

Making a case for school geography or fighting our curriculum corner round 2 or 3 or ... !

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We have been here before – several times, though as John Westaway suggests in 'A sustainable future for geography?', today's context is somewhat different, and now our audience includes school senior managers, as well as policy makers. Making a case for the contribution of geography to the school curriculum of the future is certainly part of our psyche as geography educators, though I am never quite convinced whether this is a fully beneficial or productive affair, often being left unsure who we are actually trying to convince.

There is an inevitability that has developed around 'making a case for school geography': we look back at what was (whether we recognise a 'golden age' or not), recognise the various factors why geography today is not faring as well as it might, and then prescribe 'what next for geography'. These discursive practices tend to delineate what can be seen, what can be said, what can be thought, and ultimately what can be done. Just as language makes some ways of saying and doing possible, it also makes other ways of saying and doing difficult, if not impossible. While I acknowledge the significance of the juxtaposition of current curriculum changes, the second phase of the Action Plan for Geography and the Government's Sustainable Schools Strategy, the problem is that the legacy of 'making a case for school geography' has been to normalise the way things are now ('what is' in terms of the school curriculum and the inevitable problematic nature of geography within it). This always seems to restrict 'the case for school geography' to rather opportunistic and often instrumentalist formulations for the future well-being of the discipline as a curriculum subject.

Leaving aside the real issue of resurrecting school and teacher curriculum development, of whether the new 'big picture' curriculum edifice is too complex, too prescriptive, not favourable for geography (nor, indeed, subjects in general), and will inevitably mean, within a culture of accountability and performance tables, that any creative curriculum change at the local level will be more illusory than real, is the proposal that geography takes a lead role in 'delivering' sustainable development a feasible one? The answer is 'no'. The proposal needs to be interpreted with reference to the macro-politics of New Labour's modernisation of Britain and its education system.

Very briefly, New Labour is a hybrid, composed of two strands: the neo-liberal which is dominant and the social democratic which is subordinate (Hall, 2003). We have a Government whose primary objective is still the achievement of economic growth as conventionally understood and measured, with as much social justice and environmental protection as can be reconciled with that central goal. Such ecological modernisation (Barry and Paterson, 2004) does not seek to limit overall levels of consumption nor does it share sustainable development's commitment to global justice. The primary goal should be the wellbeing of society itself and of the planetary resources and environment that sustains us all, with economic objectives shaped to support that central goal rather than the other way round' (Sustainable Development Commission, 2004). Government policy limits the potential of sustainable development; however we might wish to define it.

The neoliberal strand of New Labour's education policy involves opening education to business values, interests, and methods of management and funding. Its social democratic strand in terms of sustainable development serves only to ameliorate problems accentuated by the neoliberal strand. Sustainable development does not imply the affirmation of a neo-liberal economic model; rather, it proposes a world of solidarity that would accompany profound changes in existing economic arrangements; and a reassurance of democratic procedures.

Further, guidance on ESD is often unhelpful as it fails to recognise the contested nature and politics of sustainable development. The national framework for Sustainable Schools identifies 8 'doorways' as an integrated approach to the curriculum (teaching provision and learning), the school campus (values and ways of working) and community (wider influence and partnerships) but there is little to suggest that this framework could, or should, go beyond the ecological modernisation of the school and its community to reveal and challenge those interests and policies that render it difficult to make them truly sustainable.

There are currently major obstacles to students developing 'the skills, knowledge and value base to be active citizens in creating a more sustainable society' as the Sustainable Schools Strategy recommends. For educational and political reasons aligning geography so closely to the Sustainable Schools Strategy is unlikely to offer us a real chance of securing its curriculum future.

Barry, J. and Paterson, M. (2004) 'Globalisation, ecological modernisation and New Labour', *Political Studies*, 52, 4, pp. 767-84.

Hall, S. (2003) 'New Labour's double shuffle', *Soundings*, 24, pp. 10-24.

Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) (2004) *Shows Promise. But must try harder*. London: SDC.