

THE GEOGRAPHICAL ASSOCIATION

January 1991

Dear Member

National Curriculum Geography Draft Order

You are probably aware from press comment in recent weeks that Mr Kenneth Clarke, Secretary of State for Education, has altered the recommendations of both the Geography Working Group and the National Curriculum Council Consultation Report on Geography so significantly that the Draft Statutory Order for Geography is now causing The Geographical Association much heart-searching. Many members of the Association are of the opinion that the Order represents a dated, ideologically-driven version of the subject, bearing all too little relationship to the excellent education provided by geography teachers at present.

The GA's Education Standing Committee is therefore taking the unusual step of writing to all of our members to ask you all to communicate your concern to your Member of Parliament. If you are a geography teacher, you might wish to do this as an ordinary citizen/parent. We suggest that you insist that your MP places a written question to the Secretary of State so that he is forced to answer your specific question. In this way our concern surrounding his action is drawn to the attention of MPs, not least in Mr Clarke's own party.

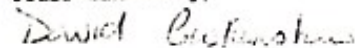
Some potential themes for questions are listed below:

- * Why did the Secretary of State not accept the advice gathered over 18 months?
- * Why did the Secretary of State authorise alterations to be made in ten days over Christmas 1990?
- * Why has much of the discussion of the appreciation of attitudes been removed when Sir Keith Joseph was so much in favour of that aspect of the subject?
- * Why has he removed enquiry skills from the ATs in Geography, when enquiry skills do appear in ATs for several other subjects (eg Technology and History)?
- * Why have land use conflicts been removed from the ATs (4/4)? Surely it is a basic truth that there are competing demands for space.
- * Could the Secretary of State name the people that were consulted when the Consultation Report was revised over Christmas 1990? How many of these were geographers or geography teachers?
- * Why is there no agreement apparent between the Draft Order, the recommendations of the National Curriculum Council on cross-curricular environmental education and the wishes of the Department of the Environment, as expressed in the White Paper This Common Inheritance, concerning environmental education?

We urge you to write as soon as possible. In this way Mr Clarke might be embarrassed by the attention given to his proposals. Please also urge your PTA, Governors or any other contacts you may have to write in, not only to Parliament, but to all newspapers, including the tabloids. Headquarters would appreciate receiving copies of any correspondence.

Thank you for any action that you take to support geography in schools.

Yours sincerely,



David Burtenshaw
Joint Hon. Secretary (Education)



Battle to bridge the Gulf in the classroom

As it turns out, Kenneth Clarke's arbitrary demarcation line between history and current affairs could hardly have come at a more sensitive time. It might have seemed like an academic distinction for a few days, but now it is anything but. Current affairs in the Gulf overflow from television screens, airwaves and newspapers, filling the minds and imaginations of children and inevitably the life and consciousness of schools.

Whatever the convictions, doubts or personal resources of teachers, there is no getting away from the questions and fears that children of all ages are bringing into the classroom with them, and the opportunity as well as the imperative to help their charges find their way through.

At short notice, teachers are being forced into a crash course in how to handle such red-hot issues and events. And because contemporary issues as topics have been increasingly out of political favour of late it may be that only a minority of teachers has had recent and relevant experience in how to handle them.

What was called current affairs in Mr Clarke's schooldays had developed into something altogether more constructive for teachers and taught. Lawrence Stenhouse's Humanities Curriculum Project for the Schools Council some 20 years ago was designed essentially so that the teacher would not have to fly by the seat of the pants when confronted with emotionally explosive issues. A key part of the package was the role of the teacher as neutral chairman, as a guard against real or perceived bias. (A counter view was that it was better to respect the pupil's ability to know, and discount, the teacher's own opinions.)

Though the Schools Council went out of favour, many of the HCP ground-rules lived on as political education developed, fostered by the Hansard Society, the Politics Association, HMI and even Sir Keith Joseph, as Education Secretary.

The lack of sound, up-to-date materials was always a difficulty and political education did not flourish during the Thatcher years. Peace studies had an even bumpier ride and teacher enthusiasm for tackling

current issues was further dissipated by the clause forbidding political indoctrination in the 1986 Act.

Now that the Gulf crisis is upon us, it is back to seat-of-the-pants time for many teachers, with an over-rich diet of moral, technological, historic, personal, religious, geographical and emotional issues to handle, and often little but transient media material to draw on.

For some teachers there is the extra responsibility of counselling children with close relatives caught up in the war, on either side; for others, with a high proportion of Muslim pupils, multi-cultural and anti-racist understanding becomes crucial. But there can be few who wish to avoid the central concerns.

If many teachers now have limited experience to build on, the emerging shape of the national curriculum could offer even less in the future. As Eleanor Rawling comments on the opposite page, the Secretary of State has cut inquiry skills from the draft Order for geography because "however desirable, they are not particular to geography". But they are not being encouraged in history either; and the moral issues have also disappeared from technology and science. Perhaps it wouldn't matter that pupils are not to be encouraged "to handle evidence, consider alternative views, critically evaluate material from different sources, ask awkward questions or develop their own views" on the environment in geography, if they had the opportunity to develop such skills elsewhere in the national curriculum.

Will a space be cleared in the timetable for current affairs? Because all those skills must be deployed now if children are to be taught to sift the instant reportage from the battle-fronts: sort unchecked facts from interpretation; cool scoops under fire from intrusion on grief; and technology's white-hot edge from video games without heart or conscience.

Media studies has claimed its place in or out of current affairs. Whatever we call it, the Gulf war provides an inescapable reminder of the duty to nurture the full range of inquiry skills in pupils, and the techniques to mediate them in teachers.

Second opinion

Spirit of inquiry falls off the map

ELEANOR RAWLING

In the Draft Order for geography in the national curriculum, the Secretary of State has removed inquiry skills, the use of secondary sources and diagrams from the statements of attainment because "however desirable, they are not particular to geography". He has also decided that references to pupils' exploration of attitudes and values should be deleted so that greater emphasis can be placed on knowledge and understanding.

This provides us with a view of geography as a subject mainly concerned with putting across specific items of knowledge and information, with developing basic understanding and with learning a narrow range of "geographical" skills (predominantly mapwork and fieldwork). Pupils are not to be encouraged to handle evidence, to consider alternative views, to evaluate material from different sources critically, to ask awkward questions or to develop their own values in environmental matters. These activities can be carried out in other subjects seems to be the argument - no need to practise them in geography.

I do not share this vision of geography and I am surprised and concerned that it seems to have found favour with the Secretary of State.

Over the past 25 years, geography has developed into a challenging and rigorous subject, capable of extending pupils' general education as well as their geographical skills. This is just the kind of potential which the Government should draw on if it is serious about its claim to raise standards of achievement for every child. The key to this potential lies in active inquiry skills in classroom work - the very features which have been dismantled in the Draft Order.

Of course, inquiry skills are not the sole preserve of geography, many run right through the curriculum. But without them geography is an arid lifeless subject making few demands on its learners and providing little of transferable value in the real world.

Similarly, geographers' increasing emphasis on attitudes and values is not motivated by any desire to meddle in areas which should not concern them, but by the need to address environmental matters with the rigour they deserve. Knowledge and understanding in geography cannot be separated from attitudes and values. Few topics in geography, whether they are concerned with urban redevelopment, agricultural change, regional unbalance or global warming, can be dealt with in a coherent way without reference to attitudes and values.

Unless issues involving a range of views and opinions are opened up in the classroom, pupils may find few opportunities to clarify their own values and to develop their own convictions. This really cannot be what the Government wants.

The recent Department of Environment White Paper, "This Common Inheritance", envisaged an important role for geography in making young people more aware of and able to participate in action about environmental matters. The White Paper makes particular mention of the need for pupils to "discuss how people's attitudes can affect the exploitation of natural resources" - one of the very statements which the Secretary of State is suggesting should be removed.

The Draft Order for geography seems to have brought us to a situation strangely out of line with current concerns and with best educational practice and, equally inexplicably, to a situation in which its potential to enhance the quality of education will be constrained.

My vision of geographical education, after 20 years of involvement in curriculum development, is of a subject that can be challenging, intellectually demanding and of direct relevance to current environmental, social and economic issues. By the late 1980s, the full potential of the subject was apparent; all that was needed was for these gains to be enshrined in the national curriculum so that they could be made more widely available. What has gone wrong? And more importantly what can we do to put it right within the next four weeks?

Eleanor M Rawling is senior vice-president of the Geographical Association and was a member of the national curriculum geography working group.

A process of erosion

24.1.91

VIEWPOINT

By Ashley Kent,
David Lambert
and Frances Slater

DETAILS of how the Government intends geography to be taught in schools under the national curriculum have alarmed geographers at all levels in the education system.

Previous reports, culminating in the National Curriculum Council's consultation report last November, represented an attempt at a balancing act. But we still saw potential for engaging children in good geography lessons. We now see this potential fading.

The government-appointed Geography Working Group was heavily influenced by the beguiling ideas of cultural literacy propagated by American E D Hirsch in his 1987 book about the subject.

He argued that all (American) children, regardless of background, need to acquire a particular body of knowledge to give them access to the shared public world of all educated people. He even lists 5,000 "facts", 500 of which are places.

Few geography teachers would argue that there was no need for children to learn a locational framework — which arises partly out of geography lessons, well-planned and well-taught, and partly by using atlases.

But a balance needs to be struck between this (and the list of "essential knowledge", an idea we believe to be of dubious quality) and the need, in a rapidly changing world, for students to apply knowledge to understand and make judgements about what they are learning. These understandings and judgements will require adjustment and reworking in the light of new information and fresh perspectives the students gain. This is why geography should emphasise the role of enquiry and the purpose of studying issues.

Mr Clarke's draft order strikes out these elements of geography. By doing so he badly distorts it and upsets the balance. Parents of children in the state education system are surely not happy that this

will discourage children from examining economic, social or environmental issues in geography lessons. Statements such as "explain the role of decision-making within the processes that have resulted in stability or change in the home region" have simply been crossed out of the curriculum.

Let us consider a scientist who is studying the formation of a soil. Over the years he or she has learnt that the relevant variables include people, climate, parent material,

The omission of a crucial variable is anti-intellectual and anti-educational

relief, time, flora and fauna. Each of these variables needs to be examined to build an understanding of the processes leading to the formation of soils.

Now let us consider an urban planner or consultant who is working as one of a team on a redevelopment project. Over the years he or she has reached an understanding of the variables that have to be taken into account if the project is to be a success. The planner knows he or she is working for one or more vested interests and that other people and organisations involved have attitudes, values and opinions that need to be taken into account. With experience, our planner has learnt to consider these human variables along with site, situation, bedrock, traffic, projected demand for office space and so on. These are a complex set of vari-

ables with various interconnections. It is interesting to note that in the development of this process the concept of "planning gain" or "community benefit" — where planning officers negotiate with developers to get them to contribute to the building of community facilities — has emerged. This strategy has developed as a way of meeting (and some would say neutralising) the concerns of social groups which might have views different from those of the development company. The general process and concept of planning and development over the years has incorporated these varied viewpoints.

What would the soil scientist say if told that geography in the national curriculum had failed to identify, say, climate as an essential variable in an understanding of soil formation?

What, then, are geographers to say when told that variables crucial to understanding the processes of land use change have been deleted?

It is a bit like a powerful and authoritarian figure in the Middle Ages telling a scientist to forget his recently developed insights into planetary motion in the universe and to revert to inadequate conventional wisdom.

The omission of a crucial variable in understanding space, people and environments — geography — is not only nonsense, it is profoundly anti-intellectual and anti-educational.

Perhaps we should not be surprised at a minister of Mr Clarke's reputation making a rapid decision that flies in the face of professional advice. But his failure to see the role geography should be encouraged to take in the delivery of the vital cross-curricular areas identified by his government, namely citizenship and environmental education, is mystifying.

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