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Towards an educational case for social and political issues in the geography curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Whilst social and political issues have an important role in the geography curriculum, the long-term erosion of the value and insularity of disciplinary knowledge in society and the curriculum has blurred the distinction between educational aims and political advocacy in classrooms. Increasingly, teachers, policymakers, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) instrumentalize the curriculum with respect to their political objectives, including climate change and social injustice. In taking an advocacy approach to pedagogy, they potentially undermine liberal educational objectives, including the development of autonomy and subjectification. Drawing on recent work in philosophy of education (e.g. Biesta; Van Poeck, and Östman) as well as social realist approaches to knowledge, I make a case for teaching about social and political issues on liberal educational grounds. Geography plays a key role in the school curriculum by providing a space for exploring the human condition through the study of people in contrasting environments and cultural systems. Here, we examine how geography teachers can handle issues in a morally careful way and navigate a line between advocacy and educational aims. One key difference examined is the need to treat students as subjects in their own right and to help develop skills of moral enquiry. In practice this means encouraging an open-ended approach, exploring topics (and the values underpinning them) from a range of perspectives, developing sensitivity to difference, and showing tolerance for ideas of which one disapproves. For students to develop agency and moral independence, they must learn *how to think* about social and political issues rather than be told *what to think*.

KEYWORDS: social issues, geography, curriculum, subjectification, liberal, autonomy

INTRODUCTION

The past few years have been a challenging time for UK schools with the curriculum coming under increasing pressure to respond to important political issues related to Brexit, racism, climate change, Covid-19, war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis, and so on. Many schools chose to make curricular changes in response to growing

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campaigns and protests linked to Black Lives Matter and Climate Change. In autumn 2020, the government responded by offering guidance to schools reminding them of the need to take a nonpartisan approach so that when political issues are brought to the attention of pupils, 'they are offered a balanced presentation of opposing views' (Department for Education 2020). However, the guidance went on to proscribe the use of materials produced by organizations with 'extremist political stances', such as those with a commitment to 'overthrow democracy, capitalism, or to end free and fair elections'.

In schools in the USA, an even bigger controversy has arisen over the teaching of critical race theory. Some parents' groups and Republican politicians have objected to the teaching of this ideological theory in what they claim as a one-sided and uncritical way. As of 2020, forty-two US states had passed legislation to restrict the teaching of critical race theory or limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism in the classroom (Schwartz 2021). The curriculum in American schools is highly scrutinized and this recent prolonged episode suggests that politicization is getting worse not better.

When decisions about the curriculum are driven by politics or ideology, this encourages an instrumental approach to curricula that tends to treat students and schools as 'objects of desires and goals determined by others instead of recognising them as persons and institutions in their own right' (Van Poeck and Östman 2020: 1,004), and there is a risk of teaching slipping into indoctrination (Marsden 2001). Yet, geography teachers, amongst others, believe that social and political issues around racism, climate change, migration and development are an essential part of learning geography. So, how can teachers teach about these social issues without politicizing the curriculum and the classroom? Is it possible to draw a line between educational aims and advocacy when teaching about issues? How do issues fit into a geography curriculum? What is their relationship to knowledge and skills?

HOW DO SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS LEARNING GEOGRAPHY?

Geographers study social issues that are geographical in nature—they have spatial dimensions to them, they involve the management of landscapes, urban areas or resources, and they explore human interaction with nature and with each other (connecting people across space). When studying geography these issues are important for understanding the human condition, managing change, and developing capacity for citizenship. Whilst geographers use physical and social sciences to examine the changing nature of the Earth's surface and our interactions with it, geography is also part of the humanities. For many geographers, the varied nature of the subject is what is appealing—we contribute towards broader curriculum questions about what is true, what is beautiful and what is right (Sehgal Cuthbert and Standish 2021)? This means that we, alongside other humanities subjects such as history, religious education, and English literature, explore the human condition—what it means to be human, how people live their lives, how this varies

from place to place, and how these change over time (Livingstone 1992; Creswell 2012). Learning about people and environments includes *an understanding of the challenges people face in their given locality*. These will vary according to climate, vegetation, soil type, landscape morphology, tectonic activity, access to raw materials, access to oceans, scale and shape of political territory, type of governance, political legacy, culture, local conflict, foreign intervention—all important topics of study in geography. For students to learn about the challenges of living in the Sahel, above the Arctic Circle, on islands in the Pacific, the Ganges Delta, or in Dharavi, Mumbai, they must go well beyond their own experience and expand their understanding of human lives and the range of struggles people face across the world. Insights such as these provide perspective on one's own society and enable young people to understand the ways in which their lives may be connected to people in other countries, through trade, migration, or climate change. As stated in the Geographical Association Manifesto, 'Geography underpins a lifelong "conversation" about the Earth as the home of humankind' (2009: 5).

Further, geography is concerned with change—how places, life, and landscapes are changing now, but also what were they like in the past and what will they be like in the future (Rawling 2017). When we explore change, we are interested in differential impacts of that change on people and the environment. Is the change positive or negative, for whom, where, and when? Because geography is focussed on contemporary affairs and the future trajectory of current trends around the world, it has potential to make a significant contribution to the moral education of the child and to prepare them to participate as citizens of a democracy (McPartland 2006). More than most social science subjects, it has the potential to link to news media about conflict, disasters, social trends, social, environmental, and economic problems. In this sense, it can play a similar role to social studies in the curriculum of the USA and South Korea.

To do this successfully, the teacher must proceed carefully and open up the discussion of the issue to examine it from different points of view. Richard Bustin (2007) argues that it is important that students are given real-life stories and issues to explore because, when geography is about the real world it is more engaging. An example is the 2014–16 refugee crisis in North Africa and the Middle East and how European countries should respond. Should they open their borders and let refugees in or is that just displacing the problems people face in their own countries? Should European countries close their borders to protect their citizens and the welfare systems for which they pay? Or is there a solution that sits somewhere in the middle? In order to develop a deep appreciation of this issue and to consider how best to respond, the geography teacher needs to (1) teach about migration, different types and timeframes, the reasons for it, and its short- and long-term impacts, and (2) give students the opportunity to explore different ways for countries and people to respond to migration, and to evaluate arguments for and against it, as well as positions in between.

The relationship between developing knowledge about a topic such as migration and exploring it as an issue is often not fully appreciated, yet this has important

curricular implications. As teachers, we do not just want young people to have opinions, we want them to have *informed* and *considered opinions*. Whilst teachers often use enquiry questions to engage students and focus their learning, they must also plan to teach them about the topic in depth, so that the opinions they form are linked to substantive knowledge (Roberts 2013). To take a common curricular example, a lesson sequence on coasts often begins with physical processes, moving on to different methods of human management of coastlines, and then a place-based example where a management decision needs to be made. Therefore, when studying an issue, students are forced to apply abstract knowledge to a context, and often also synthesize knowledge of different factors—physical effects of processes, the perspectives of different local people (residents, businesses), tourists, environmental groups, costs of management decisions and their long-term consequences. The ability to carefully undertake investigations and to make a judgement about the best course of action with respect to management of resources or the location of a new facility like an airport, is an important aim of geography education (Roberts 2018). Synthesizing and integrating knowledge are the essence of geographical thinking and hence we are teaching students to use structured epistemic thought (Rata 2012) to approach geographical issues (Hanson 2004; Jackson 2006; Holt-Jensen 2009).

This brings us to the third point about developing capacity for democractic citizenship, such as exploring different sides of an argument. Nobody can really say that they understand an issue unless they have considered it from different perspectives. School provides the ideal forum for young people to explore what they think about issues because they can do so in an academic setting separated from the political and social pressures of responsibility for decision-making with real-world consequences. When teaching about moral questions the geography teacher must take a different pedagogical approach from teaching about conceptual knowledge. With the latter we want to work towards a common understanding of concepts (including interpretation and nuance) whilst with moral questions the teacher needs to open up the discussion and 'consider ways of teasing out the moral stances adopted by students in the classroom' as well as the values upon which they are based (McPartland 2006: 173). This is a democratic point because decisions about whether changes are for the better or worse are a matter of perspective, and considering alternatives requires abstraction and imagination. For a democracy to make wise decisions, a country needs a citizenry that is both knowledgeable and capable of abstracting from their own situation to consider what is in the common interest. It is for this reason that Meira Levinson (1999a) and Elizabeth Rata posit that a successful democracy needs people versed in generic principles taught through subjects because 'one is a condition for the other' (Rata 2012: 72).

In summary, being morally careful when teaching about social and political issues means that the teacher seeks to develop their students' understanding of and capacity for thinking through issues by engagement in open enquiry and exposure to a plurality of perspectives. An open approach to questions that are moral and political in nature, means that the teacher does not privilege one perspective over another,

although they should help students to evaluate the merits and weaknesses of different positions.

FINDING THE LINE BETWEEN EDUCATIONAL AIMS AND ADVOCACY IN THE CLASSROOM

Amost three decades ago, Bill Marsden (1997) noted how geography teaching in the UK was suffering an imbalance between social causes, educational processes, and knowledge. Taking an historical perspective on the curriculum, Marsden observed that 'an excessive devotion to the "good causes" of their time, whether religion, the empire or the environment, has served to divert attention away from distinctive geographical content' (1997: 241). He cited the 1980s as a decade of increased 'politicisation of the curriculum' reflecting the growing prominence of social and political issues in the subject, articulated for instance in the journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography Education* (1983–91).

Since this time, the lines between the *intrinsic* purpose of education (learning for its own sake) and its links to *extrinsic* uses have become blurred to the point that many no longer see a distinction. There are several reasons why knowledge has been 'dethroned in society and displaced in curriculum', as explored by Leesa Wheelahan (2010). These include refashioning education as the development of skills or competencies for the 'knowledge economy', the erosion of the boundary between the field of knowledge production and wider society, and postmodern approaches to knowledge that conflate epistemic relations with social relations of knowledge production. Here, we will start with changes in the way society views education, before moving on to trends within academia.

Taking a social realist approach to knowledge, Wheelahan (2010) astutely notes how in the era of globalization and the knowledge economy, knowledge has become more important, yet claims to truth, expertise, and objectivity are increasingly questioned and distrusted. Young people are frequently encouraged to go to university to gain skills and knowledge to make themselves employable for the global marketplace, rather than to seek truth and wisdom. Wheelahan also cites the massive expansion of higher education as part of a process whereby knowledge production has become less exclusive and more transparent, but also less respected and less trusted. She highlights the expansion of academic writing and more public disagreement, alongside the increase in knowledge production outside of universities, the outcome of which is that 'the insulation between science and the public domain has been eroded' (2010: 95). We could add the role of social media, self-publishing, blogging, and other ways in which more voices contribute to debates about social and political issues, as well as science, which in the main is a good thing.

However, whilst access to higher education and knowledge production have increased, there is now more scepticism towards the authority of social institutions and expertise, and the instrumentalization of education for employment, social or mental well-being, and political ends has become common place within society and some education settings (Furedi 2009; Van Poeck and Östman 2020).

Whilst there is not always a clear line between education and advocacy, it is helpful to make a distinction between the more public and collective processes by which a national curriculum is established and how the teacher manages curriculum content in the classroom, although they are connected. At a national level curriculum design must necessarily be linked to a culture, because selection is linked to questions about *who we are* and *what we believe* (Young 2008). Citizens expect that, broadly speaking, public education will reflect the values and beliefs of the country. In multicultural societies, this may be less straightforward and there are occasions when the values of a school clash with those of local parents (such as at Parkfield Community School in Birmingham in 2019). Nevertheless, the UK is a liberal democracy in which a broad education in sciences, arts, and the humanities is valued as a pathway to the development of autonomous individuals who can contribute to democracy, the economy, and community (Levinson 1999a). Responsibility for the national curriculum lies both with the elected government and professional subject communities. Whilst the Department for Education has the final say on the national curriculum, it is written with input from curriculum experts in each subject (subject associations, lecturers, teachers, and school inspectors). The draft national curriculum, including subject content guidance for public exams, is then made available for public consultation. One might criticize this process for not being sufficiently democratic and failing to allow adequate space for minority groups or public interest groups to voice their opinions. However, it is a public process shaped through the political mandate of elected representatives as well as representatives of curriculum subjects. As Meira Levinson argues, here education is being shaped through 'liberal political principles' (1999a: 5). In this sense the curriculum is linked to a political vision, but it is one that places an emphasis on education as a means to develop rational thought and help individuals to see beyond their everyday knowledge and culture into which they were born, although not necessarily to surpass them.

Sociologist Frank Furedi calls this education *socialization*, which 'proceeds by communicating values that are already held widely by the older generation in society' (2009: 120). This includes a 'hidden curriculum' that reflects social norms and systems, such as democracy, welfare, tolerance, and maybe even capitalism, although hopefully with space for critical reflection. He differentiates education as socialization from *social engineering*, which is devoted to 'promoting values that are as yet weak, but which proponents believe are necessary for society to move forwards' (p. 120).

The latter is more likely to involve an element of advocacy because it treats pupils as a means to extrinsic political ends. Instead of starting with educational questions (what should these pupils learn to develop their intellectual capabilities and subjectivity?), the teacher is leading with a political question (how can I engage pupils' interest in this issue and promote values and action to resolve it?). This raises a legitimate question; on what basis does a teacher or teachers have the legitimacy to use their position of authority to change society in a direction of their choosing?

Activist pedagogy collapses the distinction between collective responsibility for maintaining a subject curriculum and the personal perspectives of teachers, thus asserting political issues (such as racism and climate change) as the basis for curriculum selection.

Next, we explore the roots of social activism in education before moving on to some curricular examples of instrumental approaches to teaching social and political issues in geography and discuss the ways in which this can potentially limit the development of students' agency or subjectivity.

Reconstructionism is an established educational tradition that since the mid-twentieth century has focussed on addressing social problems through education. Drawing on critical theory, Paulo Freire (1921–97) championed education as a means to challenge the Brazilian political system and to escape poverty and oppression, and, in the process, he founded Critical Pedagogy. In geography, this tradition is reflected in discourses for global and ecological citizenship education by geographers such as David Hicks (2014) and John Huckle (2020), as well as in the aforementioned journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography Education*. All teachers need to handle social and political issues in a morally careful way and be mindful not to let their teaching slip into indoctrination, but this is especially true for those advocating for predetermined social reform. Hopwood (2022) suggests that they can do this through encouraging a 'culture of argument', a 'tone of uncertainty' (there is always more to learn), and 'expressing viewpoints'. In a liberal democracy, more partisan, reconstructionist approaches to teaching are usually kept in check through students' exposure to contrasting political ideas. However, to an important degree, this situation has changed over the past few decades as higher education has become less politically diverse—both in terms of personnel and through the growing influence of Critical Social Theory (CST) (Wheelahan 2010; Williams 2016).

Originating in the mid-1990s, CST was formed from an amalgamation of Critical Theory and Social Theory, encompassing a set of academic approaches including anarchism, anticolonialism, critical race theory, environmentalism, feminism, Marxism, post-Marxism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and socialism (Berg 2010). Critical theory seeks to explore tensions in modernity, drawing on Marx and Kant. Whilst CST is clearly a broad church of different theoretical approaches, a common theme is examining the relations between structures, language, and how these impact on individual lives. The roots of CST are in postmodernism emphasizing society, and individuals, as a product of systems of power and hierarchies of knowledge, the power of language and the relatedness of discourse and reality. Because inequality and oppression are 'structural', CST focusses on critiquing notions of power and privilege, developing a full understanding of oppression, both objective and subjective (Leonardo 2004). In the context of education, Critical Pedagogy preferences knowledge transformation over knowledge transmission. Here Leonardo suggests that a key aim is to cultivate the student's ability to question, deconstruct, and then reconstruct knowledge in the interest of emancipation, as defined by the teacher (2004).

In geography, Berg suggests that critical human geography takes 'a shared commitment to a broadly conceived emancipatory politics, progressive social change, and the use of a range of critical socio-geographic theories' to promote 'Social Justice' through education (2010).

Through the lens of CST, the *curriculum* tends to be viewed as a projection of the perspective of those in power, rather than providing access to better, more truthful knowledge about humanity and the world. Thus, in exploring the relationship between culture, power, and the curriculum, Michael Apple felt it apt to replace the question 'What knowledge is of most worth?' with 'Whose knowledge is of most worth?' (Apple 2003: 7). Social realism counters the approach to knowledge in CST, recognizing that in practice curriculum knowledge may lie somewhere in between—it is both a social construct, reflecting socially sanctioned knowledge, and has objective qualities (Young 2008; Young and Muller 2016). As Alexander posits:

> Theoretical knowledge can never be anything other than the socially rooted efforts of historical agents. But this social character of knowledge does not negate the possibility of developing either generalised categories or increasingly disciplined, impersonal and critical modes of evaluation. (Alexander 1995: 91)

The growing influence of this standpoint theory can be seen in the decolonizing and decolonial discourses, which highlight the connections between disciplinary knowledge and neocolonial power and calls for university and school curricula to be replaced by a plurality of knowledges that reflect the perspectives of different groups of people in society (Jazeel 2017; Radcliffe 2017; Rudolph et al. 2018). Whilst academic and school curricula should be open to challenge and debate through democratic channels, CST challenges the concept of a common curriculum set by those in positions of power and encourages teaching from a political standpoint rather than exposing students to a plurality of perspectives (Muller 2000). As Leonardo notes of CST, 'A language of critique is never simply about clarity, but is always bound up with a political project' (2004: 14).

In an article examining the place of 'critical geography' in the school curriculum, Aiden Hesslewood suggests that 'most geography graduates since the 1990s—from human geography at least—had a broadly "leftist" university education, when critical geography increasingly shaped academic thinking and practice' (2021: 109). Citing Natalie Oswin, Hesslewood asserts that given what geography teachers know about global inequalities and how a global minority is denying the majority access to resources and opportunities—including land, home, privacy, public space, education, nutrients, water, security, health, territory, national belonging, and dignity—they should not 'try to become more neutral' (2021: 110). He posits: '[H]ow can a geography education remain apolitical when neoliberal politics have helped engender this status quo?' (p. 110). As examples of this approach, Hesslewood cites calls for antiracist and anticolonial approaches to pedagogy and curriculum in geography, such as those proposed by Puttick and Murrey (2020) and the Decolonising Geography Education Group (2022). Set up in response to Covid-19 and the police killing of George Floyd in the USA, 'The Decolonising Geography website contributes

to developing curricula that challenge "universal truths" and "objective knowledge" in geography by offering: *pedagogical techniques* to empower students to co-create knowledge and build critical geographies; a space for *critical reflection* on the content we teach in geography education' (2022, my emphasis).

My argument here is that whilst reconstructionism in education, and specifically in geography, has a history stretching over a few decades, in recent years an advocacy approach to pedagogy has become more explicit and central in the curriculum, aided by the erosion of the special status and insulation of disciplinary and expert fields of knowledge, leading to the conflation of objective knowledge and perspective discussed above. Denying a distinction between the realms of education and advocacy, being an 'activist' or 'radical' teacher is often openly celebrated.

Illustrative of an advocacy approach to pedagogy are John Huckle's (2020) *Critical School Geography* and Paul Turner's (2019) *Radical Geography*. Huckle and Turner shared their thinking behind their 'radical' approaches to teaching geography in a recent Geographical Association podcast. Here, they articulate some interesting and challenging ideas, such as 'global democratization', 'redistributing power and wealth', and 'exploring how power works in society' as well as a 'critical pedagogy' in which 'knowledge is debated and questioned' through a 'discursive approach' (Turner and Huckle 2020). Most teachers welcome a more discursive approach to knowledge and in the classroom should be willing to explore some left-field ideas for social change (from a variety of political perspectives). However, Huckle and Turner are also explicit that their 'critical pedagogy' is linked to CST and an activist agenda the aims of which are for 'eroding the power of elites', 'constitutional reform', and 'putting nature first' (2020).

At the level of the school curriculum, we find advocacy in geography schemes of work linked to climate change, fair trade, and the development work of NGOs like Oxfam and Christian Aid. The United Nations (UN) has created a climate change course for teachers, linked with private company Harwood Education, which aims to promote sustainable living, recycling, and other pro-environmental behaviours. Angus Mackay, head of the UN Climate Change Learn Secretariat claims that '[t]he classroom is the new frontline in scaling up the response to climate change' (UNITAR 2022). The organization reports that over 3,000 UK-based teachers have taken its course and become certified 'climate change teachers'. Of course, a skilled teacher can take any resource, regardless of who produced it, and incorporate it into a critical enquiry that explores different approaches to addressing climate change or development. In this example, teachers are being trained and versed in curricular resources produced by a Western-dominated institution with its own political agenda. Yet, there has been little in the way of critical discussion about the UN's agenda and how this translates into its teaching materials for schools.

Instrumentalizing education as part of a wider strategy to address climate change is also now government policy in England. In 2021, the Department for Education published *Sustainability and Climate Change: A Strategy for the Education and Children's Services Systems* (2021). At the start of this article, we noted the government's stated commitment to teacher impartiality in education. Yet, when it comes

to climate change it views schools as sites for promoting its policy responses including reducing environmental footprints, decarbonization, supporting the UN sustainability goals, and working towards Net Zero. Whilst there is a strong scientific consensus about the causes and trends associated with climate change, there is much disagreement about the best way to address climate change, and how to balance this alongside other priorities, such as reducing poverty and managing a cost-of-living crisis. Why should schools be tasked with promoting the government's policy agenda on climate change? As Levinson (1999a) notes, when government (noneducation) policy infuses education, this is an abuse of state power, rather than allowing teachers the freedom to explore a range of policy responses to climate change.

Too often, schemes of work produced in schools in England are one-sided and ahistorical about industrial development, fast fashion, plastics, or working in sweatshops, failing to consider development, and progress from a historical perspective (Alcock 2019). Geographer Charles Rawding (2016) expresses concern about the subject's promotion of Green and anticapitalist ideology. He asks, 'Are classroom discussions of environmental geography too emotional and simplistic? Has school Geography become a vehicle for promoting Green lifestyles and suggesting that Western models of development are unsustainable? Is a focus on sustainable development fostering an anti-modern, anti-development view of the world?' (2016: 12). There is plentiful evidence to suggest that the answer to these questions is in the affirmative (Lambert and Morgan 2011; Standish 2017; Alcock 2019).

These examples of activist pedagogy are what Michael Hand (2018) would call *directive* moral instruction, where '*moral formation*' (subscription to standards) is elevated above '*moral inquiry*' about the justification for those standards. Whilst teachers will use a combination of 'moral formation' and 'moral inquiry', Hand makes a distinction between moral standards where there is a consensus about the standard, if not always its application (e.g. cheating, stealing), and those where there is reasonable disagreement between reasonable people. Nearly all social and political issues in geography will fall into the latter category—for instance, there is near universal agreement that global warming is a problem for societies, but disagreement about how best to respond. Hand rightfully notes that it is unethical for teachers to present social and political issues in a one-sided fashion and not to expose students to the plurality of perspectives held within society. Such 'instrumentalization' of education, 'renders students, schools and universities into objects of desires and goals determined by others instead of recognising them as persons and institutions in their own right' (Van Poeck and Östman 2020: 1,004), is detrimental to their moral education (Hand 2018), and undermines key principles of liberal education in democracies (Levinson 1999a).

HOW DO WE BUILD SUBJECTIVITY AND PREPARE STUDENTS FOR DEMOCRACY?

We should expect that schools will reflect the values of the society in which they are based. In liberal democracies such as the UK, these include freedom of individual

thought and choice (Levinson 1999a; Biesta and Säfström 2011) and pluralism—exposure to a range of ideas, arguments, and moral frameworks (Todd 2011), which involves developing habits of listening, reasoning, debating, and tolerating different ideas and moral frameworks (Levinson 1999a), and providing opportunities for young people to initiate their own ideas and change society in their own image (Arendt and Kohn 1968 [2006]; Biesta 2012).

Meira Levinson defines individual autonomy as 'the capacity self-critically to evaluate one's values and ends with the possibility of revising and then realising them' (1999b: 48). Whilst at university students might expect to encounter courses that are taught through one or more particular political framework, such as Radical Geography (Peet 1998); schools are for children who are still forming their values and ideas and impressionable to their teachers who act *in loco parentis*. To help children and adolescents form their opinions, values, dispositions, and identity, teachers need to create opportunities for them to explore political and social issues and to teach students how to distinguish between knowledge, belief, and opinion (Hopwood 2022). When a teacher is helping students to *explore* and *understand* contrasting positions on social and political ideas, or moral frameworks, they are enhancing the students' capacity for moral and political reasoning; they are helping the individual to develop the capacity for autonomy (Levinson 1999a). The American academic Fish (2007) uses the phrase that the instructor 'academicizes' the matter at hand, meaning it is turned into an 'object of study' rather than something to pronounce upon. To do this requires that teachers make a case for a clearer boundary between education and society, rejecting the instrumentalist expectations that schools are there to fix society's problems.

An example of this approach is given by Van Poeck and Östman (2020) who discuss the Ancient Greek scholastic meaning of schools as a space for free, non-productive time (in the material sense), that is separated from the domains of society (*polis*) and the household (*oikos*) (Masschelein and Simons 2013). Here, we can distinguish between school as a space for study and practice versus the instrumentalist approach, which views schools as a site to remedy society's problems. The scholastic approach does not inhibit engagement with contemporary issues. It does so in a forum that is free from the responsibility for taking political decisions. Masschelein and Simons use the metaphor of the teacher bringing something to the table and letting it go: 'Making it free means bringing things to the table for study and practice, so that the students can give their own meaning to it' (Masschelein and Simons 2013: 87, quoted in Van Poeck and Östman 2020: 1,007). This does not mean taking a morally neutral position. Rather, the teacher works with the students to help them understand the strengths and weaknesses of different arguments and their likely consequences.

There are several ways that the teacher can do this, as David Mitchell (2018) explains in his writing on teaching controversial issues in geography. Mitchell suggests that the teacher can take a position of procedural neutrality, a balanced approach, committed impartiality (where the teacher reveals their opinions without imposing them), or 'devil's advocate'. So, even if the teacher does reveal their own views on a

controversial issue, they do so in a way that does not inhibit the exploration and examination of different perspectives and arguments. When doing so, it is important that the teacher encourages students to make a distinction between *ideas* and *the person* who is expressing them, so that criticism of an argument is not seen as criticism of a person (Malik 2020). Here, the teacher is fostering the dispositions and habits, a sense of tolerance for pluralism and conflicting opinions, needed for participation in a liberal democracy (Levinson 1999a).

As Johannes Drerup explains, tolerance as a democratic virtue is linked to liberal education because of the mutually supportive preconditions of education for tolerance as a democratic virtue and personal autonomy and the virtue of democratic toleration (Drerup 2018: 520). He continues, 'toleration can be regarded as a democratic virtue because it is a constitutive precondition for a peaceful coexistence and a facilitating factor within democratic processes of decision-making and debates about political questions' (p. 521). Tolerance of ideas has an established tradition in education systems of liberal democracies. Helen Keller once referred to toleration as 'the highest result of education' (2012: 99). Yet, Drerup argues that it is not only an aim of education, but also a *pedagogical attitude and practice*. Beyond the promotion of political autonomy in the classroom, Drerup asserts the need to 'foster capacities and dispositions which constitute central elements of personal autonomy', including the capacity to critically reflect on and distance oneself from one's reasons, beliefs and emotional dispositions in light of higher order principles, reasons and values' (Drerup 2018: 522). As he suggests, pedagogically, this is not just a matter of autonomy, but one of capacity building—knowledge of moral arguments and exposure to different notions of the good, fostering skills of listening, reason, and debate, and dispositions of tolerance and respect. It is akin to the notion of subjectivity through education or what Biesta (2012) terms *subjectification*.

It is for this reason that teachers, and teacher educators, must work to understand the difference between the realms of education and political advocacy, rather than imagining that there is no clear distinction. This does not mean that we do not acknowledge that many of the concepts and ideas discussed in school are indeed political (like democracy, nation states, development, inequality, racism, capitalism), that they have political consequences outside of the classroom, and that curriculum selection is shaped by what we value and believe, which is a matter of public debate *and* the collective responsibility of the teaching profession. The difference is a matter of context and aims—a teacher must ensure that a classroom is a learning environment for exploring and scrutinizing ideas, not for advocacy or promoting ideologies.

WHICH SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES TO INCLUDE IN THE GEOGRAPHY CURRICULUM?

There is another important question for teachers, as curriculum makers, to consider about teaching social and political issues in geography: which issues to teach and when to teach them? Some teachers express concern that issues can take over the curriculum and clearly there is a need to plan for exploring topics and

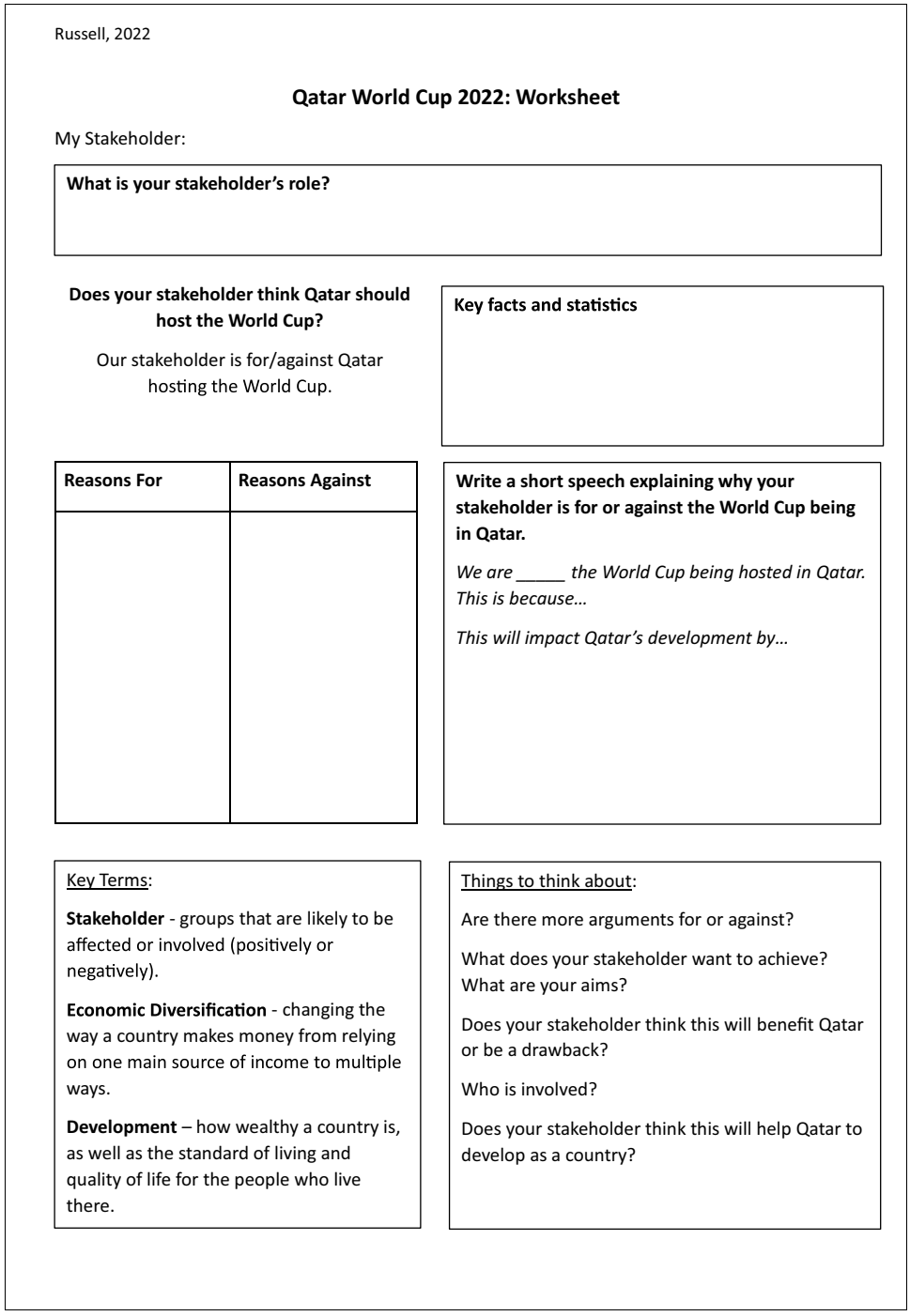
In this lesson students will be introduced to the tensions and conflict surrounding the Middle East, specifically focussing and zooming into the current situation of Qatar. Initially, students will be expected to develop an understanding of the range of sources of conflict and the various categories of tensions. This lesson aims to extend students potentially narrow view of conflict between nations as a physical materialisation of war to more abstract ideas such as breeches of human rights. As mentioned, using the example of the World Cup in Qatar, this mini 2 sequence of lessons will aim to both illustrate how such an event can encourage the development of a nation but also result in conflict. Students will hopefully be able to acknowledge these contrasting elements and make a judgement on the advantages and disadvantages of the event for Qatar and its population based on the contrasting interests of various stakeholders involved.

Figure 1. Qatar World Cup 2022: Lesson background and aims.

developing knowledge and skills in a curriculum. Above, we related the study of issues to good aims for geographical education. We suggested that they are a part of *understanding the challenges people face in their given locality*. These can be economic, environmental, social, political, or a combination of these types. Many countries and places around the world have challenges that are specific to their location or level of development, including: access to water in arid regions, common pathways for tropical storms, competing religious or political interests, common migration routes, an ageing population, low-lying land, a monsoon climate, resource abundance, or scarcity, poverty, disease, and underdevelopment. Of course, students of geography do not need to study all these examples. A geography curriculum should introduce them to a diverse range of places, environments, and cultures from around the world, so that they begin to understand the varied nature of challenges people face in their locality.

We also said that geographical issues arise from change. This could be an economic change, such as opening up a place to tourism or the loss of a former economic activity, like the London Docklands. A popular political topic in geography lessons over recent years has been Brexit and its implications for the UK and Europe. Other popular topics in geography curricula include coping with disease or viruses such as Ebola and Covid-19, migration, social injustice related to race or class, and the impacts of climate change on people and environments. The effects of change have differential impacts on people. Becoming mindful of different stakeholders, their respective interests, and perspectives, helps students to learn to abstract from personal experience and consider the interests and perspectives of others.

One recent example of a controversial issue taught in geography lessons was Qatar's hosting of the 2022 football World Cup. As the tournament approached, the UK media was full of stories about human rights issues in the country and the treatment of migrant workers who helped to build the stadiums for the tournament. This provided a good opportunity for geography teachers to help their pupils to examine the issues at stake when countries with different values and approaches to workers' rights collaborate over a sporting event. This sample lesson from a



Russell, 2022

Qatar World Cup 2022: Worksheet

My Stakeholder:

What is your stakeholder's role?

Does your stakeholder think Qatar should host the World Cup?

Our stakeholder is for/against Qatar hosting the World Cup.

Key facts and statistics

Reasons For	**Reasons Against**

Write a short speech explaining why your stakeholder is for or against the World Cup being in Qatar.

We are _____ the World Cup being hosted in Qatar. This is because…

This will impact Qatar's development by…

Key Terms:

Stakeholder - groups that are likely to be affected or involved (positively or negatively).

Economic Diversification - changing the way a country makes money from relying on one main source of income to multiple ways.

Development – how wealthy a country is, as well as the standard of living and quality of life for the people who live there.

Things to think about:

Are there more arguments for or against?

What does your stakeholder want to achieve? What are your aims?

Does your stakeholder think this will benefit Qatar or be a drawback?

Who is involved?

Does your stakeholder think this will help Qatar to develop as a country?

Figure 2. Qatar World Cup 2022 Worksheet (Russell 2023).

student teacher is titled: Should Qatar host the 2022 World Cup? (Russell 2023).[1] Fig. 1 provides an introduction and aims for the lesson. The students were divided

[1] I am very grateful to Eve Russell for granting me permission to cite this material.

into groups with each taking on the role of a different stakeholder: Qatar tourist board, Economic Growth and Development Team, human rights activist, migrant workers, FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) representative and World Cup sponsors. Each group was given a set of resources (articles and fact sheets) to help them understand the key issues and the perspectives of their stakeholders. Students worked together to share ideas and formulate arguments for and against Qatar hosting the World Cup (Fig. 2). When this work had been completed, the teacher hosted a debate in which stakeholders were able to share and respond to different views and arguments. In the lesson, pupils were able to tease out the tensions between the perspectives of outsiders and visitors to Qatar versus those who wanted to defend its path to development and right to cultural differences.

Good geography education requires selection and presentation of issues that genuinely reflect the concerns and voices of people from places of study. As discussed above, the geography curriculum in England has sometimes been guilty of presenting issues in a one-sided fashion, often solely from a Western perspective.

So here is a test for teachers. Do the social issues in your curriculum reflect the concerns of people in the places you are studying, or do they express the concerns of those in the UK and other Western societies (also sometimes referred to as 'Global Issues' (Standish 2012))? If it is more the latter, then you may be limiting the potential of the subject to truly explore and capture the nature of people in the places they live. Further, your curriculum will be less inclusive to people from nonWestern countries who may hold different values and attitudes. Listening to and understanding the voices of people in different countries, as well as the students we teach, means treating them as *subjects in their own right*, rather than objects through which we promote a political agenda for change. For instance, recognizing that for people in many countries, climate change is a less immediate political priority behind more pressing issues of education, affordable and nutritious food, healthcare, job opportunities, and responsive government (United Nations 2015).

This does not mean that we cannot also study key geographical issues in the UK, such as inequality, healthcare, energy production and consumption, the location of new airports and other infrastructure, or our relationship with other European countries. When doing so, again, students should be encouraged to explore the perspectives of different stakeholders—local residents, businesses, service providers, as well as national needs and priorities.

CONCLUSION

The erosion of the value of disciplinary knowledge in the curriculum and the subsequent blurring of the distinction between theoretical knowledge and personal knowledge or perspective has challenged the foundations of liberal education, especially the space needed for the development of autonomous individuals. There is a risk that instrumental approaches to education, as advocated by UK government, teacher

educators, and activist teachers, turn schools into a space for political action, with harmful consequences for the lives of children and teachers. As Hannah Arendt noted, a certain 'destruction of the real living space occurs whenever the attempt is made to turn children themselves into a kind of world' (Arendt and Kohn 1968 [2006]: 183). In Arendt's view, what is destroyed by the attempt to treat children as a real part of the public and political domain, to treat them like adults, is the space and time they need to mature and grow into this realm. Arendt makes the case for schools as 'the institutions that we interpose between the private domain of home and the world in order to make the transition from the family to the world' (p. 185). For Arendt, schools are not sites of action in the world, but are 'hidden from the world' to create a safe space for learning, testing ideas, and maturation. By 'hidden from the world' she does not mean that teachers should avoid engaging pupils in debates about challenging issues and scary events taking place around the world. On the contrary, schools provide 'concealed' environments in which children can be exposed to different points of view and belief systems where they can engage in thought and discussion without being held to public account for their views and decisions.

The development of autonomy, necessary for maturation and assuming the responsibilities of adult citizenship, thus depends on a degree of separation between the realms of education and political action, as well as the distinction between children and adults with respect to political responsibility. This means that geography teachers and other educators need to start with the educational principles and values that underpin schooling in liberal democracies rather than the issues themselves. As Levinson, Hand, Biesta, and others show, this means focussing curriculum aims on the development of autonomy and subjectification through exposure to a plurality of conceptions of the good, engagement in moral reasoning about values and exploring different arguments about social and political issues, and developing habits and dispositions, such as tolerance and civility, conducive to conduct in a collaborative community. Teachers can do this by framing curriculum selection in educational terms: which contemporary social and political issues are important for my students to learn about this place or region and how can I ensure that they develop a deep understanding of what is at stake with this issue and the range of potential ways forward?

When approaching the key social and political issues of our time, the error activist teachers and policymakers make is to view *what* young people think and believe as more important than teaching them *how* to think about issues and moral questions. As we have seen, this approach objectifies young people rather than seeks to develop their capacity for moral enquiry and subjectivity. Over the course of a lifetime, the key social and political issues of the day will change. Only through the development of autonomy and capacity for reasoning do schools prepare students to face issues of the future.

If geography teachers are to make a valuable contribution to our understanding of the human condition, they need to approach social issues with an open mind, to model tolerance for ideas they disapprove of, and to demonstrate sensitivity to the needs and desires of people who live by different culture systems and in different

environmental conditions. If they do this well and allow students the freedom to explore ideas and to disagree, they will be well on the way to helping young people find their voice and develop their subjectivity, preparing them for their future role as responsible citizens.

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