about aspects of human biology that are universal, about universals in the inorganic world and about science as a universal human activity. Universals in biology are also encountered in health education and PE. In geography, pupils learn about recurring patterns in relationships between human beings and their physical environment.

2) Identity, belonging and difference

To be human is to be rooted in a particular time and place and therefore to be different from most other people. The principal differences are to do with age, class, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, language, nation, race, religion, sexuality and status. They are expressed through different perceptions, narratives, interests, standpoints and customs. Every individual belongs to a range of different groups, and therefore has a range of different belongings. Also, and partly in consequence, all individuals change and develop over time, as do all cultures, groups and communities.

In all subjects, the texts, visual material and electronic resources can reflect the reality that there are many different ways of being human and that cultural identities are continually developing. Similarly the tasks, problems and assignments that are set can reflect these aspects of the real world. In many subjects, in addition, there are direct opportunities for teaching and learning about cultural differences, and differences of perception, interpretation, interest and narrative.

3) Globalisation and the global village

Countries, cultures and communities are not cut off from each other. On the contrary, there has been much borrowing, mingling and mutual influence over the centuries between different countries and cultural traditions. Events and trends in one place in the modern world are frequently affected by events and trends elsewhere. You cannot understand your own local world close at hand without seeing it as part of a global system. The global system has a range of interacting sub-systems: ecological, cultural, economic and political. There are benefits, but also dangers and difficulties.

Economic interdependence is an essential concept in geography. Ecological interdependence is fundamental in biology, chemistry and physics. Political interdependence is central in all studies of causation in history. Cultural interdependence, involving fusion, cross-over and mutual influences and borrowing, is a recurring feature in art, design, drama, literature, music and technology.

4) Learning from other places and times

Examples of high achievement are to be found in a wide range cultures, societies and traditions, not in 'the west' or in modern times only. They are the work of both women and men, of gay people as well as straight, and of disabled people as well as non-disabled. They are to be found in all areas of human endeavour – the arts and sciences, law and ethics, personal and family life, religion and spirituality, moral and physical courage, invention, politics, imagination.

In every subject, examples of achievement, invention, creativity, insight and heroism can be taken from a wide range of cultures, both in the present and in the past.

5) Conflict resolution and justice

In all societies and situations – including families, schools, villages, nations, the world – there are disagreements and conflicts of interest. In consequence there is a never-ending need to construct, and to keep in good repair, non-violent ways of dealing with conflict – rules, laws, customs and systems that all people accept as reasonable and fair.

It is particularly in history, PSHEE and citizenship education that social and political concepts to do with conflict resolution and justice are taught and developed directly. Indirectly, they can be a dimension in all subjects, particularly literature and stories and the creative and performing arts.

6) Open and closed minds

All advances of knowledge and substantial achievements require a readiness to review and examine assumptions, expectations and perceptions that may be false or distorted. Such assumptions may be about the inherent superiority of one's own country, culture or ethnicity; the inherent superiority of either women or men; sexuality; disability; people of one's own generation; or the period of history in which one happens to live. The avoidance of stereotypes and unexamined beliefs, accompanied by keeping one's mind open to new information, evidence and points of view, is a constant struggle.

It is particularly in history, PSHEE and citizenship education that social and political concepts to do with prejudice and open-mindedness are taught and developed directly. Indirectly, they can be a dimension in all subjects, particularly literature and stories and the creative and performing arts. In science, technology and mathematics there is constant emphasis on attention to hard evidence and on the rigorous testing of hypotheses.

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