# Big ideas

## What are big ideas?

A big idea is a significant concept that can apply to multiple subjects disciplines. Together, big ideas reflect the overarching academic intentions of your curriculum. In some cases schools also refer to the big ideas as the goals or endpoints of their curriculum. That is the larger concepts that children should understand by the time they leave their primary education.

For Wiggins et al., big ideas describe the core concepts of single subjects or disciplines.[1] However, big ideas in this book and most primary schools refer to an 'enduring concept that is not constrained by a particular subject or place in time'.[2] Figure 7.1.1 shows examples of big ideas.

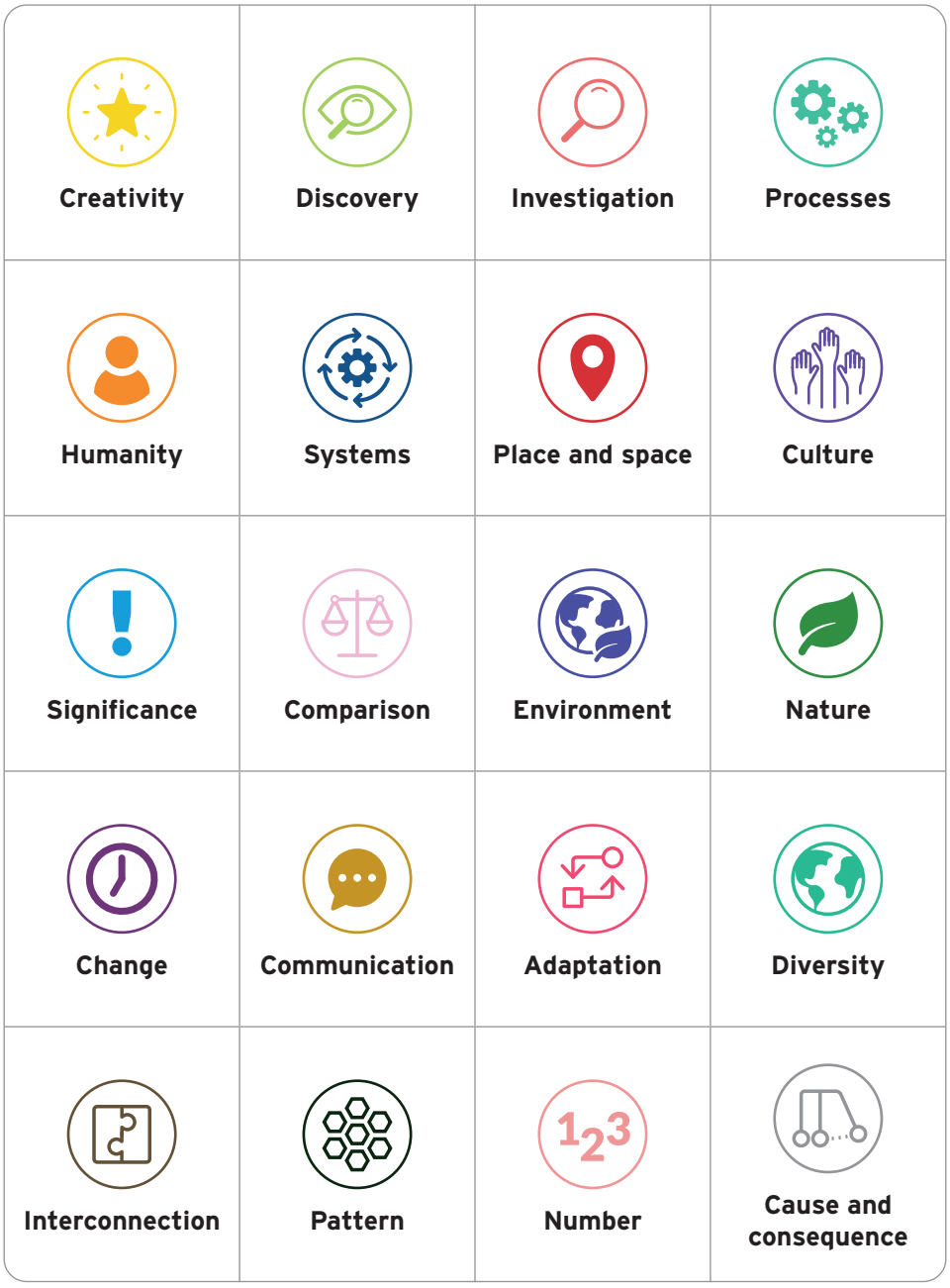


Figure 7.1.1 Example big ideas

## Characteristics of big ideas

Erickson et al. and Wiggins et al. propose interesting thinking about what makes a big idea and provide valuable indicators of their characteristics. The following paragraphs are based on some of their thinking and provide valuable criteria for establishing your own big ideas.

## Characteristics of big ideas

Big ideas are sometimes called macro concepts. This is because they are significant concepts that have a broad meaning. Due to their breadth, it's important to have a clear, shared understanding of what each big idea means to you and your stakeholders so there is no room for misunderstanding. Defining your big ideas can be done briefly, as in Figure 7.1.2, or in more detail, as in Figure 7.1.3.

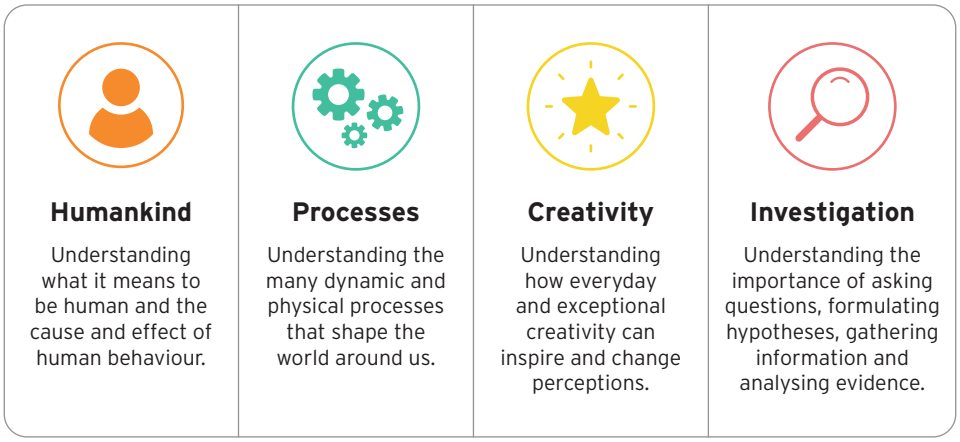


Figure 7.1.2 Big ideas with short definitions

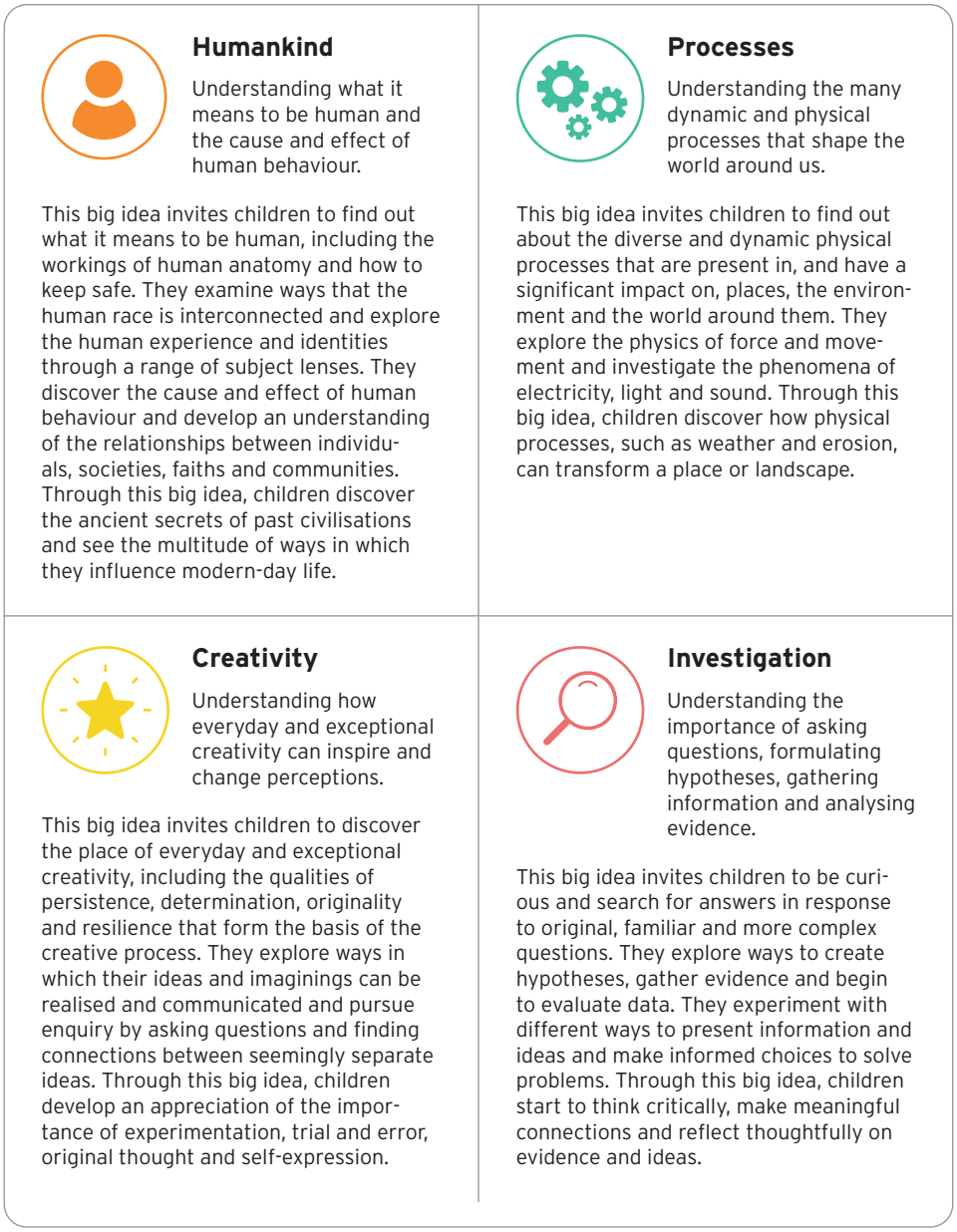


Figure 7.1.3 Big ideas with extended definitions

## Big ideas are abstract

Big ideas are abstract. That is, they have no concrete form. Therefore, the challenge is bringing those abstractions to life through your curriculum and the lessons teachers teach.

For example, the big idea of creativity can be brought to life in many subjects. For instance, in art and design or design and technology, children can use their creativity to realise their ideas, make objects and find solutions to design problems. Similarly, children can use their creativity in English to write poetry or stories; in science, they may hypothesise and investigate, both of which require creative thinking.

The more opportunities you provide for children to study abstract concepts through meaningful contexts and with specific examples, the better your children will begin to understand how big ideas have meaning in the real world.

## Big ideas are timeless

Big ideas are timeless and universal, applicable to any place, race or culture. These concepts will have existed in the past, are relevant in the present and are more than likely to exist in the future. They are steadfast, a fact of life and not at risk of disappearing due to educational, social or political fads or trends.

## Big ideas promote primary pedagogy

At a time when the acquisition of knowledge in the curriculum is king, it is a welcome fact that the inclusion of big ideas in a curriculum structure can promote the kind of pedagogy that supports the unique nature of the primary child. Big ideas cannot just be taught and assumed, learned or remembered; they must be uncovered and discovered. Active learning strategies, such as asking questions, investigating hypotheses, making connections and finding patterns, are all important in a curriculum led by big ideas.

## Big ideas create meaningful links across the curriculum

One of the most critical functions of big ideas is that they can provide a conceptual lens for different subjects and aspects of the curriculum. For example, take the big idea of nature; there are many ways that this can act as a conceptual lens across numerous subjects. While geography and science might be the obvious place to start, valuable links can be made with other subjects, such as English or art and design. For example, in art and design, children could learn how to draw and paint natural landscapes, with the teacher using the opportunity to revisit the physical features of the landscape. In English, children might write poems about nature, rivers, mountains and the coastline using technical vocabulary they have learned in geography.

It is important to understand that this does not mean looking for tenuous links between subjects but meaningful opportunities for the children to learn and make connections through the lens of a big idea.

## Big ideas in maths and English

The subjects of maths and English usually have their own unique big ideas. For example, in English, concepts such as reading becomes a big idea, as does number in maths.

However, it is still worth reflecting on some of the more universal big ideas in these two subjects where possible, for example, using the big idea of investigation in maths, or comparison in English.

## Reference list

Erickson HL, Lanning LA, French RL. Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom. Corwin, a SAGE Publications Company; 2017

Wiggins GP, McTighe J. Understanding by Design. Merrill/Prentice Hall; 1998

[1] Wiggins GP, McTighe J. Understanding by Design. Merrill/Prentice Hall; 1998
[2] Erickson HL, Lanning LA, French RL. Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom. Corwin, a SAGE Publications Company; 2017