3. RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS AND VALUES IN GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION

JOHN LIDSTONE

In a world of uncertainty that some have termed post-structural, in which the search for grand theory or metanarrative becomes ever increasingly difficult, or for some, impossible, the title of this chapter appears to be wonderfully ambiguous. I use the word "wonderfully" because it is a great source of wonder that so many people, with such a wide range of expertise and interests, and most, if not all, with high levels of personal and professional integrity, can expend so much effort in debating the nature of the school curriculum. It is indeed wonderful that the ways in which we educate our children are treated as of such importance throughout most of the world. It is also wonderful in a different sense that there is so much disagreement about how this task is to be accomplished. The ambiguity implied by this disagreement, comes from the ways in which the title can be interpreted. Does the reference to relevant knowledge, skills and values in geographical education indicate that there may be irrelevant knowledge skills and values as well, and could it be that only some of this irrelevancy occurs in the context of geographical education, or does the title question the relevance of geographical education at all? Finally, I can't help wondering if the terms relevant, knowledge, skills, values, geographical and education are not themselves ambiguous, admitting of a wide range of meanings, perhaps depending on context.

For too long, geographers and geographical educators have lectured one another, on what they see as the negligence with which our discipline has been treated by those who plan and fund curriculum development in our schools. I shall suggest that the close relationship between geography as a field of academic endeavour and geography as a subject named in school curricula that is often believed to have existed in some past "golden age" has largely been a fantasy. Rather, I will propose that the history of geographical education has been a history of social education designed for a variety of social ends, often with little regard for work conducted "at the sharp end" of academic endeavour. I will suggest that the conflict between people of varying curriculum persuasions has not been a conflict over how best to prepare students to be "good geographers", but over different conceptions of what constitutes "the good life", either for the few or for the many, and the ways in which the varying conceptions of the good life may be achieved through education. This chapter, therefore, attempts to stand back a little and consider the factors that may influence curricular decisions and the claims that we as geographical aficionados may wish to make for a place in the sun.

The Curriculum: contested territory

The nature and focus of the curriculum has always been a political issue in Western (for which read, democratic) nations, as well as elsewhere, although it is only since the 1960s that its political nature has become overt and acknowledged. This does not mean, however, that the curriculum, geographical or otherwise, was neutral before this date. Marsden (1989: 509) has shown how, in the United Kingdom, previous generations looked to the schools to promote a variety of what he calls “Good causes”. “Good causes” are defined in terms of “ politicization” and Marsden explains this process as one of using the curriculum and informal channels of education to serve the ends of significant power groups, whether the church, the state or some other body, even the “educational establishment”, so that explicitly or implicitly employed techniques of inculcation, indoctrination, and loaded selection of material, dictate the content, values, attitudes and beliefs to be transmitted. This definition enables us to see curricular developments in other countries in a similar vein. In the United States, integrated social studies, was seen as a truly American education that would not mimic European traditions and would create a “deliberate fashioning of a new republican character ... committed to the promise of American culture” (Cremin 1976: 43,44) as a way of creating citizens who could identify with the customs and institutions of a new nation. (see Kliebard. H. M. (1986). The Struggle for the American Curriculum 1893-1958. Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul). In France, a centralised curriculum was prescribed by the Government, for many of the same reasons. In the early years of the twentieth century, in Soviet Russia, it seems that mathematics and physical geography, not to mention the playing of chess, flourished mainly because they were seen as essentially non-political and therefore “safe”. For much of the last two decades, some curriculum theorists especially in the United Kingdom and Australia, have been promoting the notion of “Education for environmental education” or “Education for sustainable development” (Linke 1976; Huckle 1983; Huckle 1991; Fien and Trainer 1993). And finally, and most recently, recent developments in promoting social education in Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia (especially the state of Queensland) and some countries of Europe, apparently at the expense of “disciplines” such as geography and history, may be interpreted as part of this tradition.

Marsden (1989, 510) places his definition of politicization in a broader framework of curriculum decision making which embraces content, pedagogy and social purposes. While the social purposes of education may be conceived both in narrow utilitarian terms such as the “key competencies” for employment produced in Australia in the early 1990s, they may also reflect broader values and aims. Furthermore, social education may be interpreted in terms of aggregate social control or the individual socialisation of children. However, while social education provides the justification for politicization (it is the “good cause”) content and pedagogy may be equally important. Content reflects a selection from both the culture of the society in which the curriculum is being constructed, and the selection depends largely on what is most valued by that society at the particular time. Pedagogy, as defined as the art and science of teaching, reflects a wide range of ideologies and assumptions about
the nature of teaching and learning. Extreme examples are the catechetical pedagogy of early nineteenth century schools which was designed for the mass education of urban children, the “child centred” pedagogies which became fashionable around the middle of the twentieth century and the inquiry-centred and “constructivist” pedagogies that gained in popularity if not in widespread implementation, towards the end of that century.

Although Graves (1975) describes the growth of geography as a subject in British schools from the early- to mid-nineteenth century, the school subject of that name had little of the excitement or creativity of the work being conducted by those who increasingly called themselves geographers. Indeed, Marsden cites the words of both Mackinder (1911) and Unstead (1928) to illustrate that for most of this period, fostering geographical understanding was not the main priority:

Let our teaching be from the British standpoint, so that finally we see the world as a theatre for British activity. This, no doubt, is to deviate from the cold and impartial ways of science. When we teach the millions, however, we are not training scientific investigators, but the practical striving citizens of an empire which has to hold its place through the universal law of survival through efficiency and effort. (Mackinder, 1911:79-80)

Unstead (1928: 319) also declared that, in the context of the Primary school, the geography teacher should be a teacher first and a geographer second: “pedagogy is fully as important as geography”.

The Role of Geographers and the Discipline of Geography

The influence of academic geography on the geography curriculum seems to have been strongest, at least in the United Kingdom, where documentation is most readily available, between the mid-1920s and the early 1970s, a mere half century. One aspect of this influence is demonstrated by the interchange between Fairgrieve who criticised the teaching of Geography Honours courses by L. W. Lyde at University College, London, as creating only rigid thinkers, while Lyde criticised the pedagogic work of Fairgrieve as being “mere class management” (Marsden 1997: 245). Other aspects, however, are illustrated by the change of name of the journal of the UK Geographical Association from The Geographical Teacher to Geography, and the writing of school textbooks by eminent professors of geography. After the creation of the Institute of British Geographers in 1933, the conferences of the two organizations were arranged so that academic geographers could attend both, academic geographers continued to publish in Geography and Wooldridge (1949) published his seminal call to arms against social studies entitled “On taking the get-out of geography”. Wooldridge was adamant that social studies would destroy the value of geography as an important medium of education. The strong contacts between geographers and geography educators, according to Marsden, and at least in the United Kingdom, was maintained and perhaps even enhanced through the 1960s and 1970s, with a balance being
International Handbook on Geographical Education
Gerber, R. (Ed.)
2003, XVIII, 348 p. 7 illus., Hardcover
ISBN: 978-1-4020-1019-4