Getting Started with Key Concepts

What Are Key Concepts? - Transcript

Interviewee

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What are key concepts?

Okay, so if we're thinking about key concepts, first of all we have to think about what a concept is, and a concept is a mental representation of a thing or a class of thing. I know that sounds a bit complex but actually it's part of our everyday life. So when we're young we learn these concepts by people showing us things and pointing to things, and giving us the names.

So we would learn for example the concept dog by people showing us lots of different dogs or perhaps they would look at a picture book with us and say dog and we would perhaps repeat that. And so it's a part of our, sort of, everyday life and learning and part of the language that we use, the way that we can communicate with each other is all based on concepts. So rather than us talking about one particular animal over there that has got a tail and all this sort of thing, we know when we say dog the sorts of things that we're meaning. And then of course that develops during our schooling so we get more academic concepts. So we might for example learn that a dog is a mammal. And so through our schooling we're refining and gathering more concepts and those are perhaps not so much everyday ones they're ones that we have to be taught.

So that's concept. But then when we think about key concept we're moving here into an educational purpose. So each subject has lots and lots of different concepts, and the teacher or the curriculum planner, the person who's writing the assessment specification, is deciding which concepts are key for a particular age group or in a particular topic. And key here tends to mean important, it could also mean opening up an area of learning.

Why might it be useful to let your students know about key concepts?

So when we're thinking about letting our students know about key concepts. The first thing to be aware of is that we are of course teaching concepts and conceptual knowledge all the time within our work. So it's impossible to escape from the substantive concepts which make up a large part of our subjects.

But in thinking about key I think it will depend on the age and the context, and the topic that we're talking about. But particularly for the substantive concepts it's very important to make those explicit because people learn about substantive concepts by seeing different examples of them in different situations. So they need to know that they're learning about rivers or parliament or whatever it is in order to build up that deeper and richer understanding of a concept over time. And that needs to be quite explicit, we need to be

helping them make links between the different instances of a particular concept that they've encountered within their subject learning. But then when we think about key concepts sometimes those might be things that are actually quite sophisticated and particularly with younger children we might not necessarily always want to share those.

So for example if as a geography teacher I'm thinking about developing different understandings of place with my class, with younger children I might actually just be focusing on different instances of places.

But because I'm approaching those in different ways I know that I'm actually building up their more abstract conceptual knowledge of place as a key concept. But it might not be until children are older that I actually get them to explicitly reflect on place as a concept and the different ways that different groups would construct and understand that concept. So I think it is something that very much depends on your teaching situation and that's where obviously we're talking about the teacher as a professional in directing the knowledge and the learning of that class.