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The Prospects for School Geography in England

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Introduction

In England, recent years have seen the re-emergence of a series of curriculum debates which are concerned with the question of what knowledge, skills and values should be taught in schools. In the face of widespread criticism that the national curriculum was in need of renewal, there have been several interventions and proposals for change. For example, from the official perspective, in 2004 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) launched its 'Futures' programme which was concerned with how the school curriculum should respond to a series of 'challenges' presented by the 21st century, and which informed the eventual revised national curriculum to be taught in schools from September 2008 (see http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/). There is increased interest in curriculum innovation, and, again as an example, the Royal Society of Arts has developed an alternative curriculum named *Opening Minds,* based on five 'competences' that are deemed

[1] This paper is adapted from a number of projects in the Geographical Association and Institute of Education, University of London (IoE), and I acknowledge in particular inputs from Dr John Morgan, the person with whom I share my role at the IoE.

essential to successful adulthood (see for example, http://www.openingminds.org.uk/Welcome.html). One of the impacts of such interventions – and there are more, such as Enquiring Minds from FutureLab (see for example http://www.enquiringminds.org.uk/), is that subject specialist teachers of geography have new opportunities, but also face renewed challenges as the subject based curriculum is replaced in many schools with skills and competence based approaches to integrated curriculum design.

These developments are not uniformly welcomed (see Lambert 2008), and in this paper we discuss one, relatively high profile critique of recent curriculum reforms, reported in a pamphlet called the 'Corruption of the Curriculum'. We will focus on its criticisms of curriculum developments in school geography, a subject which, at the time of writing, is experiencing a 'crisis', which may yet effect its future in the school curriculum. To be sure, the number of candidates sitting examinations at 16 and 18 has declined significantly in recent years, and schools are no longer required to offer geography as an option beyond the age of 14. The UK-government's inspection agency, Ofsted, recently reported on the poor quality of geography teaching in schools, particularly in primary schools and KS3 (11-14 years) (Ofsted 2008).

The Corruption of the Curriculum was published by the think-tank Civitas (Whelan 2007). The book is an edited collection which includes an introduction by Frank Furedi and chapters on English, Geography, History, Foreign Languages, Mathematics and Science. The contributors share the belief that there has been a steady erosion in England of important educational principles and ideals: 'Over the past two decades the school curriculum has become estranged from the challenge of educating children' (p 1). This, the authors argue, has been the consequence of government intervention in the

school curriculum, for teachers are no longer free to 'impart a body of academic knowledge to their students' (Civitas press release 11th June 2007, p1). According to the book:

- Science is no longer about teaching established and accepted scientific knowledge ('truth') but instead equipping students with a 'scientific literacy' that allows them to question established ideas.
- Foreign languages are no longer concerned with opening up other cultures and literatures, but limited to functional skills
- History is no longer concerned with narrative and the big sweep of chronology, but with inauthentic comprehension exercises of 'sources a-f'.
- Geography is 'no longer about maps' but indoctrinating young people with 'environmentalism' in the name of 'global citizenship'.

The case against contemporary school geography

The chapter on geography was written by Alex Standish, who, in a series of newspaper and web articles published since 2000, has consistently challenged what he sees as political interference in school geography and the tendency to replace a core body of knowledge and understanding with a relativist focus on 'values'. In this section, drawing from some of Standish's articles, the main points that Standish levels at school geography are summarized.

Standish (2007a) argues that the school geography curriculum is being 'politicised' with a serious effect on the intellectual development of pupils. He dates this trend to the mid-1990s when 'several factors came together that gave rise to the new geography curriculum'. There were:

(1) The declining interest in the subject in schools, which meant that geographical associations and some geographers began portraying the subject as a suitable vehicle for delivering the themes of global citizenship; responsibility for the environment, fighting social injustice, promoting cultural diversity and tolerance, and human rights.

(2) Contemporaneous government initiatives to develop a citizenship national curriculum.

(3) The tendency for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) concerned with global issues to latch onto the notion of global citizenship education to promote their concerns.

Standish thinks that the geography curriculum became a fertile site for these political concerns, and that some teachers have welcomed these developments because the themes of global citizenship have filled a moral vacuum:

> "Rather than teach pupils difficult and abstract theories about landscape formation, climate, urbanisation, economic development etc, they have opted to engage pupils' interest in trendy topics like global warming, fair trade, and poverty reduction" (Standish 2007a; no page numbers).

Standish highlights two examples of where this has happened. The first is a 'pilot' OCR Geography GCSE where pupils get the chance to study, for example, 'geography in the news' or investigate what Tesco is doing to improve its environmental credentials. The second is the Geographical Association's publication *Geography: teaching the global dimension* (DEA, 2004) which contains an activity that requires pupils to calculate their 'ecological footprint'. For Standish, the only possible outcome of such an activity is to replace learning about how the world is changing with lessons in personal morality.

Standish identifies three concerns with this issues-based approach to the teaching of geography. First, it devalues subject knowledge. It replaces much of the geography curriculum with lessons in self-exploration and it encourages students to think of knowledge as something fluid and to question the validity and sources of knowledge. Second, the focus on values is intrusive and discourages independent thought. There is a strong moral imperative behind the examination of values in that the messages are that pupils should consume less, buy environmentally friendly or fair trade products and view western intervention in the South as a positive process. In this way, global citizenship education seeks 'to shape the personalities of individuals themselves'. Third, the treatment of global issues offers misleading accounts of how the world works. For example, it is 'deceptive to tell young people that by changing their consumption patterns they can change the world'. Offering simplistic messages may have the effect of leading young people to be more disillusioned with politics and the potential of humanity to change the world for the better as their individual actions will not have the effect they hoped for.

In some ways Standish's observations offer important warnings, since they alert geography teachers to the danger of teaching geography in what we have described elsewhere as in a 'morally careless'

manner (Morgan and Lambert 2005). Standish argues for a more rigorous school geography and deeper learning, adding:

> 'Such learning only comes from a comprehensive education that offers pupils not only knowledge about the world but a theoretical and conceptual framework through which they can situate ideas. This framework is sorely lacking in many geography textbooks today'. (Standish 2007 p 55)

This is a criticism that many geographers in school will recognize and have some sympathy for – and has been recognized to some degree by the government, which has been anxious in their secondary curriculum revisions to emphasise the 'key concepts' or 'big ideas' of subjects. Not that the KS3 programme of study for geography really does provide 'a theoretical and conceptual framework'. At best, it proposes seven broad ideas[2] that arguably suggests an 'architecture' for the subject. But this is not a theoretical framework. Indeed, in this sense it encourages a theoretical and conceptual pluralism, for what is meant by 'space' (for example) depends very much on how it is theorized, and the purpose to which we put this idea. Nevertheless, the 2008 programme of study represents a new opportunity for this kind of discussion. However, that Standish's arguments contribute to a wider attack, on the way government interference has contributed to the demise of traditional subject areas in schools, perhaps negates any credit that may be claimed for these reforms.

Having set out Standish's arguments about the current state of geography teaching in school, we shall move to some reflections on the nature of a critical approach to geography teaching and the place of geography, as a subject discipline, in the school curriculum.

[2] place, space, scale, interdependence, cultural diversity, human and physical processes, environmental interactions and sustainable development

The case for geography in schools

A strong case can be made for geography in schools. During the early 1980s, the government of the day began steering a course to introduce to England a national curriculum, for the first time in its history. Things then looked very bleak for geography, for the subject appeared not to feature in the government's thinking. Strenuous lobbying, particularly by the GA, influenced the national debate. Playing a central role in this was a carefully argued case for geography (Bailey and Binns 1987). This addressed seven questions posed by the then Secretary of State for Education, Sir Keith Joseph, who challenged the GA to adopt a 'thinking agenda' (ibid p6) about geography in schools. The book contains a powerful statement of school geography's purpose and interestingly, a list of 'expectations in geography' for children at ages 7, 11, 14 and 16 years.

Things never stand still however, and the usefulness of taking on board the case *against* geography, such as that advanced by Standish above, is that it requires us to re-examine the assumptions that may lie underneath the case we have made for geography in schools in the past: Are they still intact? Have they been subverted in any way?

As we have seen geography is again facing challenging circumstances in schools and colleges in England and, notwithstanding Standish's case outlined above, the GA has, as an element of its strategy on the national stage, been talking a lot about 'Living Geography' (Mitchell forthcoming) as a means to re-position geography in the consciousness of teachers and head-teachers in schools: a piece of mild 're-branding' and a means to an end. The goal is of course the survival of geographical

thinking in the school curriculum – but in fact, *not* as an end in itself (which may worry critiques such as Alex Standish). Lively and vibrant geography is seen as a means to contribute significantly to the educational experience of young people. In advancing the case for living geography we could do worse than remind ourselves of arguments that were put over 20 years ago now (Bailey and Binns 1986) about the subject's role as a medium of education (see also Rawling 2001 for a discussion of the changing policy context over the intervening years).

Geography as a school subject

Before coming to a fuller definition of what we mean by 'living geography', we need to dwell a little more on the nature of geography as a school subject. Time was, when geography in school was nothing more, or less, than a reduced form of the subject at large. Geography was considered to be mainly a matter of exploration, resulting in the accumulation and assemblage of knowledge about the world. It was a matter of filling in the map (much of which was coloured red) with useful information. It was self-evidently important to teach a selection of this on the school curriculum – and the university discipline was born, partly to ensure a supply of educated teachers.

Through the first half of the twentieth century several influential school textbooks were written by leading academics. Until later in the twentieth century, examinations were still strongly influenced by academics. Neither is true today. There is now a disconnection between school and university geography which has become more pronounced since, roughly, the bureaucratising of the school curriculum and examinations since the Education Reform Act of 1988. Since that time, as we have seen, we have also seen a rapid growth in 'genericism' in schools, where subjects seem less important and generic skills become all important. These currents and trends place school

geography, indeed any school subject, at risk: for where is its conceptual heart? From where does the school subject gets its theoretical nourishment?

Living geography is concerned with learning about the world through a geographical lens. The precise content selection (*what* is worthwhile, relevant and useful to teach) is best left to teachers locally, but 'content' decisions cannot be divorced entirely from 'process' decisions[3]. How the teaching is arranged is crucial, and not, definitely not, to be done in a way that apes the past 'assemblage of information' approach of the past. As mentioned in the previous section, school geography needs to be seen in the particular context of addressing educational aims. This means we can certainly take account of advances made in geography as a discipline, but also the advances in our thinking about how children learn, their interests and motivations and developments in pedagogy. These perspectives tend to emphasise enquiry learning and pedagogies that are essentially dialogic. This would include strategies that provide students opportunities to talk with each other, such as in decision making activities for example, but also strategies that provide teachers with opportunities to learn what students have made of their learning encounters and experiences. An 'education for conversation' is still a powerful metaphor. The conversation is strengthened considerably when underpinned by living geography which offers coherence, purpose and perspective.

Take for example 'exploration' and the 'assemblage of knowledge', terminology describing geography (and school geography) in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries (sometimes in ways we now find most uncomfortable). In the modern idiom these are *translatable*

[3] Margin note. Margaret Roberts (2003) brings this argument together brilliantly and with many practical illustrations and examples in Learning through enquiry from the Geographical Association (reprinted 2008)

to ‘enquiry’ and ‘knowledge creation’. Extending the point, the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) recently strongly argued that

> ‘(S)ubjects constitute the available ways we have of exploring and interpreting the world of subjective experience, of analysing the social environment and of making sense of the natural world. It is through subject study that learners acquire historical, scientific, mathematical and other forms of understanding; and it is through subject study that learners develop the capacity to engage in the distinctive modes of investigation and analysis through which human experience is differentiated and extensions of human understanding are achieved’.[4]

Thus, school geography – living geography – is not concerned with delivering slabs of content as an end in itself (a caricature of school subjects that remains remarkably persistent), but with inducting young people into geographical enquiry and how to ‘think geographically’.

Geography is therefore a vital school subject. It is about the real world, studied directly though virtual and real images, using primary and secondary data of all kinds. It is guided by the overall goal of deepening and broadening young people’s understandings of the world in which they live and will inherit. Geographical enquiry often culminates in forms of decision making activity which requires of students to make sharp observations and the capacity to analyse, evaluate and synthesise. Enquiries are communicated using a wide range of graphical techniques, including maps, diagrams and various forms of the written word. It is little wonder that students with good geography qualifications are

[4] Kirk G and Broadhead P (2007) *Every Child Matters and Teacher Education: A UCET Position Paper*, London: UCET Occasional Paper No 17, (para 39)

sought after by a bewildering range of employers, for studying geography denotes applicable knowledge and useful intellectual and practical skills.

School geography – living geography

We are now, almost, in a position to specify living geography. To start with, let us return to a statement from an eminent academic geographer, stating his take on geography in education near the end of the twentieth century. We can read this critically.

> "Geography's origins lie in the need to present material about the world to its citizens – in a packaged format acceptable to the powerful vested interests in society. Initially, this involved emphasizing the differences between places and the *singularity* of regions. More recently, the positivist orientation within geography has stressed commonalities among places, whatever their creations, environments, histories and cultures. Geographers have disengaged themselves from studying and promoting the *uniqueness* of place, and consequentially have contributed to a general ignorance of the world as a complex mosaic. This disengagement must be corrected … and geographers must once again take the lead in portraying the complex variability of peoples and environments, avoiding both the *generalization* trap of treating the empirical outcomes (as against the real *mechanisms*) as the consequences of general laws of behaviour and the *singularity* trap of considering each place as a separate entity. Such a task, of description-in-context, is necessary to human survival".[5]

[5] Johnston R (ed) 1985 *The Future of Geography*, London: Methuen p 24-25

This is an interesting passage that in its opening sentence seems to negate the point emphasized in the previous section. It appears to suggest that in education the role of the geography teacher is to deliver a selection of the discipline's products 'in a packaged format'. We can disagree with this profoundly. The role of the geography teacher may *include* this (indeed, it must do so), but it is also to introduce young people into ways of seeing – what we have called 'thinking geographically'. That is, we stress the need to induct students into enquiry processes as well as show them a selection of the products of geographical investigations.

A number of emphases have been added to the quotation for clarity. After its shaky beginnings the passage has much to commend it, and a careful reading of it will reveal much of significance in relation to how we have been setting up a case for living geography. It is a challenging statement, referring to a 'general ignorance of the world' which school geography does not appear to address, and later to the need for a stronger focus on 'real mechanisms' rather than supposed 'laws of human behaviour'. In some ways this paragraph says it all and provides a robust theoretical position for school geography.

Well, not quite all. For one thing, as with the official geography 'importance statement'[6], there is much that requires interpretation.

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[6] (QCA: http://curriculum.qca.org.uk/subjects/geography)

The study of geography stimulates an interest in and a sense of wonder about places. It helps young people make sense of a complex and dynamically changing world. It explains where places are, how places and landscapes are formed, how people and their environment interact, and how a diverse range of economies, societies and environments are interconnected. It builds on pupils' own experiences to investigate places at all scales, from the personal to the global.

Geographical enquiry encourages questioning, investigation and critical thinking about issues affecting the world and people's lives, now and in the future. Fieldwork is an essential element of this. Pupils learn to think spatially and use maps, visual images and new technologies, including geographical information systems (GIS), to obtain, present and analyse

How we interpret such statements may well depend not only on how we perceive the subject but young people. In other words, teachers and educationists are not concerned solely with 'subject delivery'. Take for example this interesting set of questions taken from a discussion by Howard Gardner[7] on how the disciplines may respond to children's fundamental curiosity. This can be grouped into the following four clumps of questions.

- Identity: Who am I? Where do I come from? Who is my family? What is my 'story'? Who are the people around me? Where do they come from? What is their 'story'?
- Place in the world: Where do I live? How does it look? How do I feel about it? How is it changing? How do I want it to change?
- The Physical world: What is the world (and this place) made of? Why do things move? What becomes of things?
- The Human world: Who decides on who gets what, where and why? What is fair? How do we handle differences of opinion?

School subjects are the resources that teachers can draw from in order to help young people address such questions. It perhaps requires no further argument here to show what the significance of geography might be in addressing such fundamental questions.

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information. Geography inspires pupils to become global citizens by exploring their own place in the world, their values and their responsibilities to other people, to the environment and to the sustainability of the planet.

[7] Gardner H and Boix-Mansilla V 2006 Teaching for understanding in the disciplines – and beyond, in Gardner H (ed) 2006 *The development and Education of the Mind. The selected works of Howard Gardner*, London: Routledge

Living geography is created when teachers use the subject discipline (see Johnston) and their knowledge of children and young people (see Gardner) to make sense of the world.

Thus, living geography

- embraces 'young people's geographies' – that is, young people's experiences and encounters with the world and takes seriously what they make of these things

- certainly recognizes the past, including the deep past (how else would we understand mountains for example), but is also current and futures oriented, encouraging young people to envision and project into the future

- often 'local' but always set in wider (global) contexts, requiring practice and steadily deepening awareness of interlocking scales

- investigates processes that bring change to environments – these can be grouped as environmental (or 'physical'), social, economic and political.

- encourages a critical, conceptual understanding of a range of key ideas such as 'sustainable development'. This foregrounds the nature of geography as a synthesis across the physical and human worlds.

We can readily see that living geography consists of a mix of skills, knowledge and understanding. It is geography set within a strong *educational* context. There is no doubt that geography framed in this way requires a lot from teachers who need preparation and training in all aspects of 'making the curriculum' – for example, in understanding children's learning, the skills of teaching and the attributes of successful teachers, and not least the capacity to think 'synoptically' about the subject resource we call geography (or living geography).

The Action Plan for Geography (2006-11)

Living geography is a term that has emerged through a number of curriculum development projects undertaken by the Geographical association in recent years.

However, arguably the most significant curriculum initiative in school geography has been the £4 million Government sponsored Action Plan for Geography (APG) co-led and developed by the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) and the Geographical Association (GA) in equal partnership.

Launched in March 2006, the Action Plan for Geography (APG) was designed to ensure a clear vision for geography's educational power and potential, and to ensure that its relevance to the skills agenda and life in the 21st Century is understood by all. This was a bold set of goals, identified in the context of persistent concerns about the condition of geography in schools (as we have seen, in particular primary schools and KS3).

The APG focussed on three broad interventions, communication, support and development. At the time of writing the first phase (2006-8) of the APG has been competed, and many of its achievements can be found on the specially produced website: www.geographyteachingtoday.org.uk, featuring teaching materials, fieldwork support, professional development on-line modules, teachers 'curriculum making' uploads and details of how to engage with geography Ambassadors, become a Chartered Geographer (CGeog) and/or acquire a Geography Quality Mark (GQM) for the school. In addition, regional conferences involving face to face participation of around 1000 teachers in high quality and challenging CPD activity have been completed nationally.

It was significant that the 2008 Ofsted Report, *Geography – Changing Practice*, (Ofsted 2008) recommended that the Action Plan continue in some form beyond its first phase of funding. This has been achieved, with funding available until 2011. However, although the APG provided a very firm base on which to build further progress, and although the overarching goals remain constant, the RGS and GA agreed that the second phase of the APG was not a matter of 'more of the same'. For example, although large scale events have been successful in clarifying and sharing some key messages with primary and secondary school teachers, we now need to look to new methods to engage new audiences. In order to spread and develop the key ideas, principles and materials, new ways are required to find 'harder to reach' teachers. The second phase (APG2) recognises this and as well as strengthening and extending APG1 achievements, for example by improving the website and rolling out the Ambassadors scheme nationally, it focuses on building local networks.

The GQM and the CGeog (teacher) are now set to become established as locally owned but nationally moderated mechanisms for individuals, departments and schools to identify and

develop excellent practice and to have this recognised. As such these are key tools, managed and led by the two subject organisations for geography. Embedding the support provided for geography teachers in these instruments will help ensure the continuity and sustainability of professional and curriculum development in a community of practice of geography teachers.

The vision for 2011 is therefore to contribute significantly to the transformation of school geography in a way that:

- new opportunities can be grasped by teachers, such as that offered by the new secondary curriculum, to motivate, inform and to stimulate the curiosity of children and young people
- teachers can respond effectively to new curriculum frameworks such as those mentioned earlier in this article, but also that may result from the government's primary review and the introduction of a Humanities Diploma for older students
- Headteachers and curriculum managers, parents and students, are better informed via the subject specialist community, about the wider contributions geography is able to make to several policy agenda, including 'Every Child Matters', cultural diversity, community cohesion and climate change
- the subject curriculum is responsive *and* challenging to young people, taking into account their experiences, interests and needs.

Readers are encouraged to go to the Geography Teaching Today website and we would be keen to hear comments and responses to what you find. Though no guarantees are possible regarding the future of geography in English schools and colleges, the APG, expressed through the website, is a sign that the subject organisations for geography – the learned society (RGS) and the teachers' subject association (GA) - are working in partnership in a focussed and productive

manner, ensuring that there are strong voices for geography to be heard in policy making corridors, and that there is strong support for subject specialist teachers.

Conclusion

The school curriculum is for ever an expression of several enduring tensions. For example, schools are charged with introducing young people to the best traditions, of what we know and have produced, to ensure society's continuance, whilst at the same time ensure that we prepare young people for rapidly changing and uncertain futures. School geography is always in a dilemma in this regard – being seen by some as stuffy and old hat and full of low level description that in a digital age is now redundant, but by others as the subject for the future (see for example Hicks 2007), *because* as a resource it helps us understand a rapidly changing world.

School teachers need to be part of this debate, for it is too important to leave to the policy makers alone. This is why in this article we have emphasised teachers as curriculum makers using living geography as a framework and resource. In the first half of this article we discussed the ways in which in England today school geography is under threat to an extent it has not felt for many years. But the subject community has responded, not least through the APG.

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