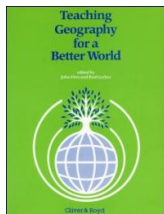


# Teaching for a Better World: Is it geography?

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When first asked if I would talk to this group I demurred on the grounds that I no longer really felt myself to be a geographer as such. He argued, however, that my experiences of geography and allied fields were very pertinent to current debates about the nature of curriculum and geography in particular.

I take my title, therefore, from a classic text of the 80s, *Teaching Geography for a Better World* (Fien & Gerber, 1988), which was written for those who wanted to explore a more socially critical approach in their teaching. I should point out that what I wish to share with you here is more in the nature of a personal reflection than an academic discourse. This has three main strands:

- A reflection on events that have influenced my own notions of geography
- A reminder of some key progressive influences on geography in the 1980s
- A warning about current attacks on good practice in geographical education

## A geographer's journey

### *In the classroom*

What makes a geographer's journey - the events and insights that influence one's notions of what a geography curriculum should be? Like many I was inspired by my own teachers who made the subject an engaging and exciting prospect. As a student in the 1960s, however, I found myself beset by a deeply troubled world. On the one hand I became aware of the superpower arms race and the terrifying possibility of nuclear war. On the other, at the Film Society, I watched a horrific documentary, 'Night and Fog', about the Nazi holocaust. Faced, at 18, with one appalling holocaust behind me and another possibly before me I did not know what I could do or where to turn. The only realisation that came to me out of that despair, simplistic though it may have been, was that in some way one had a responsibility to try and make the world a 'better place'.

As a young teacher in the late 60s I felt geography could help pupils make some sense of the world around them and we explored issues of poverty and environment, the war in Vietnam and in the Middle East. Straight from college and with sole responsibility for my subject I was asked to design a Mode 3 CSE Geography syllabus. Mode 3 meant a syllabus matched to the needs of an individual school. Whilst somewhat daunted, with support from others, I was able to put together such a curriculum. Current global issues – conflicts, poverty, population and

environment – were at its heart, supported by some of the new textbooks then becoming available on 'world problems'.

### *Teacher education*

The 1970s saw the publication of a number of seminal books, such as *Limits to Growth* and *Blueprint for Survival*, which highlighted growing environmental problems and the dangers of pursuing endless growth in a finite world. I attended a seminar in London entitled 'Teaching for a Sustainable Future', surely a decade or more before its time. A number of radical books on education also became available then - my favourite was *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* (Postman & Weingartner, 1971). I became aware that there was a long tradition of radical education (Hicks, 2004) that could be drawn on in bringing greater 'relevance' to geography teaching.

In the mid-70s, at a College of Education in the Lake District, I taught a course entitled 'Only One Earth.' Its aims were:

1. To give a global perspective, both in space and time, relating awareness of environmental problems to changing attitudes and values.
2. By using the key concepts of conflict and change to see environmental problems as symptoms of disequilibrium rather than causes.
3. To promote informed opinion about the 'Third World' and recognition of the multiple links between rich and poor.
4. To be aware of the interrelatedness of the world system and the need to plan for alternative futures.

### *Research at the edge*

Subsequently I was involved in postgraduate research which investigated the global dimension in teacher training and found it wasn't only geographers who explored the state of the world but also historians, sociologists, RE tutors and modern language specialists. I realised then that in studying global matters I wanted to go wherever the issues took me even if it meant going beyond the then boundaries of geography.

This was confirmed when I came across the World Studies Project, an inspirational curriculum project run by Robin Richardson. In the late 70s, as education officer for the Minority Rights Group, I found myself involved in debates about multicultural education and the nature of racism in school and community which led to an investigation into the nature of racist bias in geography textbooks (Hicks, 1980).

### **Issue-based educations**

At this time in the 1970s a number of issue-orientated educations had begun to emerge, often from the margins of mainstream education. I want to briefly highlight four here because of their influence on geography. They are global education (known then as world studies), development education, peace education and futures education. Initiatives such as these arose internationally between the 60s and the 80s in response to a range of global issues and the belief that education needed to

take more note of those issues. They were part of a progressive and radical impetus in education at that time (Lister, 1987). Their influence in the 80s was exemplified by Fien & Gerber's (1988) *Teaching Geography for a Better World* which highlighted issues of citizenship, political literacy, race, gender and alternative futures in the geography curriculum.

### *Global education*

The term 'world studies' was coined by James Henderson who worked at the Institute of Education in the 50s and 60s and felt that global matters were largely absent from the school curriculum. Robin Richardson, who ran the World Studies Project in the 70s, built on the work of Henderson. The emphasis in world studies was on a number of key issues, in particular environment, development, conflict and human rights, and the importance of studying global and local examples of each. Historically the project drew on two long-standing educational traditions, those of 'world mindedness' and 'child-centredness'. World studies was the UK variant of what is now internationally known as global education and the notion of a global dimension in the curriculum had its origins here (Hicks & Holden, 2007).

### *Development education*

Development education was a term coined in the late 60s by those working for NGOs that had as their focus issues of global poverty and injustice, debates about the nature of development and the need to listen, in Paolo Freire's words, to 'the voices of the oppressed.' A national network of Development Education Centres (DECs) emerged some of which provided excellent materials and support for teachers. Think Global today, with its emphasis on the global dimension, had its origins in the work of such centres and others working in development education (Think Global, 2011).

### *Peace education*

Peace education was interested in exploring all aspects of peace and conflict from the personal to the global. What are the causes of conflicts and how can they be resolved? What do we mean by peace – is it just the absence of conflict or is it something more than that? During the 1980s many teachers, schools and LEAs became interested in exploring notions of peace and conflict in the classroom (Burns & Aspeslagh, 1996). As the nuclear arms race came into public consciousness people looked to peace educators for guidance on how to teach about such matters. The political Right, however, proclaimed that the real purpose of peace education was to preach communism and thus undermine Western democracy.

### *Futures education*

The field of futures education was little known in the 80s, although those working in global education were quick to appreciate the importance of this field. Again an international concern, futures education draws its inspiration from the academic field of Futures Studies (Bell, 2010). Its interest is not in predicting the future but rather

in helping students to think more critically and creatively about the consequences of present actions on the future. Since all education is in some sense preparation for the future where in the curriculum are young people enabled to think critically and creatively about the future, from the personal and local to the global (Hicks, 2006, 2011)?

### *World Studies 8-13*

World Studies 8-13 (1980-89) was a national curriculum project, initially funded by the Schools Council and the Rowntree Trust, which built on Richardson's previous work. Aimed at the middle years of schooling it described world studies as:

Not a new subject but a dimension in the curriculum which embraces a) an awareness of contemporary global issues such as world inequality, human rights, peace and conflict, social change; b) understanding cultures other than one's own; c) the need for the curriculum to include a global perspective. In so doing it notes that children will have to cope with a future very different from today, a future that will be greatly influenced by the outcome of current world issues which increasingly impinge on all our daily lives (Hicks, 1990).

Over a nine year period the 8-13 project worked with fifty LEAs, half of those in England and Wales, and was successful, I think, because it caught the zeitgeist of the times. Similar important work was carried out by David Selby at the Centre for Global Education in York. It was not realised at the time, however, that the success of these ventures would lead to attacks from the political Right.

### *A growing influence*

During the 1980s several of the issue-based educations – particularly world studies, development education and multicultural education - contributed significantly to developments in geography. Indeed during what was known as the 'relevance revolution' in the 70s and 80s geography began to embrace many of these concerns as Walford (2001) highlights in his history of school geography. But the arrival of a Conservative national curriculum in the late 80s then sidelined many of these matters as education came under more central political control.

During the 90s, fields such as development education and peace education realised that they needed to widen their focus. As both fields expanded their concern from their original starting points their interests began to converge. The value of such fields, however, is that they each developed enormous expertise in teaching about their original presenting issue. Development educators then began to talk about the need for global learning and global perspectives in the curriculum, a concern long held by global education (Hicks, 2008).

I have always found it curious that those working in development education seemed to ignore the pioneering work of Richardson. The fact that world studies had always advocated the need for a global dimension in the curriculum was seldom acknowledged. Claims were even made that development education was the real

source of progressive teaching methods and global learning. Perhaps this was because development education held the ground during the 90s when global education had a much lower profile in the UK. What is clear, however, is that over this period the global dimension became an essential element in the geography curriculum and was also later seen as a vital cross-curricular concern (QCA, 2009).

## **Ideological differences**

### *Attacks from the Right*

In the mid-80s Right-wing politicians and conservative thinkers began to register the issue-based educations as an ideological threat. In particular criticism focused on world studies, development education and peace education. Promoting global awareness, a concern for 'Third World' development and questioning the nuclear arms race were considered to be dangerous examples of indoctrination occurring in schools. Those involved in these fields were seen as responsible for schooling children in techniques of political activism and were attacked in a number of Right-wing publications. The arguments of the Right were seldom substantiated but presented in a rhetorical fashion that invited media interest and headlines. Critical reflection was at the heart of the issue-based educations although this was denied by conservative critics who saw instead political indoctrination. Under New Labour the climate of education began to shift towards greater openness.

### *Taking the wrong direction?*

It would seem, however, with the work of critics such as Standish (2009) that such times may be upon us again. In the mid-80s it was naively thought that through open conversation and academic discussion such criticism from the Right could be rebutted and the evidence on the ground shown to disprove their concerns. Only later was the impossibility of this realised. This is because it is not just a matter of discussing different opinions and beliefs about geography but rather it is about fundamentally opposing worldviews or ideologies.

Such attacks are underpinned, consciously or unconsciously, by fundamental beliefs about the nature of human nature, the nature of society and the purpose of life. Questions relating to such issues can, of course, be answered in a multiplicity of ways depending on socialisation, class, gender and culture. Whilst political ideologies may be subject to change over time their power lies in the fact that they enshrine a powerful set of core beliefs and values (Goodwin, 2007; Harvey, 2005). As Meighan points out in his *Sociology of Educating* (2007: 212) 'These systems of belief are usually seen as 'the way things really are' by the groups holding them, and they become the taken-for-granted ways of making sense of the world'. Ideology, in this sense, does not allow much room for the notion of partial truth, indeed for many people their 'truth' is an objective unchanging reality and all others are false. Michael Apple's (2006) analysis of neoliberal policies and their impact on education, in his book *Educating the 'Right' Way: Markets, standards, God and inequality*, aptly illustrates why education is always a site of struggle and compromise.

Standish's (2009) concern about global perspectives in the geography curriculum is a case in point. What he appears to believe is that:

- All education should be based on a traditional curriculum
- Which is in turn based on an objective body of knowledge
- In this Truth is seen as crucial because it has a 'non-moral status'
- Young people are essentially seen as vessels to be filled
- Since education is primarily about content and not process
- Without these elements essential subject ideas will be destroyed

He thus argues that geography should take its direction from what is intrinsic within it rather than looking outside the subject for inspiration and guidance. The obstacles to all this are 'reformists' who have taken control of education for their own purposes. They believe that:

- The curriculum is something that should be open to change
- Bodies of knowledge should be open to critical analysis
- The nature of truth varies in different social and cultural contexts
- Young people have ideas of their own which deserve consideration
- Education is as much about process as it is about content
- And only through this will students learn critical awareness

### *Two vital traditions*

Richardson (1990), in his book *Daring to be a Teacher*, highlights two long-standing traditions in educational thinking:

The first tradition is concerned with learner-centred education, and the development and fulfilment of individuals. This tradition is humanistic and optimistic, and has a basic trust in the capacity and will of human beings to create healthy and empowering systems and structures ... The second tradition is concerned with building equality, and with resisting the trend for education merely to reflect and replicate inequalities in wider society of race, gender and class; it is broadly pessimistic in its assumption that inequalities are the norm wherever and whenever they are not consciously and strenuously resisted.

Both traditions are concerned with wholeness and holistic thinking, but neither, arguably, is complete without the other. There cannot be wholeness in individuals independently of strenuous attempts to heal rifts and contradictions in wider society and in the education system. Conversely, political struggle to create wholeness in society – that is, equality and justice in dealings and relationships between social classes, between countries, between ethnic groups, between women and men – is doomed to no more than a partial success and hollow victories, at best, if it is not accompanied by, and if it does not in its turn strengthen and sustain, the search for wholeness and integration in individuals.

This is where I believe geography needs to stand. Education in the twenty-first century needs to be about developing a critical awareness of both self and society and an understanding of what needs to change. It is not political indoctrination to invite students to explore, for example, issues relating to climate change, peak oil and resource depletion (Hicks, 2010). There are many diverse ways in which one might help to create a more just and ecological future. If we do not help the present generation to develop the skills that are needed to do this then, I believe, as educators we will have failed in our task - and indeed may have already done so.

### *Facing the dangers*

What is there to be learnt from those attacks in the 80s? Firstly, they came about as the result of a change in government which brought Thatcher into power. As Conservative politicians began to exert greater control over the curriculum it helped legitimate vociferous Right-wing attacks against progressive and radical initiatives in education. At the time it felt difficult to know how to respond to such attacks which were both very broad brush but also often very personal.

Current Coalition attitudes to education may pave the way for similar attacks on geography and other related initiatives in education. Whilst, at one level, there is much room for academic argument and debate about such differences (Lambert and Morgan, 2010), at heart I believe them to be unresolvable because they represent a clash of fundamentally opposing worldviews. They are resolvable only in the sense that a Conservative government has the power to impose, directly or indirectly, a more traditional curriculum on schools and omit from it the elements it disagrees with.

My learning from the 80s was that those traditions which get marginalised often go underground to resurface again when times are ripe for their flourishing. What then might progressive geographers and others do in these times? What needs to be done to ride out a possible coming storm? Does a geography strategy group need to be set up? Is a collaborative front possible with other threatened subject areas? What we are seeing now may be warning signs of what is ideologically to come. What do we need to do to protect that which we value for future generations?

Richardson (1990) once suggested that the issue-based educations had five possible options in relation to their own survival. The options we have before us at this point in time could well be similar:

- *Laissez-faire* – leaving matters to the hidden hand of the 'market'
- *A pact* – agreeing not to compete with but to assist each other
- *Dialogue* – with possible allies which will require as much listening as talking
- *A coalition* – in order to gain more authority, voice and political power
- *Breaking the mould* – a complete re-conceptualisation of the task in hand

The Geographical Association's manifesto, *A Different View* (2009), argues that geography 'seeks explanations about how the world works and helps us think about alternative futures'. Should we therefore be prepared to accept anything less?

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