

The Interim Report of the Independent Primary Review by Sir Jim Rose

Response from the Geographical Association

Executive Summary February 24th 2009

A Rationale for the Curriculum

- 1) **Status of subjects** We concur with the view that the National Curriculum is an entitlement for all children and that it should reflect what our society deems to be worthwhile knowledge, understanding and skills. However, whilst overriding pressure on a narrow band of achievement exists, overload will remain inevitable. A more balanced view of subject status in terms of value (if not time) would encourage and support teachers to think and plan in terms of a whole curriculum and to be encouraged to make rigorous links between subjects, and within and between areas of learning. For example:
 - *In defining 'well planned, cross-curricular studies' (para 1.47) it would be helpful to make reference to (as currently defined) both core and foundation subjects rather than making reference to core subjects only. In addition, clear references should be made to the value of subject areas such as geography and the inherent potential for contributing to achievement in core areas such as English and communication.*
 - *Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) offers the potential for recognition of geography as a superlative vehicle to '...help children apply and refine their reading, writing, speaking and listening... across the rest of their learning' (para 1.27).*
- 2) **Subject integrity** We agree wholeheartedly that subject integrity should be preserved as per Recommendation 4 and stress that in order for teachers to understand how to apply geography knowledge effectively, the curriculum must include clear and relevant underpinning concepts; specific mention of geographical skills and processes such as map work, fieldwork and enquiry, and clear signposts given to productive links between as well as within Areas of Learning.
- 3) **Support for teachers** It is essential that teachers are fully supported to develop subject expertise both through effective and redesigned teacher training programmes and through ongoing CPD. It might be helpful for teacher training programmes to focus on the Areas of Learning but programmes should rather strive to give trainees an understanding of the distinctiveness of individual subjects contribute to the Areas and of how integrated planning can be made rigorous. Ongoing CPD should seek to strengthen subject expertise and to enable confident and creative professional application of subject knowledge within a school's personalised curriculum.

Designing a curriculum is not just a technical matter, specifying objectives and a course of study to meet them. It is a moral concern, and should reflect what we think we should be teaching. This is why we believe the curriculum should be deeply influenced by confident, autonomous teachers. (GA 2009 p. 28)

- 4) **Aims and values** If the new curriculum is to fulfil its defining aims there needs to be a clear emphasis on sustainability and recognition of 'futures perspectives' both as a curricular dimension and more particularly through geography and its associated Area of Learning. It is especially relevant that the concept of sustainability is visible in the HSE

Area of Learning (Martin and Owens 2008) as geography is well placed to engage children intelligently with this field.

Geography deepens understanding: many contemporary challenges – climate change, food security, energy choices – cannot be understood without a geographical perspective’ (GA 2009 p.5).

5) Distinctiveness of the Primary Phase We agree that this is a vitally important time in children’s development. Not least, because children begin to develop attitudes and values at a very early age, which affect their predispositions. Early intervention through high quality teaching concerned with relevant material such as: everyday issues, learning about other cultures, countries and communities; is essential to challenge misconceptions and prejudiced attitudes. By the time children reach nine or ten years, unchallenged attitudes and values become entrenched and difficult to change.

Curriculum Design and content

6) Skills for learning and life We welcome a framework in which there are no longer core and non core subjects and the open acceptance that the concept of literacy has broadened. We believe that it is necessary to equip children with an array of ‘literacies’ in order to make sense of the changing world in the 21st century. Through geography, children develop core geographical skills such as graphicacy, and other visual, spatial and media literacies that enable them to make sense of the world around them. Geography also draws on and develops aspects of emotional literacy because it recognises that the centrality of place to people’s everyday lives is conceptualised in terms of emotional, affective and cognitive elements. In addition, research tells us that emotional and cognitive learning experiences work in tandem to support strong and enduring learning memories.

7) Skills for learning and life We disagree with the proposal that literacy, numeracy, ICT and personal development should be at the heart of the new curriculum as ‘skills for learning and life’. Personal development is not in itself a skill, and the focus on ICT, literacy and numeracy is too narrow. We suggest that a better focus for the skills for learning and life might be drawn from the Sustainable Schools’ agenda (of which there has been no mention in the Review to date) namely a focus on the notion of ‘Care – for oneself, for others and for the environment’ or perhaps ‘curiosity, communication and collaboration’ which would subsume ICT, literacy and numeracy but would also encompass other types of vital skills for learning and life and imply enquiry and action. We suggest that further consideration and discussion is given to this area and its components.

8) Importance statement and key ideas We agree that an importance statement should clarify the relevance of an area of learning to a child’s development; convey a sense of distinctiveness and inspire teachers. Care will be needed to convey the distinctiveness of all of the subjects in the proposed area of learning in which geography sits. Distinctive elements of geography are its concern with the world: understanding how and why diverse people, places and environments are connected, why and how they are changing and why it matters. ‘Living geography’ is a ‘brand’ of geography that:

- *‘is directly relevant to people’s lives and the world of work,*
- *is about change – recognises that the past helps explain the present, but is current and futures oriented,*
- *has a scale ‘zoom lens’, so that the local is always set in a global context,*

- *is 'deeply observant' – it looks beneath the surface to identify the mechanisms that change environments and societies*
 - *encourages a critical understanding of big ideas like 'sustainable development', 'interdependence' and 'globalisation'. (GA 2009 p.13)*
- 9) **Specific language** It would be extremely helpful to both teachers and pupils if specific language pertaining to subjects could be employed within the areas of learning. This would help identify what is being studied and would enable children to make more informed subject choices later on. Terms such as 'geography' and 'geographical' are essential components of the subject identity as are terms relating to germane geographical ideas, processes and skills.
- 10) **Key processes** We agree that there should be processes to develop specific skills needed to gain a better understanding of the key ideas. For the integrity of geography to be maintained, it is essential that there should be specific reference to the skills of enquiry, graphicacy and map work, fieldwork (as distinct from a more general reference to 'outdoor learning'), and the use of specific types of ICT such as GIS. There should also be specific reference to other essential tools such as maps, globes, compasses and atlases.
- 11) **Range and content** We welcome opportunities for child initiated enquiry and exploration and also opportunities to consult on what 'generic' range and content might look like in early primary before a proposed move to more subject based understanding in upper primary. We anticipate that the capabilities of very young children will be recognised – for example children in Reception are already using ICT programmes and tools such as robots to aid their understanding of simple map use and creation, whilst digital and video cameras are tools of choice for data collection. Reception children are also capable, albeit at a simple level, of enacting a whole cycle of enquiry involving not just asking simple questions, but gathering data, talking about what they have found out, making decisions and taking action, e.g. where in the playground can we site our compost bin?
- 12) **Curriculum coherence** We believe that it is essential to identify the significant contributions that each area of learning makes to others as there is a real danger that teachers may view the areas of learning as ring fenced constructs for themed curricular work. We view geography as being a subject that offers a resource within the curriculum for both focused and integrated teaching and learning. Geography synthesises other areas of learning well, drawing as it does on real life and everyday events in the world around us. Geography offers purposeful contexts for English, maths and ICT. Supported outdoor learning and fieldwork is known to raise levels of language acquisition through first hand engagement with the environment.

Literacy, Numeracy and ICT

- 13) **Priority** We welcome giving serious attention to the spoken language and specifically, developing the vocabulary germane to geography. As previously stated, children acquire environmental vocabulary through first hand experience and this provides a sound rationale for developing language capabilities in outdoor contexts and more specifically within fieldwork.
- 14) **ICT and Becta** As previously stated, ICT plays an important part within geography: both generic and particular kinds of software and hardware are used from early primary to support quality learning. For this reason we suggest that it might be useful for QCA to work with both Becta and subject associations.

Personal Development

- 15) **Strengthen provision** We welcome the statement that the provision for personal development will be strengthened and hope that this will be woven into each area of learning rather than appearing as a good deal of additional material. Personal development has always been a key part of geography: the relationship between environment and identity is well documented; people have different and ongoing relationships with their surroundings that shape who they are, what they do and how they feel. Geographical activities and contexts such as fieldwork, sustainability, school and Eco-councils all serve to strengthen the attributes of personal development, especially self esteem. Geography explores the different perceptions, views and values that people hold and helps to make them visible and comprehensible to others; it explores and actively values diversity and seeks, through the development of empathy, to respect and understand similarities and differences; it considers how people can improve and sustain environments and it provides an agenda of hope within a futures perspective in which pupils learn that they can make a difference.

Language

- 16) **Context** We advise that the learning of languages in order to ‘..gain insights into [their own] lives and those of others around the world’ (Para 2.108) would be enhanced through deliberate links with a sound framework of informed geography.
- 17) **Cultural understanding** With regard to Recommendation 16, we suggest that the area of learning entitled Human, Social and Environmental is also extremely relevant to the development of understanding and attitudes associated with learning a foreign language and that there should be direct allusion to the opportunities for gaining insights into other lives, and rich opportunities and contexts for e.g. role play and drama.

References:

GA 2009 *A Different View: a manifesto from the Geographical Association*, Sheffield: GA
This is a 32 page booklet supported by leaflets and a website – to be launched in April 2009 at the GA’s Annual Conference in Manchester

Martin, F. & Owens, P. *Caring for Our World: a practical guide to ESD for ages 4 – 8*, Sheffield: GA

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