

Geography in Education

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The position of geography in schools at the beginning of the 19th Century was hardly an enviable one. In most schools it was not taught and in those where it was taught, it amounted to little more than a list of facts and figures to be committed to memory. Its growth in the 20th century was spectacular and today it is well established in the schools curriculum. Recent years have seen substantial changes in the content of our schools curriculum. There has been a tendency towards incorporating foreign languages, (particularly German) and business studies, using computers and keyboard skills, into the school curriculum. The last two decades have seen the introduction of the Transition Year Option (TYO) and Vocational Preparation and Training Programmes (VPTP). VPTP was

intended for young people of 15 - 18 years who, having completed their compulsory education, desire to prepare and equip themselves for employment.

(Eileen Doyle in Mc Namara, 1990)

The target groups for this European funded programme were (a) school drop-outs and (b) those who remain in school but who are inadequately served by traditional programmes. In practice no two schools offer the same type of TYO or VPTP programme in the same way that no two schools will offer exactly the same range of subject options.

In the face of these changes one must wonder what role geography will have to play in our schools and whether or not its inclusion in the school curriculum is justified. Fortunately a core-curriculum exists in our educational system whereby certain core-subjects must be taught, geography being one of these. But geography, like the nature of the content of our schools' curriculum, is also undergoing change. Last year for example saw the introduction of the new junior certificate syllabus wherein the geography syllabus underwent an important change in emphasis. Here we can ask ourselves the questions; "Does geography have a place in the school curriculum"?, "what does the geography syllabus aim to do"?, and "what is the role of the geography teacher"?

After three years of studying geography at university, I still found it difficult to explain to people that geography was not simply studying the names of towns or rivers in a given country. Yet this was the impression that school geography had left on peoples minds! Holt-Jensen highlights this in his opening to 'Geography : History and Concepts', where he says;

school geography has left many bad memories of learning the names of rivers and towns by rote. It is still common to meet people who think that geographers must have to learn a mass of facts, must know the population of towns all over the world and can name and locate all the new states in Africa... People also have an idea that geography has something to do with maps... Another view is that geographers write travel descriptions

(Holt-Jensen 1988)

Of course all of the above cannot be dismissed, maps and locations are as Holt-Jensen says,

Facts for the geographer, of the same order as dates are for historians..

...they are the basic building blocks of the subject but they are not the subject itself.

And what better medium is there to build up these blocks than through education itself. As David (in Marsden,1976) suggested, geography,"should be strengthened and extended in school where it was potentially stimulating,exciting and useful".

This is not to say that the only reason for studying geography at school level is to lay the foundations for its further study. On the contrary, geography can make a greater claim for it's inclusion in the curriculum. Harris (in Marsden,1976) has argued that; "the development of personal autonomy is the over-ruling educational aim". If this analysis is accepted it is necessary that the overall curriculum strives to contribute to the development of personal autonomy. Personal autonomy implies integration of the individual with his environment and in this area geographers obviously have something direct to contribute; environment here being taken to mean the "action space" of the individual encompasses the world as a whole, learning not only its places but the peoples in these places.

On the other hand it is often argued that disadvantaged pupils are alienated from schools because of didactic methods and a curriculum content derived from "high culture". The view is now widely held that the curriculum should stimulate interest through relevant materials, relevant being taken to mean applicability to the child's social and environmental situation. It is also appropriate that pupils should be encouraged to make value judgments about world problems for example. Again, the study of geography is directly relevant if we take this view on what the curriculum should seek to do. Geography describes the earth and studies the relationships between people and their environments.

Similarly the intermediate certificate geography syllabus covers a range of material aimed at;

encouraging the development of an informed and responsible person at local, national and international level, and to develop the ability of students to use geographical principles

in order to understand the constantly changing facts of our world

(Intermediate Certificate Syllabus)

The syllabus also had the objective of developing a range of skills from observing to interpreting geographical phenomena such as the interaction of man with the environment.

While the aims and objectives of the syllabus are quite clear one must ask whether or not the material or body of knowledge chosen to fulfill them remains socially relevant or applicable to the learners situation. The geography syllabus must match the quality and interest of the people who are going to follow it. Upon returning to school I found myself teaching the intermediate certificate geography syllabus to 14 and 15 year old pupils. For the first time I fully realised why people misunderstood what geography had to offer. It was no doubt, as Holt-Jensen said, going to leave many "with bad memories of learning the names of rivers and towns by rote", especially the slow learners, where Denmark became Spain on the map of Europe and the Eiffel Tower was found in Rome. Teaching some aspects of the geography syllabus became a futile effort. Much of the course content was obviously geared towards 'learning' without 'understanding' or 'experiencing' the associated geographical concepts. The only use any of this learning served was, for many, in passing the state examinations. This is not to say that the geography intermediate certificate syllabus, now in its last year, is totally irrelevant. However, for a large number of pupils it dealt with far away places that they had never been to, would never see or which were totally alien to their own social and economic backgrounds.

The new junior certificate syllabus differs a good deal (in the content and range of material to be covered) from the old, but more so in its emphasis and approach. Before looking at it, it is important to bear in mind that the aims of geography as a school subject have always been influenced by the prevailing 'philosophy', of education, by the prevailing economic climate and by the prevailing paradigms in geography. The content of the new syllabus most certainly recognised current economic, environmental and social situations. Its approach takes into account that the education of young people today takes place against the background of a world with such characteristics of geographical concern as;

increasingly multi-cultural societies, sharp social and economic inequalities on a variety of scales, an increasing pace of socio-economic change and growing concern over declining environmental quality in many regions.

(Graves, 1984)

Thus, the aims and objectives of the new syllabus sought to involve pupils in a learning

process that allowed them to use and apply various geographical concepts such as spatial interaction and change over time, in a way that was both meaningful and experiential in their own environment. Various geographical settings were chosen for study as well as local settings, whereby pupils could test what they learned or discussed in class against what they saw each day around them. The content of the syllabus was also geared towards issues which prompted a sensitive awareness of environment as well as contributing to pupils understanding of important issues and problems in contemporary society. These settings include areas of international concern such as Ethiopia, areas of national concern such as the Mezzogiorno in Italy and more local settings such as a case study on marine processes and problems at Ballycotton in East Cork.

One must be careful not to over emphasize the importance of the syllabus content, aims and objectives, however. While the new syllabus is clearly more stimulating, relevant and interesting, this is not to say that any other syllabus such as the old inter-certificate failed as part of the curriculum. It is at this point that the geography teacher deserves mention, for the success of any course pursued in the modern secondary school depends not on equipment, the school environment or the calibre of the pupils, but on the teacher. The educational value of geography is closely linked with the character and quality of the methods by which it is taught. Taking the view of the Romantics and Rousseau, that education should be child centered and experiencing, the good teacher should be able to make geography real and significant to the pupil, despite any restrictions that the syllabus might pose. The very nature of geography allows the pupils themselves and their immediate environment to become their sources of information, not the text books alone. It is up to the geography teacher to make these sources known to the pupil so that the written syllabus becomes a living experience.

The teaching of geography does however pose some problems for the geography teacher. Holt-Jensen questions geographers concerning whether they are “jacks of all trades and masters of none”!. Here he was referring to the fact that geographers unlike geologists or botanists, study several types of phenomena, each of which is already studied by another science. School curricula have long recognised the relationships between the constituent elements of the humanities and the social sciences. However similarities in certain areas of study were not always explored to make learning easier for the pupils, while pupils themselves often fail to recognise the inter-relationships between history and geography for example.

Social scientists are also aware of the interfaces of their disciplines with history and

geography. If we take anthropology, sociology, economics, political science and psychology as the main social sciences, it becomes clear that the ideas which the social sciences are interested in are often the concern of historians and geographers. In geography, no valid study of, for example, land reclamation in the Netherlands could neglect the basic economic concept of scarcity; nor could a study of primitive societies omit references to anthropological, sociological, ecological concepts; nor could a study of spatial perception of environmental hazards ignore ideas from the behavioural sciences. The new geography syllabus, more than ever, takes this diversity in the discipline into consideration. Co-operation and interaction in the teaching of history, science, geography and other subjects is encouraged in secondary schools in order to avoid over-teaching certain areas of knowledge, such as the great famine and the hydrological cycle, both of which are dealt with by more than one school subject. The new syllabus

recognises that the geography teacher is involved in a body of knowledge which has wide horizons, and in a methodology which contains many and varied techniques and skills.

(Junior Certificate Syllabus)

It also recognises that the 'fundamental factors in the discipline's motivational strength' are its breadth and diversity. Just as the geographer explores a broad and diverse area of knowledge, the geography teacher also has to become, as Holt-Jensen puts it, 'a jack of all trades'.

In the face of our constantly changing world, our changed environment, changing social structures and fluctuating economies, the nature of content in school geography inevitably changes so that our geography pupils become more informed, critical and observant beings. Above all, the need to include geography as part of the school's curriculum must continue to be recognised. This essay has attempted to look at the changing nature of the geography syllabus in the light of recent development in educational practices, the objectives of the curriculum, the prevailing economic, social and physical environment, and the need for the geography teacher to be aware of the breadth and diversity of the discipline of geography. Geography in education has grown steadily since the 19th century and given the changes occurring today, it will continue to form a valuable part of the education of both societies and individuals

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