

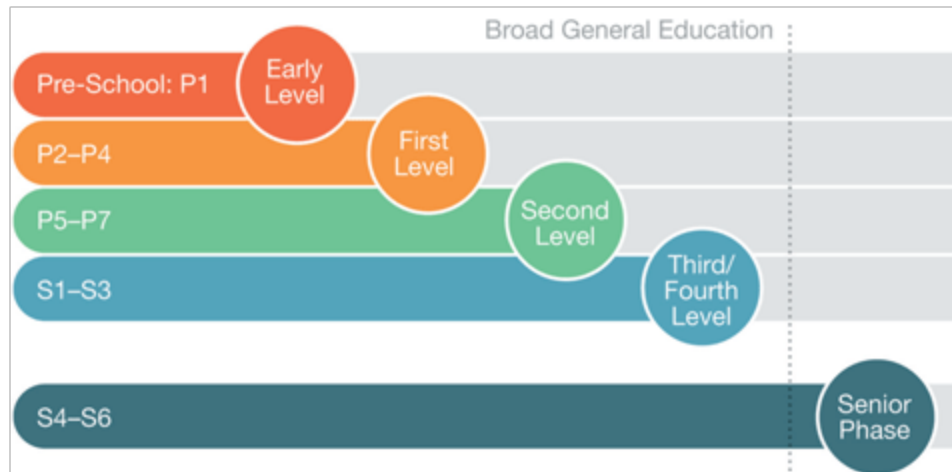
# **Geography in the Broad General Education in Scotland: Tensions, opportunities and suggestions for the future**

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## **Introducing the Broad General Education**

Each of the countries that make up the United Kingdom – England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland – has a distinct school-level education system and associated policy context. Critically reflecting on education policy - in the place we work, but also beyond - is important as it can help us to understand how policy shapes the spaces that we, as educators, work in and contribute to. Engaging with education policy can also develop our understanding of curricula, teacher agency, and ultimately what, how and where young people study and learn.

Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) was introduced in 2010 and is the current national curriculum for Scotland (Education Scotland, n.d.). CfE is organised around two phases (figure one), with primary school years labelled with a P (e.g. P1 represents the first year of primary) and secondary school years with an S. The Broad General Education (BGE) begins in early childhood and lasts through primary school until young people finish the school year Secondary 3 (S3), when they are 14-15 years of age. After this, young people enter the Senior Phase.



**Figure one: Curriculum Levels in Scotland (Education Scotland, 2023a: n.p.)**

The BGE is organised through eight *Curriculum Areas* (e.g. Social Studies and Health and Wellbeing), which are planned around *Experiences and Outcomes* (informally termed Es & Os), with *Benchmarks* providing national guidelines as to expected standards for curriculum areas at each of its five Levels (Education Scotland, 2023a; figure one). There is a commitment to interdisciplinary learning in the BGE, and the CfE is underpinned by *Four Capacities* that the curriculum aims to develop in young people - *Successful Learners, Confident Individuals, Responsible Citizens* and *Effective Contributors* (Education Scotland, 2023b). The four capacities are reflective of supra-national policy discourse from organisations such as the OECD (Priestley and Minty, 2013) and are not without criticism. For example, it has been argued that the capacities are undertheorized and ‘Biesta (2008) has been critical of the “responsible citizen” capacity, with its focus on social responsibility rather than democratic citizenship’ (Priestley and Minty, 2013: p. 40).

In this article, we examine the place of Geography in the BGE, writing together as colleagues working in geography teacher education across primary and secondary education, with all Initial Teacher Education (ITE) in Scotland being university-led. Where we refer to subjects – as constructed through the CfE - we write Geography with a capital G, however, elsewhere we write with a lower-case g to recognise diverse geographies.

### **Tension one: Where is geography in the BGE?**

In some countries, Geography is constructed in policy as a discrete subject in both primary and secondary education. Geography is a discrete subject in the Senior Phase in Scotland, however, in the BGE, Geography is primarily conceptualized as part of Social Studies. Social Studies also incorporates History and Modern Studies and is organised through the themes of *People, Past Events and Societies*, *People, Place and Environment*, and *People, Society, Economy and Business* (Hancock et al., 2018; Education Scotland, 2023c). However, geographical knowledge, concepts, ideas and thinking can also be identified in curriculum areas including Science, as part of the Four Capacities, Learning for Sustainability (Scottish Government, 2023) and Wider Achievements (e.g. the John Muir award).

This curricula positioning leads to the first tension - young people in Scotland may not be taught Geography as a discrete subject and/or by subject specialist until S4 (age 15-16 years). Whilst it is important to note that practice varies between secondary schools and many teach Geography as a discrete subject during S1-S3, there are also questions around if, how and why the integration of Geography into Social Studies impacts upon young people's curricula choices at National and Higher Levels, and their progression and interests in geography. For example, whilst noting that student numbers are beginning to increase, Selmes et al. (2022: p. 351) posit that 'Geography is a minority subject in the Scottish school system and is in relative decline. In the year ending 2021, it was the 10th ranked subject in several entries at N5, 11th at Higher, and 11th at Advanced Higher'.

As Hardman (2021: n.p.) states 'to teach a subject is to convey the role of that subject in the world', to be able to explain how and why it matters, and to introduce (young) people into its ways of thinking and inquiring. Subjects can help to nurture and develop children's identities and interests both within and beyond the classroom. Geography is a rich and diverse discipline which varies methodologically and substantively, and which evolves over time through engagement with (issues in) the world (Lambert & Morgan, 2010). Whilst arguing that Geography has a distinct essence, Brock (2016) describes geography as a composite and integrative discipline, precisely due to its relationships with other fields. Interdisciplinary

thinking is important to expanding knowledges and debates in geography, and as part of young people's education as they engage with complex issues in the world (e.g. climate change) and think about the futures that they want shape for themselves, their communities, and the Earth.

However, as Catling and Willy (2018: p. 13) reflect when considering geography in primary education, teaching geography as part of an integrated curriculum can risk limiting the geographies that are taught, children and teachers not being able to identify geographical knowledges, and a failure 'to provide a clear focus on the key ideas, knowledge and skills of geography'. Integrating Geography into Social Studies in secondary schools potentially expands these concerns further into a young person's education. In the context of the CfE, there is also a risk that young people and teachers will have a limited grasp of disciplinary concepts and knowledges to support engagement with interdisciplinary thinking and/or teaching (Humes, 2013).

### **Tension two: Separating humans and nature in the present time-space**

Education Scotland's (2023d: p.1) statement as to the purposes and value of Social Studies begins:

'Through social studies, children and young people develop their understanding of the world by learning about other people and their values, in different times, places and circumstances; they also develop their understanding of their environment and of how it has been shaped.... Children and young people learn about human achievements and about how to make sense of changes in society, of conflicts and of environmental issues. With greater understanding comes the opportunity and ability to influence events by exercising informed and responsible citizenship.'

In many ways, this statement offers numerous opportunities for teachers of geography. As curriculum makers (Lambert & Morgan, 2010), teachers may support young people in their explorations of how humans shape, and are shaped by, the Earth and its systems, processes and

places. The statement can also be seen to encourage the nurturing and development of young people's knowledge of citizenship and (potentially) their agency in different spaces and places.

However, a second tension emerges from the positioning of Geography primarily within Social Studies in the BGE, which Stewart (2022: p. 161) suggests is a questionable decision 'given the essential physical and environmental components of the subject'. This positioning has the potential to lead to a separation between humans and nature in curricula and teaching, and a more limited knowledge of the discipline of geography. This separation is particularly problematic in the period of intersecting injustices within which teachers and young people live and act, and where conceptions of human-nature divisions are increasingly questioned in academic and everyday discourse (Latour, 2017).

Stewart's (2022) recent research with geography teachers in Scotland raised concerns about teacher expertise and confidence in teaching physical geography when they have a Social Science or non-specialist background. Stewart's research also examines the gap between school and university geography, which she argues has led to school geography becoming 'outdated', impacting upon students' experiences of, and perspectives on, the discipline in Scotland. The framing of Geography within *People, Place and Environment* potentially contributes to this disconnect, as it fails to truly engage with the histories, geographies and turns of the discipline. This raises important questions around how children and teachers conceptualize and understand geography, teacher expertise and confidence in teaching subjects beyond their ITE qualification, and education about interdisciplinary teaching and learning during ITE (Humes, 2013)

### **Tension three: Teaching the geographies and histories of Scotland and the world**

The complex histories of the British Islands shape debates about the histories that are constructed through curricula in the countries that make up the UK (Chapman & Smith, 2023) and shape the histories that are taught, learned, and sometimes contested in classrooms and lecture theatres.

Cassaithe & Chapman (2023: n. p.) argue that what they term a 'geographical framing' can allow

‘continuous stories to be told’. However, they highlight a tension that in an age of nationalism there is often a foregrounding of the nation state and a desire to make histories permanent, ‘even if the historical record shows that they are historically contingent’ (Cassaithe & Chapman (2023: n. p.)). This argument lies at the heart of the third tension – what shapes the (at once) intellectual, practical and ethical decisions about which geographies and histories of Scotland, the UK, Europe and the Earth are explored, and how and why they are taught through Social Studies.

An example of the complexities of these decisions can be seen when we examine this Third Level E & O, which focusses on developing young people’s map skills:

‘I can use a range of maps and geographical information systems to gather, interpret and present conclusions and can locate a range of features within Scotland, UK, Europe and the wider world’ (Education Scotland, 2023c: p. 11).

Ordnance Survey (OS) maps are commonly used in classrooms in Scotland in teaching and learning. However, when OS ‘first surveyed Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the language mould into which it was cast was Standard English rather than Scots’ (Ordnance Survey, 2023: n.p.), resulting in a misrepresentation of Scottish places that potentially erased local histories and stories. Further to this, there is no mention of Scots or Gaelic languages, or Scotland’s diverse histories or geographies in the Social Studies Es & Os, potentially resulting in partial geographies and histories of Scotland being taught in some schools.

Looking beyond Scotland, we turn to another E & O from the Third Level:

‘I can compare the social and economic differences between more and less economically-developed countries and can discuss the possibilities for reducing these differences’ (Education Scotland, 2023c: p. 9).

Here, we contend that command words such as ‘compare’ have the potential to feed into to othering of places and people. As Winter (2023: p. 31) reflects when considering the teaching of global development in England:

‘Reductive statistical comparisons produce ‘discursive homogenisation’ (Escobar 1995), which erase countries’ rich and unique characteristics, obscure their

histories and silence indigenous voices. Comparison of extremes promotes a Western economic model of global development underpinned by the ‘West is Best’ discourse’.

The use of terminology such as ‘more and less economically-developed countries’ feeds into this reductionism, with the idea of reducing social differences being problematic as it may result in a lack of engagement with different identities, knowledges, imaginations, ways of life and perspectives on the world, and instead lead to a focus on a one world view in geography lessons.

### **Conclusions and suggestions for the future**

This article has examined some of the tensions faced by geography education in Scotland. As educators navigate a period of significant curricula and assessment reform and engage with national conversations about the future of Scottish education (Muir, 2022; Hayward, 2023), it is important that a range of perspectives on geography education are engaged with, not least as there is a relatively limited literature base about both Geography and Social Studies education in Scotland. These perspectives should include, but not be limited to, teachers of geography and social studies, teacher educators across both primary and secondary education, academics, children and young people, as well those involved in education policy and curriculum reform. It has been exciting to see these discussions evolving through the work of the Royal Scottish Geographical Society (RSGS) and Scottish Association of Geography Teachers (SAGT), as well as other communities and networks (see for example, RSGS, 2023).

In concluding this article, we suggest three areas that it would be pertinent to focus on through research as these discussions evolve. First, investigating how children, teachers and teacher educators understand geography and its value in education across education phases in Scotland. Second, examining how the relationships between disciplinary and interdisciplinary thinking are constructed and represented in policy, theory and practice in Scotland. Finally, examining how the diverse histories and geographies of Scotland are taught, and why. These three areas can contribute to active discourse about the impacts of curricula constructions of geography on teaching and learning, and teacher education. They can also support critical reflection as to how

geography education informs young people's knowledge about, imaginations of, and actions in, the world. We look forward to seeing the discussions develop!



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