

Education for geographical understanding

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Geography is one of humanity's big ideas. It literally means something like 'writing the world'. Thus, traditionally, geography is associated with rich descriptions of places. For many years geographers were almost synonymous with explorers, bringing back data of all kinds which could be added to the evolving maps and the world. To this day, atlases and globes are a source of endless fascination; the names, the shapes, the distributions, the relationships ... and these days brought to life through Google Earth and such like.

As with all subject disciplines, classifying these data about the world is vital. Hand-in-hand with this is the development of organising ideas, which help us *make sense* of the world and all its diversity. In this way, concepts such as place, region, location and interdependence have been developed which enable us to *think geographically*. For example, 'tropical rainforest' has particular characteristics and is found in certain regions around the world. Coniferous forest has different characteristics and distributions. There are reasons for this. And equally interesting and significant are the ways human beings use and sometimes abuse these particular environments.

In the early years of the twentieth century, when geography was in its infancy as a discipline (and building upon its exploration phase), thinking geographically was dominated by 'environmental determinism'. This is the idea that people were pretty much conditioned or limited by their physical environment. A deep form of racism was fuelled by this – for example,

in hot countries people cannot work hard and are lethargic. But today, geography is *the* subject on the curriculum that helps children understand that environments are made by people working, more or less successfully, with each other and with the physical world (the land, water and air). So geography is concerned with the social, the cultural, the economic and the political choice dimensions of our lives, as well as the physical world in which we live. These are the corner stones of the challenging notion of 'sustainable development'. Sustainable development has replaced environmental determinism.

Let us examine the implications of this. The primary curriculum certainly should begin to build children's geographical vocabularies of the world. For instance, the continents and countries, the oceans and rivers, major climate regions, cities ... and nearer home, features in the locality and local region and how this is situated in the nation, the British Isles and Europe. For without a vocabulary how can children think geographically? But such 'locational knowledge' is not a sufficient end in itself, and neither should it dominate. Although 'geography as locational knowledge' is what many imagine geography to be, in TV quiz shows and so forth, it is clear from the previous paragraphs that there is more to it than this. *It is a means for children to understand themselves in the world.*

Children, of course, *exist* in the world: they live somewhere; go shopping; have relatives who live elsewhere (often in distant places); they visit leisure centres, parks or football grounds; they eat food, consume electronic goods and toys and have friends with whom they communicate via the internet. Thinking geographically about their lives can be *very* interesting therefore. And, true to geography's traditional roots, this can be developed in the context of 'exploration' and

enquiry. Discovering the global connections of the local High Street for example can be most revealing. Investigating how children use the school playground – the popular areas, the dangerous zones, place that always seems to be windy, or quiet – this too is geographical investigation relating people and their environments (and the investigation in some cases could lead to recommendations to *improve* the environment).

And by the way, this kind of enquiry gets us outside the classroom, sharpening observation and the capacity to make sense of the ‘messy’ real world. Children often simply take for granted the world in which they live: that broken fence, those empty buildings, that lovely woodland, the cracked pavement: ‘it’s always been like that’. But it is exciting to grow an understanding of how all those things are changing, sometime quickly and sometimes very, very slowly.

Without providing the means to geographical understanding the primary school curriculum is inadequate. This is because denied the opportunity to develop the capability of thinking geographically children are not fully educated. They are limited in their capacity to grasp and address such fundamental questions as:

- Who am I, where am I from and who are these people around me?
- What is the world (and this place) made of, and why do things move and change?
- What is this place like, why is it as it is and how might it become?
- Who gets what, where, why – and why care?

For further inspiration and support:

www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview : the GA's manifesto for geography called *A Different View*. Images and lesson ideas to download

www.geography.org.uk/primary : The GA's primary pages. GA members get *Primary Geographer*, plus large discounts on *The Primary Handbook* and the extensive publications list.

www.teachinggeographytoday.org.uk : the DCSF-funded Action Plan for Geography website with information of primary 'curriculum-making' and the *Primary Geography Quality Mark*