ABSTRACT: This article is intended to stimulate discussion about the type of geography curriculum appropriate to young people growing up in Britain in the twenty-first century. It starts from the position that there is a gap between the type of geography taught in schools and that taught in universities. This gap is a spur to reflection as to what should be taught in schools. The article provides an historical analysis of curriculum change in geography, and seeks to place these changes in their wider economic and social contexts.

My starting point is the record of a little-remembered conference held at Queen Mary’s College just over 30 years ago. The papers collected in Change and Tradition: Geography’s new frontiers provide a useful starting point for an analysis of curriculum change in schools and for thinking about the relationship between geography as studied and taught in universities and in schools. The conference was a response to the changes that had taken place in the academic subject since the mid-1960s and looked to explore the implications of these changes for school geography.

In their contribution to the conference, entitled ‘Reformation and revolution in human geography’, David Smith and Philip Ogden stated the problem clearly:

‘The past two decades have seen a number of important changes in human geography. While their major impact has been on the conduct of research and on the teaching of geography at the university level, these changes also have important implications for geography in school. Some of the new approaches have been slow to spread into school textbooks and teaching, with the result that students entering university are often unprepared for the kind of geography that awaits them’ (1977, p. 47).

What is striking about this statement is that although the ‘important changes’ are those brought about by the change from ‘old style’ regional geography to the new ‘scientific’ geography, it could apply just as well to the various ‘isms’ associated with what, for the sake of brevity, I will call the ‘cultural turn’. Smith and Ogden continued:

‘Responsibility for the gap between human geography at school and in university lies in both institutions. Schools are bound by a syllabus designed de facto by a board of examiners who may be unfamiliar with recent developments in the field or disinclined to accept them. School teachers may be understandably reluctant to change their approach to accommodate every shift in the thinking of the avant garde of the profession. In the universities, those pioneering and adopting new approaches tend to write for colleagues rather than for students. Even university students may have to
wait some years for a textbook that adequately explains a new method of analysis at a level that they can understand’ (p. 47).

Smith and Ogden’s paper was concerned to outline some of the important changes taking place in human geography and suggest their implications for teaching. They stressed that changes in the objects of study and the methods used to study them do not emanate simply from the discipline, but reflect in some way the conditions of the time. They pointed out that changes in academic disciplines do not occur in isolation, but reflect the society in which they take place. From this perspective, the quantitative revolution and its focus on spatial science reflected an era of faith in technological progress.

However, the late 1960s and early 1970s saw the ‘rediscovery of poverty’ in the United States, and the advent of the so-called ‘relevance’ debate in geography led to heightened concern with spatial and social justice. This led to divisions between those who adopted a liberal view of society that saw it as amenable to manipulation and reform (e.g. problem areas had distinctive characteristics) and those who adopted a more radical perspective which argued the need for system transformation (e.g. problem areas are a product of uneven capitalist development). According to the latter view, the ‘new’ geography associated with locational analysis was ‘in fact, profoundly conservative, as it reified “the spatial” as the basis of the subject matter of the discipline’.

These themes were developed by Roger Lee (1977) in his introduction to the collection of papers: ‘The ivory tower, the blackboard jungle and the corporate state. A provocation on teaching progress in geography’. Lee stressed that the new geography appeared to offer a radical break but in fact accepted the ‘heritage of the old geography and the adoption of its basic definitions and categories’. This meant that there was the illusion of change but it was at the level of methodology rather than philosophy. However, the materialist revolution ‘demands a fundamental restructuring of philosophy and so of the whole field of geographical enquiry’. Locational analysis, concerned as it was with patterns and appearances, had ‘no notion whatsoever of historical process and the dynamic of society’. For Lee, the challenge to, and eventual rejection of, this approach was the result of the realisation that these models did not offer a realistic account of how the world works (this understanding came from the ‘blackboard jungle, not from the ivory tower’).

In concluding his provocation, Lee argued that the pressures facing geography as a discipline ‘demand the breakdown of the educational hierarchy to allow real co-operation amongst teaching geographers’. It is not just a case of progress in geography but the relations between academic progress as a whole and developments in society.

Lee (1983) developed these ideas in a later article ‘Teaching geography: the dialectic of structure and agency’. In this article Lee explains the materialist view of society. Ideas about society do not appear as if by magic, but emerge from and reflect the nature of society itself. Societies are always being made and remade, and it is ideas about society that shape that process. The underlying motor of this social construction and reconstruction is the dialectical relationship between ‘real people’ (or agents) and the ‘real context’ (or structure) which is made by people to provide their own conditions of existence. This dialectic between social structure and human agency is ‘the most fundamental idea to impart through education’ because it makes people aware of their own ability to influence the world.
Lee shows how the new geography based on positivism and quantifiable models arose from a context where there was optimism about the ability of technology to solve spatial problems. Importantly, he goes on to show how even more progressive forms of geographical knowledge based on welfare geography and ‘issues-based’ approaches (such as those that were developed in the various geographical curriculum projects of the 1970s) are ultimately ideological because they tend to focus on the problems themselves rather than inquire into the nature of the society that creates those issues.

Lee argues for the development of a societal geography which incorporates the ‘idea and reality of the connections between the social and material conditions of life which are central to the making and history of geography’. He recognises that this requires ‘nothing less than a rewrite of the curriculum’. Teachers are central to this, since they are the ones who have to make the curriculum:

‘My prescription for change is schematic; it is high on armchair theory and minimizes practical problems. Yet, it is important that the curriculum is rewritten from the bottom up, rather than the top down; from the blackboard jungle, rather than from the ivory tower. The diverse lives of children in the classroom must provide the raw material’ (p. 108).

Understanding curriculum development in school geography

These arguments about the nature of change in geographical knowledge are important in helping to understand the nature of curriculum development in school geography. Rawling (2000) has characterised the 1970s as the era of curriculum development in school geography with a series of projects sponsored by the Schools Council.Whilst this is true, it is important to clarify the ideological role that the Schools Council projects played in this period. The Schools Council was established in 1964 in the midst of the Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s ‘white heat of technology’ era. Prior to this, the curriculum had been the business of school teachers, so much so that Sir David Eccles, the Minister of Education, spoke in 1962 of the need for the government to break into ‘the secret garden of the curriculum’. In political terms the 1960s was a decade of corporatism in which there was a supposed concordance between the state, workers and industry. Education was seen as a means of resolving the contradictions of a class-divided society:

‘Working-class voters were being told that their problem was the lack of equal opportunities, created by a class-divided society. Industrialists were being told that a skilled workforce was a prerequisite for industrial efficiency and economic growth’ (Wolpe and Donald, 1983, p. xii).

The Schools Council projects were an attempt to examine the question of what types of curriculum might be suited to the needs of a modern economy. In geography these were ones that drew upon the new concept-based geography rooted in models of spatial location. There were also projects for the young school leaver responding to the raising of the school leaving age (ROSLA) which eventually occurred in 1973. The Schools Council became identified with the introduction of progressive theory and practice, endorsing teacher professionalism and school-based curriculum development. The projects shifted power in the definition of curriculum planning and expertise to the education departments of universities, marked by the emergence of a distinctive field of study called ‘geographical education’. Huckle summarises the impact of these developments:

‘The new or reformed geography, introduced into schools in the early 1970s, brought great changes in subject content, teaching and learning methods, and curriculum design and evaluation. Geography as a science was seen by many as superior to a descriptive, factual geography, and its component concepts and ideas not only offered more logical and complete knowledge but were amenable to rational curriculum planning. Its methodology brought exciting new techniques and instructional possibilities, and the attendant need for mathematics changed the appearance of many textbooks and blackboards. New geography enabled many teachers to increase their use of enquiry-based methods and their move to more informal classrooms was encouraged by Schools Council projects and in-service education. Such agencies also prompted geography teachers to regard themselves as professionals with new roles and responsibilities, supported by new skills in curriculum development and implementation’ (1983, p. 1).

A whole series of texts was produced that served to initiate geography teachers and socialise them into received patterns of curriculum planning. However, in these texts there was little reference to other influences on curriculum debates from a philosophical, historical or sociological perspective. The result was that curriculum planning within geography was constructed as a rational process, reflected in the neat symmetrical diagrams that populate the pages of these texts – planning grids, routes to enquiry, etc. In line with the tenor of the ‘new’ geography, curriculum development in the subject tended to promote a particular form of geographical knowledge based on a
The class-based nature of the geography that informed these curriculum development projects was challenged in the early 1980s by critics associated with the Association of Curriculum Development in Geography and its journal Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education. The cover of the first issue of the journal had a black and white photograph of two children standing on the concrete decks of a council estate, with a large block of flats behind. It was clear that, given the journal’s stated aim to ‘examine the ideological content of geographical education in relation to its political context’, this was a comment on the question of whose geography was reflected in the school curriculum.

The end of ‘consensus’

The previous section argued that the curriculum projects that represented the ‘Golden Age’ thrived in the space created by the social democratic consensus. Teachers worked within the ideology of welfare liberalism and professional autonomy which was dominated by ideas of equal opportunities and educational progressivism. This space was curtailed from the early 1980s with the onset of economic recession: moves to restore profitability led to the breakdown of social democracy in education. As far as the curriculum was concerned, new ways had to be found of purveying the ideologies, attitudes and behaviours necessary for loyal and disciplined workers during a time of economic crisis and high youth unemployment. With respect to how geography was taught in schools, there were attempts to stress the vocational relevance of the subject through initiatives such as the Geography Schools and Industry Project and the promotion of information technologies in geography classrooms. As the decade wore on, conservative education politics was dominated by the need to return to ‘tradition’ which was reflected in the promotion of an anachronistic curriculum (memorably described by Ball (1994) as a ‘curriculum of the dead’).

The establishment of a national curriculum effectively defined the ‘content’ of school geography, and teachers were subject to an era of ‘new professionalism’ which stressed the possession of a set of pedagogical skills and renewed focus on ‘learning’ and pedagogy. Moore (2006) summarises the state of curriculum discussion in the past two decades:

‘In England in particular, some of the more fundamental debates about curriculum selection, modes of assessment, models of learning and pedagogy, issues of cultural inclusion and exclusion, indeed the very purposes of public schooling and pedagogy, had seemed in danger of becoming overly focused on government interventions that had produced a prescriptive national curriculum, an outcomes-driven system of school inspection, a rapid and heavy increase in a very narrow but very high stakes system of national testing, and the development of national literacy and numeracy strategies and detailed training programmes for beginning teachers that had begun to tell school teachers not just what to teach but how they should teach it’ (p. 1).

In short, since 1988 the work of geography teachers has become increasingly tied to the needs of the economy and operated through the mechanisms of the state. This goes some way to explaining the continued (and widening?) gap between geography as taught in schools and geography as taught at universities. In human geography the response to the break-up of consensus was, from the early 1980s, a series of studies that sought to understand the processes of economic and social change and its impact on different social groups. There was a significant political shift to the left as human geographers produced texts that broke with the earlier traditions of location theory and instead sought to develop analyses that showed how space and society were dialectically linked; there was a strong injection of Marxist political economy in much of this work.

Throughout the 1980s geographers published a series of texts that sought to describe and explain these changes, and many took on a critical edge, seeking to understand the ways in which the restructuring of capitalism and the state impacted on people and places (e.g. Massey, 1984; Short, 1984). At a time of the ‘crisis of the left’ there were debates about the nature of progressive politics. The ‘new times’ analysis associated with the magazine Marxism Today offered an influential account of how the left should respond to the changes that were taking place in British society during the 1980s (Hali and Jacques, 1989). The new times sought to recognise that Britain had become a more fluid society. It seemed as if various social groups had become unanchored from their traditional moorings in the class system. Though class still mattered, it was only one factor that provided the basis for the construction of identity (others included gender, generation, ethnicity and sexuality). The
decline of manufacturing and the growth of consumerism all contributed to the sense that this was a time of rapid social change (see Clarke, 1991, for a review). These changes had their own emergent geographies reflected in the redevelopment of shopping centres and out-of-town malls, new places to play and work, and the growth of the service class. While a good deal of the work of human geographers in the 1980s was concerned to describe and explain the processes that were leading to the transformation of Britain (often mapping what Mohan (2000) called the ‘cartographies of distress’), increasingly geographers recognised how the new times had changed the physical and social spaces in which people lived their lives. New towns and patterns of settlement, new spaces for consumption such as the mall, redeveloped town centres in the wake of the decline of manufacturing, new goods and services to consume, and the breakdown of established gender relations all offered new opportunities for constituting identities and producing meanings with which to give shape to everyday life.

The new times were closely associated with cultural studies and this was represented by the development of the so-called new cultural geography which attempted to engage with the ways in which individuals and groups construct meaning in situations in which so many of the parameters of economic, political and social life have shifted.

Though the new times have proved to be controversial, the move away from a position where culture is seen as a mere reflection of the economic base to one where it is seen as an active construction has led to exciting work in the field of social and cultural geography. In British human geography, the text that best reflected the challenges of the new times was Peter Jackson’s (1989) Maps of Meaning which sought to understand the significance of these changes in cultural terms. As Jackson asks at the start of his book:

‘What is there about the current politics of fiscal retrenchment, privatization, and economic recession in Thatcher’s Britain or Bush’s America that might be relevant to a revival of interest in cultural studies? Why have such phrases as “enterprise culture”, “Victorian values”, and “moral majority” gained such sudden salience? Is the age of the yuppy and corporate culture, of urban heritage and rural nostalgia, of football hooliganism and inner-city rioting a response to national economic decline? Or does it not also represent the growing confidence of the “consumption classes” and the increasing alienation of the impoverished and despairing “underclass”, each with its own distinctive geography?’ (p. 5).

Jackson is concerned with cultural politics and to show how struggles over culture were wrapped up with ideology. At the end of the book he notes that maps of meaning ‘codify knowledge and represent it symbolically’ (p. 186). But like all maps they are ideological instruments in that they project a preferred reading of the material world, with prevailing social relations mirrored in the depiction of physical space. The cultural turn in human geography is characterised by a diversity of approaches. Critics such as Chris Hamnett have questioned the relevance of much of this work, suggesting that a ‘substantial amount of work appears to me to be simply linguistic game playing of minimal relevance to wider economic, social, environmental and political concerns’ (2001, p. 167). Though Hamnett focuses on a few well-chosen examples to make his argument, I would suggest that from a pedagogical perspective it is always important to examine the ways in which culture is put to work in classrooms and lecture halls. At its best, the cultural turn has allowed for a widening of the conversation about the type of society we want to live in. As Angela McRobbie wrote in the final edition of Marxism Today:

‘Cultural politics could be seen then as a resource, the resource for disempowered and disenfranchised groups … Post-60s cultural politics exists in relation to education, and higher education in particular. If it is in culture that things are felt and thought through
collectively, and if it is in the emergent forms and expressions that this complex process reaches out to a wider audience, then it is in education that another kind of space is opened up, where what seemed like natural or spontaneous or simply unconscious events and phenomena can be reflected upon and understood. In this sense, both culture and a kind of educational practice which allows for this kind of reflectiveness can be seen as sources of social mobility, in the good sense’ (p. 27).

Re-culturing school geography

The 1988 Education Act inaugurated a period when, in curricular terms, state schooling in England was organised around strong centralised control of provision, through national curriculum legislation, opposition to local diversity, and in particular to any strong response to ethnic or class-based subcultures, a defence of tradition against innovation and nation against cosmopolis, an emphasis on print-centred culture and a rejection of new media cultures (Buckingham and Jones, 2001). Thus, while children have been addressed by commercial cultures that position them as agential and sophisticated consumers, at school they are expected to submit to tradition. This can be seen in the apparent mismatch between the growing interest in children’s geographies and the geographies of young people and the lack of children’s interests in the school curriculum.

There are signs that this is coming to an end. Recent education policy documents are full of talk of culture, innovation, creativity and personalisation. In these documents schools and teachers are urged to interpret the national curriculum in ways that are innovative and creative. This is part of a complex set of changes. The most important of these is the economic new times, where it is argued that globalisation is leading to the development of a ‘knowledge economy’. Knowledge is seen as ‘the primary source of economic productivity’ and the economy requires new types of workers who are creative, innovative, and able to cope with risk and uncertainty. Craft (2005) suggests that business needs people who are able to work in a team, and are emotionally and socially intelligent, and this is reflected in educational reforms that seek to change the nature of schooling and curriculum. However, it is not only in the discourse of business that culture is invoked. In the 1980s and 1990s, the conservative notion of culture, organised around race, nation, tradition and authority dominated educational politics, but Labour has embraced notions of cultural diversity and multiculturalism.

These developments have been used by geography educators to argue for a new round of curriculum development in schools. In recent years, there has been a series of curriculum innovations and pedagogical texts that seek to incorporate into school geography elements of cultural geography as written about and taught in higher education (see Taylor, 2003).

While the ‘cultural turn’ offers genuine opportunities for curriculum development in school geography and suggests ways of exploring the links between school and university geography, there are potential problems when ideas from cultural geography are picked up and translated into classroom activities without a clear understanding of the intellectual contexts in which those ideas were developed and the pedagogical contexts in which they are implemented (see Morgan, 2007).

What type of cultural geography for what type of geography education?

What are the implications of this argument for curriculum development? Hatcher (2000) suggests that school knowledge has two dimensions. The first is its intrinsic meaning or the extent to which it engages the pupil’s interest and becomes internalised in the pupil’s mental structures and integral to how the child understands the world. The second is its extrinsic meaning or the extent to which it is seen as having instrumental value, in particular in terms of gaining qualifications which provide access to future career and educational destinations after school. Pupils from middle-class homes are likely to have the ‘cultural’ capital to succeed with school knowledge. Hatcher suggests that there are three approaches to the relationship between school knowledge and pupils.

The first assumes that children need to know what the academic disciplines teach, because that gives access to a general culture and to the most developed account of the wider world. This argument underpinned the development of the national curriculum, which was seen as offering a similar entitlement for all. The problem is that attempts to get most children to ‘buy into’ academic knowledge create difficulties. The second approach is to develop knowledge that is designed to prepare students for the ‘world of work’. The problem here is that this vocational knowledge tends to have lower status. A third way of thinking about the relationship between pupils and school knowledge is that pupils should have access to formal knowledge via learning which begins with their own experience and the forces that shape it, but does not stop there. The approach neither accepts the existing organisation of academic knowledge nor simply inverts it. It organises the curriculum around questions about work, the home, leisure, new technology, identity and so on (Quicke, 2001).
These different orientations to knowledge have implications for how academic knowledge is handled in school geography. Concepts and theories from cultural geography could be imported into examination specifications so that pupils are asked to deconstruct representations of landscapes. Alternatively, teachers could seek to develop curricula that allow pupils to explore their own experience and ‘understand how societies are made and remade, and how landscapes and human-environment relations change in the process’ (Huckle, 1985).

Cultural geography has an important part to play in realising the type of critical geographical education advocated by Lee, Huckle and others. However, it will require close attention to the notion of culture that is put to work in pedagogical projects. The development of the new cultural geography in the UK was strongly influenced by the work of the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at Birmingham. For the Birmingham School, the study of ‘youth’ was a political project that aimed to understand how class reproduction is undertaken in a period of rapid social change. Culture was the way that ‘groups handled the “raw” materials of their social and material experience and, especially, their class experience’ (Clarke et al., 1976). Much of this work was concerned with spectacular ‘rituals of resistance’ associated with youth subcultures, but it is important to recognise that the CCCS researchers were also interested in the experience of youth in the formal settings of school and training. Perhaps the most famous of these studies was Paul Willis’s (1977) Learning to Labour, with the subtitle ‘How working class kids get working class jobs’, but the CCCS (1981) also published Unpopular Education which explored the emergence of the post-war social democratic consensus in education and explained the failure of this ‘settlement’ in terms of how it failed to provide working-class children with ‘really useful knowledge’. During the mid-1980s the series Youth Questions (edited by Phil Cohen and Angela McRobbie) sought to explore the relationships between the formal cultures of the school and the material cultures of young people. In the introduction to Schooling for the Dole? John Clarke and Paul Willis (1984) wrote about the tendency in educational writing to see the pupil as ‘an essentially malleable bit of human clay’. The business of schooling is to mould a pupil into a future adult and the argument is over the ‘ideal’ model of the future adult – honest citizen, good worker, caring family person, critical and informed voter and so on – which the school is then organised and empowered to produce. Clarke and Willis point out that most working-class children have never been concerned with what the ideal models are supposed to be, but instead are focused on the challenges of earning a wage in order to gain power as a consumer, developing sexual identities and making the break from the parental home. Clarke and Willis argue that schools and their ideal models have never really taken into account this ‘material culturalism’ of growing up in the working class, but point out that handling the gap between the ‘official’ and the ‘real’ is the stuff of which everyday teaching is constructed. Teachers have to find ways to make a connection between the educational ideals as set out in policy documents and the actual lives of their pupils, and this can only be achieved through trying to see how the transition is understood and lived by the young people involved and to start from here to work out a relevant curriculum.

While it would be premature to define the themes that might make up this ‘relevant curriculum’, it would be concerned to explore and evaluate the worlds of employment, work and leisure and question the domestic division of labour between them. It would allow for a critical engagement with the processes and products of technical change. In a world in which social relations are stretched over space it should provide an introduction to people and places and to the workings of the media, and should allow for participation in schooling and communities. Given the centrality of consumption in young people’s lives it should allow for a sensitive and critical exploration of the pleasures and costs of buying and consuming goods.

It should not be necessary to labour the contribution that geography could make to such a curriculum.
However, it may be useful to highlight the types of work that seem to be easily amenable to this task. A focus on the worlds of work and employment is central to a relevant future-oriented curriculum. However, the models of economic space found in school geography are extremely limiting, offering little indication of how economic space is socially constructed and therefore suggesting that there are no genuine alternatives to current patterns of work (and non-work) and employment (Lee et al., 2003; Williams, 2005, 2007; Castree et al., 2003). In such a curriculum, questions of how the spaces in which young people play and work and are shaped and controlled are likely to be to the fore, and there is much within the literature of social and cultural geography that could be used to develop teaching approaches (Skelton and Valentine, 1998; Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). Similarly there is a good deal of relevant literature concerned with identity, consumption and the body that could inform curriculum development that is genuinely interdisciplinary and explores in a critical way the spaces of everyday life (Moran, 2005; Nayak, 2005).

**Conclusion**

This article has provided an account of curriculum developments in school geography during the last three decades. It has sought to understand debates about curriculum development in a wider social, economic and cultural context. The advantage of this approach is that it allows us to see that debates over what constitutes valuable geographical knowledge are not neutral, but reflect important ideas about children’s lives and their role in society. The latter part of the article suggested that there are currently opportunities for geography educators to re-shape the nature of the geography curriculum, and that insights from cultural geography could inform these developments.

**References**


