

# How can I be a better subject leader of geography?

*Aidan reflects on his own experience as a subject leader to offer some practical advice for heads of department in leading geography in their schools.*

**Phase:** New subject leads and department heads, teachers  
**Topic or theme:** Subject leadership



Accompanying online materials

The GA has compiled a number of excellent resources to help both aspiring and existing geography leads to improve leadership capabilities (see Geographical Association, 2025), and *Teaching Geography* has published a number of articles on this over the years (see Kinder, 2005, Glesinger *et al.* 2017, and Ward, 2017, for example). As I reflect on my time as a subject leader (hereafter 'SL') of over five years, this article brings these together to suggest some practical advice by focusing on six main aspects (Figure 1).

## Vision: aims and expectations of geography teachers and students

A critical question of any leadership position is: *why?* As SL, your role is to establish and communicate clearly the **aims** of your curriculum. These are likely to be long-term views of the geographical education of your students in your school, and which guide your strategic planning with a focus on clear outcomes. In current educational language, this is now widely known as **intent**. It's easy to be seduced into creating jargonistic straplines and motivational-sounding blurbs, but it's much more effective to keep your vision straightforward and to have pragmatic ideas about how you can identify the extent to

which you are meeting your aims. Kinder (2005) suggests questioning students to establish whether they 'have a clear vision of the purpose and value of geography? Would they wish to continue studying the subject and what would they want to find out next?' (p. 102).

Your vision should also go beyond curriculum intent to incorporate **wider expectations** of students and staff according to whole school aims and policies. For example, promising to teach a curriculum that inspires in students an 'active curiosity of our changing world' is rather meaningless without any explanation of what is meant by an 'active curiosity'. It's important to flesh this out with indicators of how this can be seen or measured; otherwise, how will you know if you are realising your vision? It's difficult to establish whether students have acquired an 'active curiosity about a changing world', but it is evident if students enjoy geography, can remember more over time, choose the subject for GCSE or A level, participate in geography clubs, or pursue geography as a degree. I'd advise sticking to the concrete rather than the ethereal (see Owen, 2017 for a vision-building framework).

From a managerial perspective, it's also prudent to clearly circumscribe your expectations of both staff and students. The SL should model these behaviours and expectations, inspiring staff and students to do the same. For example, one of the aims of our geography curriculum comes from our whole-school vision of *inspiration*, but how exactly are our students *inspired* by learning geography? How will our teachers be *inspirational*? As a team exercise, at our school we unpicked these questions and outlined the characteristics of inspirational geography teaching, and how these might be seen in geography lessons:

- Teachers of geography are role models for behaviour and attitudes. They will hold students to account on their uniform and behaviour; they will reflect a passion for the subject; and they will uphold the school's policies in an equitable manner.
- Teachers will demonstrate high standards of communication and require the same from students, helping them develop communication skills through the geography curriculum.
- Students will be inspired by effective geography pedagogy strategies and assessment for learning.
- Students will be inspired to 'think geographically', according to the approaches and frameworks set out by the geography department.

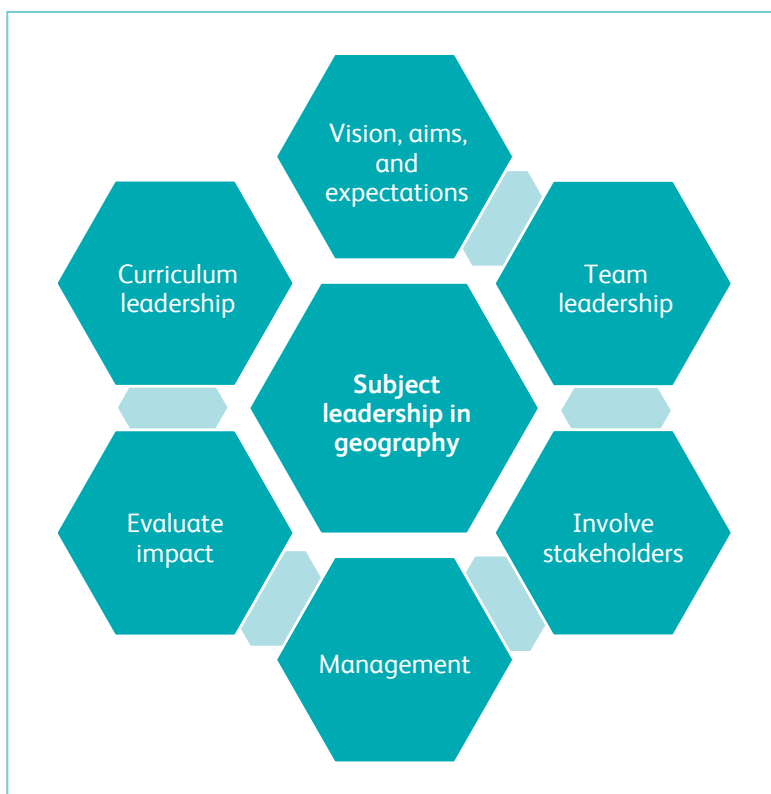


Figure 1: Six main aspects of subject leadership in geography.

We found these tangible aims allow for a more productive assessment of the degree to which our curriculum is having a positive impact (see downloads). This approach is also more conducive to consistency between teachers within the department (Owen, 2017). As I suggest in the following paragraphs, *everything* comes back to your vision.

## Team leadership: cohesion and development

'Teamwork makes the dream work', as they say, and I can't think of a more powerful strategy for enacting your vision. Collective professional discussion and decision-making are powerful approaches to ensuring that all team members are working together to achieve departmental aims, which themselves can be co-constructed as a team exercise. Indeed, this was the first task set when I took up post five years ago. As a result, the whole team had buy-in, and we all knew the direction of travel. As Glesinger *et al.* (2017) suggest, 'loosen your grip and relinquish elements of the job to colleagues you trust. Not only does this empower them; it frees your time for the constant juggling act that is managing the department' (p. 52). Micro-managing is much less effective than leading a team of agentive professionals.

There are many other practical strategies that can help achieve cohesion in the department, like involving the team in non-judgmental lesson observations, or action research, or co-creating department policies about assessment or homework, all of which lead to positive impacts on student outcomes. However, teamwork isn't always easy, and personal dynamics will affect how much you can delegate and how much buy-in you may get. Some teams 'click', and work together incredibly well; while others can be fraught with tension and even confrontation. Either way, as SL, it's your responsibility to try to get the best outcomes with the resources at hand.

While subject leadership requires positive relationships between team members, it also requires you to foster positive relationships between staff and students. This means taking a proactive role when intervening in behavioural issues, managing student behaviour that is below the expectations of the department. So be there to chair restorative conversations and to take some of the burden off your team by dealing with persistent behavioural issues yourself. This will help to ensure your team (and students) knows you are there to support them.

Department meetings, too, are a great way to keep the team working together. Regular meetings with a planned agenda will help the team to visualise how, together, you're tackling the issues that lead to better outcomes. Tasks can be delegated, student issues discussed and improvements to schemes of work made. It can also be a time to invest in the professional growth of your team, developing areas of strength and addressing areas that are yet to be as strong. Any external CPD can be discussed and incorporated

into your plans. Department meetings that focus entirely on administrative tasks will yield fewer improvements than those with a focus on teaching and learning. Again, these should be framed according to your vision and in consideration of your department development plan (DDP) and department self-evaluation framework (DSEF) (see below: Evaluating: the impact of your vision).

## Curriculum leadership: curriculum making and planning

The current educational landscape varies, when it comes to the leadership of the curriculum. At one end of the spectrum, you may be the subject leader and only teacher of geography in a very small rural school, and all the decision-making falls to you. At the other end, you may be a subject leader in a school that's part of a large multi-academy trust, where much of the decision-making in geography is done by a trust-wide SL. No matter where your leadership sits on this spectrum, make teaching and learning geography the focus. Much of this is, nowadays, referred to as **implementation**. For years I have been a staunch advocate of the notion of **curriculum making**, which the GA defines as 'the creative act of interpreting a national curriculum or examination specification and turning it into a coherent, challenging and engaging sequence of teaching and learning' (Geographical Association, n.d.) As the GeoCapabilities project suggests, curriculum making 'is what teachers do ... It includes lesson planning, but it takes a longer view. Lessons may have objectives, but the curriculum is guided by longer-term aims or goals ... [it is] the creative and imaginative work that teachers do to enact an official curriculum plan' (GeoCapabilities, n.d.). The process of curriculum making is therefore essential for the SL to align the departmental aims with the planned curriculum, which includes long-term plans, schemes of work, lesson plans, resources, homework, assessment and all the other nuts and bolts. Curriculum making questions the relevance of the curriculum, and the extent to which it will help your team realise your vision.

## Evaluating: the impact of your vision

Central to the role of subject leader are the questions 'how well are you doing?' and 'how well do you know?' (Kinder, 2005, p. 101). Much of the SL role therefore involves **accountability**, so within your skill set should be the capacity to evaluate the **impact** that your team and your curriculum are having on your students (this is called **quality assurance** (QA) in many schools). Having a clear understanding of your aims makes any evaluation much more productive, and for the past few years I have benefitted by understanding QA as the differences between the *planned* curriculum, the *enacted* curriculum, and the *learned* curriculum.

- The planned curriculum describes the aims of what you want your students to learn: the geographical knowledge, understanding and skills.

- The enacted curriculum refers to the daily classroom pedagogies that occur in teaching the intended curriculum.
- The learned curriculum encapsulates the geographical knowledge, understanding, and skills that students take away from your lessons (see Quigley, n.d.)

Effective QA tackles the gaps that may or may not exist between these three, questioning the efficacy of the pedagogies that are employed to move the intended into the learned curriculum. Much of this is done by interrogating the learned curriculum: what students know, understand and can do. If this doesn't adequately reflect your intended curriculum, then the enacted curriculum needs to change. Interrogating the learned curriculum requires evidence to draw conclusions: much of this is found in lesson observations, student work, student voice, moderation/standardisation, academic and behaviour data and action research (Figure 2). I have found that a focus on powerful disciplinary knowledge, used as 'waypoints' throughout the curriculum, is a tangible way of identifying evidence that point to these gaps (Hesslewood, 2023a).

It is also essential that the SL takes an active role in ensuring that the curriculum meets the needs of *all* students. This means frequent dialogue with teaching assistants and the SENCO, in addition to the geography team, to evaluate the extent to which differentiation strategies are working for students with special educational needs and disabilities. SEND students may require adaptations of teaching and learning resources, and adaptive teaching methods based on their own individual needs.

As well as evaluating the effectiveness of the curriculum, the SL may also need to evaluate the systems used by the department (and school) in monitoring student progress, such as assessment policies, the types of assessment data collected, and QA approaches. One of the ways of doing this is to triangulate your evaluation with that done by a different team, for instance a department review conducted by senior leadership. Two of the greatest risks to student outcomes are not knowing where departmental improvements

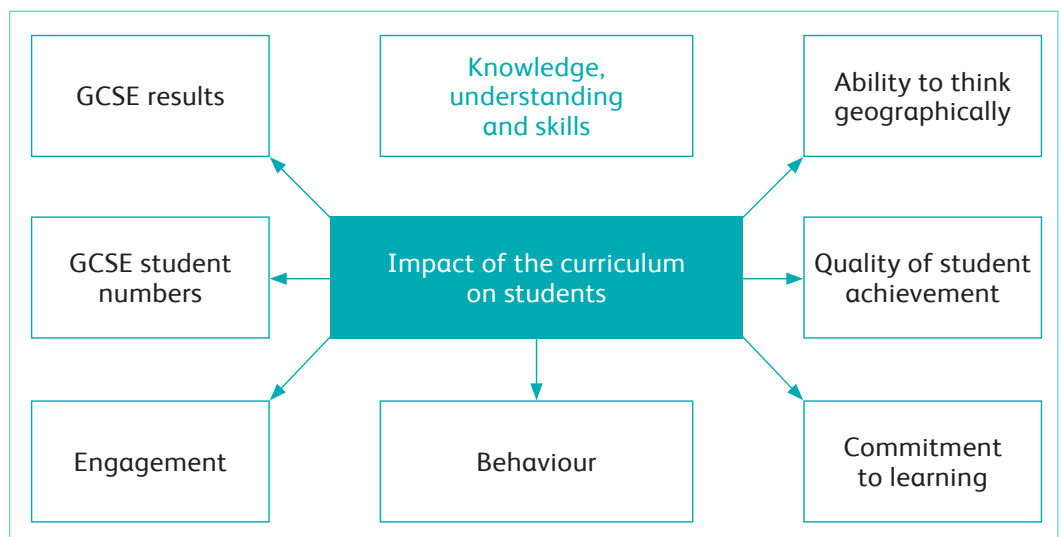
need to be made, or identifying the wrong actions to take. Adding further complexity to the process, QA may also need to be undertaken in the context of whole-school priorities, which themselves may or may not contribute to helping your students become better geographers.

Two key pieces of documentation that the SL needs to produce as a result of this evaluation process are the Department Self-Evaluation Framework (DSEF) and the Department Development Plan (DDP). The DSEF should outline how well the department is working towards its aims and often ranks this performance against a set of criteria, drawing on evidence to support any judgments made. This should then inform the DDP, which describes what needs to be improved, how, by when, and the resources needed to do it. 'Rinse and repeat' at timely intervals and this process of 'plan-do-review' should result in departmental progress over time, whether learning outcomes, uptake or attainment in external examinations. A clear and transparent rationale for decision-making, based on substantiated evidence, is one of the most important features of effective middle leadership. Building an effective evaluation framework can be difficult and time-consuming; but having gone through the process (and been a moderator now for several years), I would certainly recommend completing the Secondary Geography Quality Mark. The process is thorough, and most often results in significant and sustained improvements. More information can be found on the GA's website, and in the *GA Magazine* (Hesslewood, 2023b).

### Involve stakeholders: senior leaders, parents, and governors

In the day-to-day running of geography at your school, you'll mostly be focused on your students and your geography colleagues (as has been the focus of discussion so far in this article). However, there are three other significant stakeholders that you must involve as well. First, on a regular basis, your senior leaders will require input and updates, and I find that some kind of diary helps to document department progress and any issues that arise. I've also found a one-page summary

Figure 2: Indicators of the impact of the curriculum (from Gardner, 2021).



## Leadership

Vision (intent)

Inspiring students and colleagues (implementation)

Encouraging professional growth

Evaluating the curriculum (impact)

Interpreting student attainment data

Observing colleagues and providing feedback

Ensuring school policies are applied in the department

Reporting to senior leaders

Observing teaching

Tackling behaviour issues, including meeting with parents

Setting agendas for departmental meetings

Ensuring deadlines are met (e.g. common assessment tasks)

Budgeting and allocating funds and resources

## Management

**Figure 3:** A leadership-management spectrum, adapted from Kinder (2005, p. 102).

'dashboard' of data helps to articulate the direction of travel. Data on uptake, attainment and QA help you to justify *how you know* how well you're doing. But, as Laura-Jayne Ward (2017) suggests, 'check the data you have is valid and reliable' (p. 104). Second, at certain times of the year, it's important to communicate to parents what their children are studying and how they are enjoying it. Pictures of student work, field trips and extracurricular activities, sent to parents in newsletters or published on the school website to celebrate student achievements, are vital in creating a positive atmosphere around the subject. Third, some schools positively involve governors beyond the senior team and encourage discussions with middle leaders. Where this is productive, you may want to involve them. Many have expertise to offer, so you might be able to use them as volunteers or sounding boards for new ideas. For example, the governor attached to geography in my school was incredibly useful in helping me to justify field trips in every year group. I have found that communicating effectively with all three stakeholders increases transparency and support and helps to spread good ideas throughout the school.

Being an effective geography SL also requires a great deal of skill in management, and for this, organisation is paramount. While leadership is the most important aspect of the job, your department will not function well without the effective deployment of resources and funds, managing classrooms and displays, performance management and ensuring all deadlines are met: so as SL, you must have a functional overview of the operational aspects of the department (Figure 3).

## Conclusion

I've heard from colleagues, in many different roles, that middle leadership is the most challenging position in any secondary school, but I think it's also one of the most rewarding. With passion, dedication and teamwork, you'll find yourself responsible for improving the outcomes of young people through a high-quality geography education. If you're a new SL or aspiring to this role, I hope this article and its downloads have provided some insight, and for more experienced SLs, that they may provide some fresh ideas. | TG

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## Online resources

The downloads that accompany this article can be accessed at <https://portal.geography.org.uk/journal/index/tg>. Select Spring 2026.

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