Reviewing the case for geography, and the ‘knowledge turn’ in the English national curriculum

Professor David Lambert, Institute of Education

Introduction

The 2010 Schools White Paper, The Importance of Teaching, sets the British government’s policy direction for education for England. It has reinforced the idea that in England all state schools (including academies and free schools) ‘will be required by law to teach a broad and balanced curriculum’ (p42). This is currently delivered through subjects although ‘traditional’ subjects have been under attack now for a number of years as more ‘progressive’ skills and competency based curricula have been advocated as fit for the knowledge economy of the 21st century.

The White Paper indicates that geography is one of the ‘traditional subject disciplines’ that will enable the curriculum to ‘embody rigour and high standards’. However, it also suggests the state’s direct involvement in attempting to lay down the child’s ‘whole experience’ – by implication the 2007 national curriculum ‘Big Picture’ (QCDA 2007) - has been an error. The clearest statement of this in the White Paper is on page 10 where we read: ‘At present, the National Curriculum includes too much that is not essential knowledge, and there is too much prescription about how to teach.’ It continues by asserting that ‘the guidance on the National curriculum is weighing teachers down and squeezing out room for innovation, creativity, deep learning and intellectual exploration’ (p40).

For me, what this points to is the significance of the role of teachers as curriculum makers, summarised in Figure 1. There is not the space, and it is probably not necessary, to expand on this notion in any detail here (see Lambert and Morgan 2010 Chapter 3), but it is worth emphasising a key reason why curriculum making is significant. It is in the explicit distinctions between the main curriculum making resources - subject, pedagogy and learning – and the school teacher’s need to keep all three in mind.

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1 A version of this paper appears in the May 2011 special issue of the Curriculum Journal Vol 22 No 2 ‘Reviewing the curriculum 5-19 two decades on’

2 d.lambert@ioe.ac.uk. David Lambert is also Chief Executive of the Geographical Association (www.geography.org.uk).
Fig 1. The resources for teachers’ curriculum making in geography. (Source: Lambert and Morgan 2010)

The school teacher’s intellectual work is to draw from each of the resource domains. Complex choices and selections have to be made about content, context, the needs of learners and pedagogic approaches. These decisions are guided, ultimately by a sense of purpose or educational vision translated into curriculum goals. The teacher needs to hold the competing demands of these domains in some kind of balance and there are many reasons why this is best done locally, not least the knowledge of the learners and other particular situated matters (including the knowledge and qualifications of the teachers). But no matter how skilful is the pedagogic adventure (bottom left circle) or intriguing are the students’ experiences and personal demands (top circle), the goals must be derived partly from material matters and insights completely external to the situation, the pupil or indeed the teacher, school – or even government. This is one of the most important reasons why the subject disciplines matter. The independent development of subject disciplines as distinctive ‘ways of seeing’ is not the only thing that matters, but in recent years it may not have mattered enough in schools.

Thus, despite the existence of a national curriculum – or possibly, because of the existence of a national curriculum – teachers have turned away from ‘knowledge’ and in my view have been encouraged to over-invest energy into pedagogy and almost make a fetish out of ‘learning’. The White Paper appears to signal a return to knowledge and to teaching and so can be welcomed.
The rest of this paper examines the opportunities and the potential bear traps that may result, for the theoretical frameworks that teachers have at their disposal to interpret a ‘knowledge turn’ in schools are possibly inadequate. It would be desirable in my view to avoid simplistic, polarised debates which needlessly encourage the adoption of oppositional positions, particularly that old chestnut of knowledge vs skills.

The role of knowledge in the geography curriculum: a perspective

The White Paper calls for a review of the national curriculum some two decades after its introduction following the Education Reform Act of 1988. It is worth reflecting briefly on this period and the two decades before that. Let’s pick up the story in the 1970s, when (almost) universal comprehensive education had been introduced in England and the school leaving age had been raised to 16 years. In the wake of the so-called conceptual revolution in geography (which in effect led to the end of regional geography, derided for its gazetteer approach to knowing the world), there were three influential Schools Council curriculum projects in geography and numerous other exciting developments that had a profound effect on the teaching of geography, such as the emergence of development education and environmental education both of which were in their infancy at that time. These were heady times to begin a teaching career, mainly because of the responsibility one felt for the curriculum and the awareness one had of the significance of the content selections made. During this period there were arguments about the nature of geography and its relevance in schools, of paradigm shifts and of disciplinary integrity. Such debates helped provide a robust defence against any perceived threats to geography’s rightful curriculum space (Goodson 1983) and an anchor to energetic pedagogic developments which also characterised these times - for example, the late Rex Walford’s influential work on games and simulations as a classroom strategy (see Walford 1969; 2007).

Of course, all this needs to be placed in wider social, economic and political context too, as Lambert and Morgan (2010) have tried to do in the early chapters of their book Teaching Geography 11-18: a conceptual approach. But the professional response to the times utilised a certain kind of professional language: ‘curriculum planning’ (Graves 1979), ‘evaluating the curriculum’ (Marsden 1976), geography as a ‘medium of education’ (Naish 1985) and ‘learning through geography’ (Slater 1982) are phrases that perhaps capture this. It was essentially a curriculum language, accompanied by apparatus such as planning matrices, the 16-19 Project’s so-called ‘route for enquiry’ and the need to distinguish aims from objectives. All this made considerable demands on teachers and their capacity individually and collectively to engage in curriculum planning.
Thinking. Indeed one of the key publications from the Schools Council 14-18 Geography Project unashamedly referred to a ‘new professionalism’ for geography teaching (Hickman et al 1973).

Things changed with the introduction of the national curriculum for geography in 1991. Eleanor Rawling has provided an excellent commentary in Changing the Subject (Rawling 2001), in effect a case study of the impact of policy change on a subject specific curriculum domain (geography), from the ‘golden’ period of curriculum development described above, to the turn of the century. She urged a return to school based curriculum development in the new century, showing how the ‘new professionalism’ involving curriculum thinking had been undermined by the introduction of the national curriculum. This is interesting, not least from the knowledge point of view. Rex Walford, like Rawling an insider to the national curriculum working group which composed the 1991 programme of study for geography, has written that

‘central to the proposals was a concern to ensure a return to a more secure base of knowledge, given some of the apparent effects of curriculum experiments in the 1970s and 1980s’ (Walford 1996, p 136).

There is more than a slight feeling of déjà vu in the 2010 proposals, therefore, in the demand to restore essential knowledge.

Apart from any political intention that can be argued and debated, we can be critical of the resultant form given to the initial iteration of the ‘statutory order’ in 1991. Each key stage specified a balanced sample from across the whole of ‘geography’. The order was perceived to be very content heavy therefore, and thus simply delivering the legal ‘requirements’ became the main priority for teachers. This was often done via textbook ‘coverage’: for example, in the case of key stage three a single textbook series Key Geography [Waugh and Bushell 1991], which claimed to cover the national curriculum, quickly came to dominate the market – indeed, the ubiquity of this book was a market phenomenon (Lambert 1999). Alternatively, as in the case of many primary schools, reassurance was sought from an over-reliance on ‘official’ schemes of work. It is probably true that many more schools than ever before had documented schemes of work for geography, all ready for inspection, but curriculum implementation is not the same as curriculum making and has nothing like the same potential for innovation and creativity. Not for nothing have many commentators argued that the national curriculum played a part in ‘de-professionalising’ teachers, or at least in Judyth Sachs’ more nuanced terms, undermined the development of a confident ‘activist’ profession. (Sachs 2003).
Thus, it is true that school geography became somewhat ‘stuck’ (Lambert 2004) and in some ways dangerously disconnected from the wider academic discipline (Goudie 1993; Castree et al 2007). Moreover, subsequent reforms of the national curriculum through the 1990s tended to reduce and simplify the statutory order without substantially changing the form which it took. Arguably, the significance of geographical knowledge in the school curriculum was undermined, especially in the primary schools where, in 1997, the geography curriculum (along with history) was temporarily suspended to encourage schools to concentrate on the new literacy and numeracy strategies. This perhaps signalled a more serious threat to geography in both primary and secondary schools than that associated with the essentially internalist debates about the soul of school geography. What I have in mind here are the cultural and economic influences that value skills over knowledge and the acquisition of discrete competences and ‘learning how to learn’ over understanding. In neoliberal times, with the introduction of a competitive school system and the ‘dangerous rise of therapeutic education’ (Ecclestone and Hayes 2009; see also Lambert and Morgan 2009), such thinking can be promoted and driven into schools by a new kind of education entrepreneur: Building Learning Power (Claxton 2002) is one example of this. It should be emphasised that in responding to initiatives of this kind, especially one with curriculum as well as pedagogic implications such as RSA’s Opening Minds, it is the ‘humane’ subjects like geography that tend to be sacrificed in order to provide the space.

Alex Standish (2007; 2009) would go further, arguing that school geography itself has been appropriated by external agenda (often willingly) as a vehicle for indoctrination through moralising on global and environmental issues, and thus corrupted from its main educational function (see Lambert and Morgan 2009). On the other hand, Standish fails to acknowledge and is insensitive to some of the ways the discipline has adapted and changed since the ‘new’ geographies of the last century, and notably the significant curriculum possibilities to be derived from the ‘cultural turn’ in contemporary geography (see for example Morgan 2008).

I am arguing here that although the intentions of the White Paper may be ideological, the review of the national curriculum may be better understood in broader context. First, there are good reasons for the review, to take stock of some profoundly important trends that have taken hold in recent years. And secondly, there are probably some lessons to learn from previous attempts at writing the national curriculum. It seems that fundamental questions concern the proper limits of a national curriculum, the form it should take and how this should interact with the intellectual work that must lie behind teachers’ practical curriculum making activity. Underlying such questions are some trends in relation to the place of geographical knowledge in the
curriculum. The Schools Council projects introduced the idea that subject knowledge was not an end point in education, but a vehicle contributing to educational ends (geography as a ‘medium of education’). The 1991 national curriculum can be interpreted as an attempt to restore subject knowledge. Given the developments in the discipline and in wider society, this looked out of step even then, and in many respects it failed despite initial enthusiasm in some quarters (there is certainly less geography being taught in schools twenty years on). This is not to argue for giving up on knowledge in schools. It is more a case for sharpening our gaze on the role of knowledge in education and what teachers should be doing with it.

Before expanding on these themes more fully we need to say something more specific about geography, for the subject matter should never be taken for granted. The following section opens up, albeit briefly, geography as an idea and its place on the school curriculum. This is provides some purchase to the educational vision that must lie behind a slightly more operational list of content, such as found in Appendix A. The latter is an attempt to provide a minimalist knowledge framework for geography. Although practical in intent, such a document may remain inert unless theorised more deeply, which the following section now tries to do.

School geography

Geography is, as Alastair Bonnett says, one of humanity’s big ideas (Bonnett 2007). It is concerned with producing and communicating knowledge about the world: its places, its morphology, its features and patterns. Thinking geographically provides us with a deeper understanding of the human occupation of the earth. All children and young people deserve the best geographical education therefore, as it contributes significantly to their knowledge and understanding of their place in the world. It teaches us about human relationships across the globe, and the interactions of people with the physical environment.

Geography is a linking discipline. It links with science, with the arts and with other humanities subjects like history. In schools where geography in strong, the subject can help with curriculum coherence as well as satisfy pupils’ curiosity about people and places. Geography also offers opportunities to develop a broader skills and knowledge set. This is particularly the case with ICT and the enormous potential of digital mapping, visualisers and GIS. In strong secondary school geography departments many students are able to keep their post-14 options open by choosing geography: students can be inspired by challenging and engaging questions concerning

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3 See the Geographical Association’s ‘manifesto’ for school geography A Different View (www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview)

4 Computerised ‘Geographical Information System’s, allowing the powerful analysis of spatially arranged data
society and environment, drawing on diverse sources and data; and based upon deep description and scientific explanation of contemporary change.

Developing a deeper understanding of people and place, of humanity’s home on planet earth, is more important than ever in today’s world. Thus, in schools where geography is weak, as it sometimes is in primary schools and Key Stage 3 (Ofsted 2008; 2011), children are denied crucial elements of a broad and balanced education for life. Children will have a narrower conception of the world and lack knowledge of both physical and human environments. They will have missed out on fieldwork and the power of learning directly in the world, experiencing the particularity of places and environments. They will have been denied the opportunity to think about change in the contemporary world and how to imagine alternative futures (see Hicks 2007).

Thus, if geography is found to be weak in school, the curriculum experience of children as a whole suffers. The curriculum is impoverished in particular ways, and its educational potential diminished. It is therefore a matter of concern that geography’s place in the curriculum has been undermined during the last fifteen years. This is not the place for a detailed analysis of this particular aspect of curriculum history, but relevant and sometimes conflicting accounts can be found in Lambert (2004), Rawling (2001), Standish (2007), Stannard (2003) Walford (2001) and Winter (2009).

The subject disciplines offer particular challenges to teachers. The preoccupations of science teachers, English teachers, mathematics teachers and geography teachers are all different. Thus, many geography teachers take great pride in being topical: ‘geography in the news’ is a commonplace theme for the notice board. The geographer’s intense interest in describing and explaining the changing world as it is (or appears to be) perhaps accounts for why practical curriculum making skills are vital in geography teaching, for topicality per se is arguably not really the point. Geography lessons are not to be reduced to ‘current events’. The geography is, partly, to do with understanding the event, occurrence or process in context, and this needs planning and resourcing.

A second, related, challenge for geography teachers is coming to an appropriate balance between depth and breadth or, as we explored recently (Lambert and Morgan 2010 ch 4), between intensive and extensive geographical knowledge. Historians struggle with a similar issue, which in their case is often reduced to the question of chronology and the lack of overarching sense of historical narrative in young people leaving school. The Better History Group (BHG) consider this to be a serious weakness resulting from
‘... a teaching approach that stresses the importance of historical skills over historical knowledge. We believe the current orthodoxy is based on a fundamental misconception about the nature of history and that this has had a harmful impact on the quality of school history and the extent of young people’s historical knowledge’ (Better History Group 2010 p 4)

The resulting recommendations from the BHG are crystal clear in wanting to rebalance the status quo: for example, that an ‘Outline History of Britain’ should form a central part of the history course and that the development of an ‘extensive body of historical knowledge’ (ibid p 5 original emphasis) should be a central aim of the history curriculum. In geography, we know that we cannot teach the entire world, just as history teachers know they cannot teach the whole of time. Furthermore, we know that it would be silly even to try. Selections have to be made. But that does not mean that an extensive body of geographical knowledge is not important to acquire, nor that it is impossible to teach and learn. It is unacceptable and surely an abrogation of responsibility for geography teachers to argue that the acquisition of an extensive geographical knowledge does not matter ‘because it can be looked up in an atlas’. The fact is that when we need such knowledge we almost certainly do not ‘look it up’ – although it is true that with mobile technology it in increasingly an option to do so.

Even so, it is important to recognise the limits of gathering and storing a mental gazetteer, which can simply remain as fragmented and relatively inert information rather than useful connected knowledge. Thus it is frequently argued that locational facts are not of the same significance as hard won conceptual understanding of a geographical process: showing why places are where they are, what it is like to be there and so on. Rather than compare the relative importance, it may be more productive to distinguish their relative merits, as different kinds of knowledge serving different purposes. As the Geographical Association (2009) says in its ‘manifesto’, using the metaphor of learning a language, it may be useful to distinguish the ‘vocabulary’ (likened to the geographical facts) from the ‘grammar’ (the concepts frameworks) of the subject, and grasp that you need both. Learning a list of ‘vocab’ is essential, but on its own does not allow you to speak a language, just as learning grammatical rules without vocabulary (and lots of practice) may also condemn you to limited practical competence.

(The question of whether ‘facts’ are boring is not worth engaging with seriously: apart from the observation that many children and young teenagers have a seemingly unquenchable capacity and thirst for factual narrative and information, some of the least stimulating lessons I have ever seen
are those that unaccountably seem consciously to avoid dealing with hard, precise and objective information).

**The case for ‘core knowledge’ and its limits**

The national curriculum review provides an opportunity to revisit this enduring question: what is geography’s core knowledge? - sometimes referred to in the White Paper (p 10) as ‘essential knowledge’.

It is reasonably clear that one of the influences on the framing and wording of the White Paper’s remarks on the curriculum are derived from E D Hirsch’s core knowledge sequence (Hirsch 1987; 2007; [www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org)). Indeed, it is probable that Hirsch exerted some influence on the original national curriculum deliberations (see Dowgill and Lambert 1992) in geography, resulting in the publication of the national curriculum locational framework maps in the statutory order (these were dropped completely in the 2007 national curriculum). However, in this period insufficient time was spent theorising ‘core knowledge’: even now talk of knowledge sometimes provokes simplistic Gradgrind responses, and images of pedagogies limited to rote.

Before moving to a fuller consideration of Hirschian core knowledge and its possible significance in geography, we need to register a third, and again connected, challenge for teachers of geography. This lies in the enduring difficulty in establishing a robust mechanism for making content selections in the process of curriculum making. In days long gone by, when school geography did indeed claim to ‘cover’ the world, the mechanism was essentially the region. The regional gazetteer approach gave geography a bad name and geography teachers (especially new ones, recruited into a rapidly expanding state system) were ready for the conceptual revolution and more ‘scientific’ approaches to both human and physical geography. But how were geographers to select the content once the regional paradigm had been overturned? A number of approaches came to be recognised and geography courses could be identified as thematic or, less frequently, issues based. Overlaid onto the themes or issues were planning grids to ensure balanced coverage of places (eg both near and far) and scales (eg from local to global).

It would be too much to claim such curriculum technique was in widespread, confident use in the 1970s and 80s. But school based curriculum making was in its early stages of development. The 1991 National Curriculum appeared to obviate the need for such thinking and its subsequent development was truncated. The success of the White paper’s intentions (especially

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5 From Charles Dickens’ *Hard Times.*
to return to teachers more professional responsibility for curriculum selections) probably
depends on rediscovering these instruments and approaches.

According to the chief architect of the Qualification and Curriculum Authority’s 2007 national
curriculum implementation strategy, “A school shouldn’t start with curriculum content. It should
start with designing a learning experience and then check it has met national curriculum
requirements” (Mick Waters, quoted in the Guardian, September 2010). This quotation reveals a
formulation of knowledge which is inert, given and almost passive in relation to what is claimed
for ‘learning activity’. It implies that teachers are not really in the knowledge business. They are
more into the ‘activity’ business. As we have seen, there are obvious and not so obvious reasons
why teachers have, in recent times, been discouraged from grappling with knowledge. Waters is
voicing an orthodox viewpoint and it is fuelled partly by the assumed needs of the ‘google age’
and but also by an incautious use of certain ‘evidence-led’ approaches to teaching and learning. It
exists in what Hirsch has characterised as a closed ‘thoughtworld’ (Stern 2009 p 5) which
enthusiastically embraces personalisation, innovation, flexibility ... and, of course it suggests a
depth dissatisfaction with stuffy, traditional schooling that seems so unsuited to the digital age and
easily caricatured by the stereotypical rigid subject-based curriculum.

However, the problem with overemphasising a personalised and over-psychologised sense of
‘learning’ is that it leaves a vacuum at the heart of the education process. Richard Pring (2011)
points out that as well as referring to learning, the word ‘education’ has evaluative meaning too:

‘That is, not any kind of learning can be thought of as ‘educational’, but only that kind of
learning which is considered to be valuable – which leads to improved and more
intelligent understanding of the physical, social and economic worlds in which we live (p
98)

Thus, without the moral weight of ‘education’ learning is regarded as:

- *a good thing in itself*: it is assumed to be value free in this sense. (Of course, it is not
  necessarily. Learning can be trivial, wrong or even dangerous)

- *an essentially scientific or technical process*: it emphasises skills that can be honed and
  practised; learning can be ‘accelerated’, as if this were a desirable end in itself. (Whatever
  happened to the ‘beautiful struggle’ and the challenge associated with deep learning?)
Understanding aspects of science, history, art or geography can be counter-intuitive, surprising, enormously enjoyable and sometimes require sustained, painstaking effort

• **paramount**: teaching is subservient to, and led by, the learning. We become embarrassed by teaching, and instead talk only about ‘facilitating’ learning. (A society that abrogates responsibility in this way may be one that has lost confidence in itself).

The White Paper’s title, *The Importance of Teaching*, is apparently a self-conscious redress to the learning ‘fetish’ and an invitation to focus on identifying ‘a core of knowledge in the subject disciplines’ (p42). Whilst this is not expressed in quite such a definitive manner as Hirsch’s core knowledge sequence⁶, the latter has clearly been appropriated by Ministers as a means to focus on what precisely shall be taught in schools as an essential part of the curriculum. A problem in the White Paper is that, of course, nowhere is core knowledge defined, other than as a kind of ‘benchmark’ (rather than a straitjacket). It is for this reason it may be useful to consider briefly the genesis of the idea.

*The ‘core knowledge’ thesis*

Hirsch criticises process oriented curricula that emphasise ‘how-to knowledge’ over domain-specific ‘knowing what’. A skills curriculum, he argues, turns its back on ‘enabling’ core knowledge. It is based on orthodox educational thought and the damaging belief is that:

> ‘a specific, factual curriculum is not needed for gaining all-purpose cognitive skills and strategies. Instead of burdening our minds with a lot of dead facts, we should become expert in solving problems, in thinking critically – in reading fluently – and then we will be able to learn anything we need.’ (Hirsch 2007 p11)

The ‘surface plausibility’ of this position is based on:

> ‘... the fact that a good education can indeed create skilled and critical thinkers. The mistake is to think that these achievements are the result of formal, all-purpose skills rather than abilities that are completely dependent on broad factual knowledge ... The thing that transforms reading skill and critical thinking skill into general all-purpose abilities is a person’s possession of general, all purpose knowledge’ (ibid p 12)

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⁶ [www.coreknowledge.org](http://www.coreknowledge.org)
He therefore argues a case for the schools (especially in primary and lower secondary age groups) to teach particular, precise core knowledge. It is important to acknowledge that nowhere does he advocate rote learning of facts, and in any case indicates that the core knowledge sequence he has identified may only be appropriate for around 40% - 60% of the curriculum time (in primary schools). Indeed, one of the benefits of core knowledge is that it would help break the tedium of formal process learning in which the focus is, repetitively, on a limited number of generic learning ‘strategies’ (‘... this soul killing drill of clarifying and summarizing’ ibid p 21). But it is clear that in itself core knowledge does not a curriculum make!

The main impact of the core knowledge approach, according to Hirsch, is that it enables a deeper form of literacy development. Reading with meaning, and in a way that enables engagement with the text, requires core knowledge. More advantaged homes often supply some of this, especially to younger children. If schools are to serve the aims of creating a more broadly educated society, then they should take seriously the need to introduce all children to knowledge that some of them may never otherwise encounter. It is important to recognise that the ‘text’ may be words of fiction or of fact, but also could be a landscape, an historical narrative, scientific experiment or debate about a controversial issue. In all cases, the specific knowledge that can be brought to the text enables a deeper engagement with it. As we noted in the previous section, teachers cannot just assume such knowledge will be ‘picked up’ along the way, or that such knowledge does not matter.

Similar arguments underpin Hirsch’s ambitious idea of cultural literacy, which hinges on the need to create a public sphere of knowledge that enables all cultural groups to engage with common issues and debates: that is, issues that go beyond people’s local culture (perhaps based on ethnicity or class) and experience. Cultural literacy does not negate the ‘multicultural society’ but it does challenge the idea that local groups need not assimilate a wider ‘national’ culture; indeed, it shows that it is in their interests to do so.

Antithesis

Hirsch’s argument is convincing, up to a point. But it has attracted trenchant criticism, partly because it has been adopted for political purposes, often by cultural restorationists who can only imagine a safer or better future by resorting to past certainties.
Below, I list three aspects of the core knowledge thesis which have been open to challenge. In each case, I follow the main charge against core knowledge with a counter charge or possible line of defence.

- The emphasis on knowing what confuses knowledge with closed ‘facts’ and thus undervalues a more open idea of understanding, which may deepen and change over time. (This argument only holds true if the curriculum consisted solely of ‘core knowledge’)

- The identification of core knowledge in a list or sequence seems to endorse the very old fashioned idea of education based on the accumulation of fragmented, received information rather than the co-construction of coherent knowledge; in the latter, both teachers and students could be described as ‘knowledge workers’; in the former, there is no ‘conversation’, only ‘delivery’. (Again, it is quite possible to imagine the curriculum consisting of both the communication of knowledge and the production of new knowledge – indeed, this is a prime argument for subject disciplines: not simply purveyors of knowledge but an introduction into how knowledge is produced, tested and contested)

- Timeless core knowledge promotes a concept of education based on an unchanging canon of facts, even though the rate of knowledge production continues to accelerate relentlessly. Who decides on the subject canon? Who is in a position to decide? (In geography, of course, the world changes constantly, but the core locational world knowledge is actually quite constant: – although the world is a rapidly changing entity, the continents and major river systems, the oceans and global wind systems, the main biomes and even the distribution of population and main city systems do not change that quickly).

Criticism of a Hirschian core knowledge sequence can be countered, as we can see from the above. But we can also see that if a core knowledge sequence were to define or frame the curriculum it would be a different matter. Criticism would be wide-ranging and deep-seated, perhaps wrapped up in quotations like this well-known statement from Stephen Ball:

‘… the preservation and transmission of the 'best of all that has been said and written'; (this is) itself a pastiche, an edited, stereotypical, unreal, schoolbook past. A curriculum which eschews relevance and the present, concentrating on 'the heritage' and 'the canon'
... A curriculum suspicious of the popular and the immediate, made up of echoes of past voices, the voices of a cultural and political elite. A curriculum which ignores the pasts of women and the working class and the colonised - the curriculum of the dead.’ (Ball 1993 p 210)

When we set this piece against paragraph 4.7 of the White Paper, we can see the potential schism in educational thought that lies between the two:

‘The National Curriculum should set out clearly the core knowledge and understanding that all children should be expected to acquire in the course of their schooling. It must embody their cultural and scientific inheritance, the best that our past and present generations have to pass on to the next. But it must not try to cover every conceivable area of human learning or endeavour, must not become a vehicle for imposing passing political fads on our children and must not squeeze out all other learning.’ (p 38)

Towards a synthesis: core knowledge and powerful knowledge

The White Paper intends to reform the curriculum so that it becomes a ‘benchmark not a straitjacket, a body of knowledge against which achievement can be measured’ (p37). It proposes that the curriculum, as made by teachers and experienced by children, is richer and deeper than the framework laid down by the state; and, being organised by subject disciplines is independent of state control and indoctrination. But although the intentions may be good, the dangers are also plain to see. If a core knowledge sequence were to be expressed as the benchmark against which achievement is measured, experience shows that it may well become a straitjacket. The authors of the White Paper appear to be aware of the hazards, seeking flexibility to encourage teachers to seek deep learning and avoid the tendency to narrow the curriculum by teaching to the test. Indeed, the White Paper asserts the need for ‘a new approach towards the curriculum’ (p37). We do not know what this new approach entails, but we can observe that more clarity will be required over the question of knowledge and the ways terms like core knowledge, essential knowledge, concepts and understanding are used.

Synthesis: introducing ‘capability’

With the re-emergence of teachers as ‘curriculum makers’, one of the key points made at the beginning of this article (see Figure 1), it may be timely and important to distinguish between aspects of knowledge. In the end, we will need a more thoroughly worked through theory of
school knowledge, for in its absence the significance (and limits) of core knowledge can easily and carelessly be dismissed.

But for now, and particularly in the context of geography’s curriculum contribution, we may start by discriminating between powerful knowledge in the manner Michael Young (2008) describes elsewhere in this issue, from enabling core knowledge in the sense Hirsch has identified. Both are important and are mutually dependent. The former embodies what we have referred to earlier as conceptual understanding whilst the latter can remain at a fairly superficial level. The former can be equated with what we called ‘intensive’ knowledge in the previous section, whilst the latter is part of an ‘extensive’ knowledge accumulation.

This approach may help us incorporate the notion of core knowledge into a broader based knowledge curriculum (such as that outlined in Appendix A). The benefit of doing this is that it would provide the opportunity for teachers to grasp the purpose and the place of core knowledge in the context of the broad and balanced curriculum which they play a crucial part in making. In this way, core knowledge can be understood as an essential element of the curriculum. It contributes to the development of students’ deeper powerful knowledge and also to the enhancement of their ‘capabilities’. There is no room here to explicate this idea in full, save to say that I use capabilities as a facilitating professional tool. It enables teachers, the ultimate boundary workers as I remark in the conclusion below, to connect their disciplinary knowledge and expertise with the idea and purposes of education, the context in which they work.

For geography, we can say young people’s ‘capabilities’ are enhanced through:

- the acquisition and development of ‘world knowledge’ (this may be equated with ‘core knowledge’, or extensive enabling knowledge)
- the development of ‘inter-relational understanding’: the basis for grasping global interdependence, for example, or the nature of people environmental relations - and built upon a range of powerful concepts

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7 Capabilities has its origins in Amartya Sen’s influential work in development economics (but see Lambert 2011; Lambert and Morgan 2010 Ch 4),
• an enhanced propensity to think about, through ‘decision making’ and other applied pedagogic activities, how places, societies and environments are made. The quality of such ‘geographical thinking’ is dependent on both and intensive and extensive knowledge base.

A knowledge based view of the school curriculum, underlying the development of capability, has a key part to play in rectifying some of the deficiencies of a skills-based curriculum. In addition to the transmission and development of statutory core geographical knowledge, the capabilities approach knowingly recognises the need to use the subject discipline as a resource to co-construct deeper conceptual understanding, so that young people can make sense of the world.

A ‘capabilities’ geography expresses geography in terms of educational goals. The curriculum content, beyond the statutory knowledge requirements (including possibly a core knowledge sequence), still has to be selected. But the goals articulate what we are trying to achieve with young people: an improved knowledge and understanding of the world and their relationship with it.

**Conclusions**

Although I warmly welcome the opportunity to reclaim geographical knowledge as a component of a rounded education, I also agree with Sally Eden (2005) that ‘merely to assert geography’s importance is insufficient – there is no given or special claim to expertise.’ (p282). She is an academic (not a school teacher) and makes this statement in the context of how to legitimate academic (and policy) expertise. The argument is how expertise has to be produced contingently often in the context of various publics and ‘users’. In contrast, the ideal of ‘gold standard’ academic knowledge (pure, independent and uncontaminated, and often very specialised) is less likely, these days, to be accepted by users and the public, at least at face value. We might add that teachers, a key ‘public’, also tend to find such knowledge difficult to use. Children may find it utterly mystifying and difficult to relate to the world they ‘know’. But this does not mean that such knowledge should not be selected, curricularised and taught.

Hence, in the context of curriculum making introduced at the beginning of this article, the idea of ‘boundary work’ is key. In her analysis, Eden goes on to write: ‘Geography therefore has no special claim to relevance or expertise in environmental debates – or any other debates. ... expertise and relevance must be built politically through boundary work and not through simply having knowledge’. (p285) The capabilities approach provides an intellectual tool to enable the
teachers’ boundary work – mediating between the needs of students, the power of pedagogy and the value of the subject discipline

It seems to me that school teachers are – or need to be – practised and skilful ‘boundary workers’. For school teachers to simply have knowledge is not enough. This is why the GA’s 2009 ‘Manifesto’ *A Different View* talks of geography as a ‘curriculum resource’ – to be used and explored in an educational context by teachers as ‘curriculum makers’. This is where the idea of capabilities has purchase. Teachers need a pretty clear idea of education. They also need a good idea of how geography can contribute to the idea of education (Lambert 2009). If *The Importance of Teaching* legitimates and encourages such thinking, it can be welcomed. As Margaret Roberts (2011, p 252) and Noel Castree (2005) agree: ‘the future is not fixed’. We have choices about what to teach, how to teach and to what ends.

6574 words

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*www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview*
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APPENDIX A

This document has been drawn up by Eleanor Rawling and David Lambert on behalf of the Geographical Association. It is for discussion. It is an attempt to open discussion on an overarching knowledge framework for geography in the national curriculum and thus contribute to the 2011-13 national curriculum review.

Geography National Curriculum: the geography that all 14 year olds need to know

According to the 2010 Schools White Paper, the curriculum needs to focus on “the core subject knowledge that every child and young person should gain at each stage of their education” (p10). There should be a “great focus on subject content” (p42).

The following therefore expresses the content, mainly in terms of the key concepts and operations in the subject. This takes us beyond the strict Hirschian take on core knowledge: the document makes no attempt at spelling out a ‘core knowledge sequence’.

It is not concerned with the teaching methods and approaches that may be used to teach and learn geography, that is, the pedagogy. This is a matter for localised ‘curriculum making’ activity.

Table 1 below operates at the level of major overarching generalisations that school geography can begin to build and develop with children and young people. Teachers might like to think of these at the level of ‘aims’ for the curriculum.

Table 2 is an aid to describing the contents of geography, by identifying the broad topics and themes that can be covered. In a sense this is a statement of the subject knowledge demands on geography teachers (and clearly can be interpreted at many different levels).

Table 3 indicates a ‘minimalist’ national curriculum statement, drawing from tables 1 and 2. It is a matter of conjecture, and a question of significant research interest, the degree to which subject teachers in schools are equipped to use such a document. They need a mechanism or framework to help them select the content of lesson sequences and schemes of work. They also need a theoretical awareness of the form and purposes of geographical knowledge (a kind of ‘synoptic capacity’) in order to avoid slipping into the trap of translating this minimalist framework into an over-long list of ‘given’ representative knowledge to be imparted, and indeed limiting the curriculum experience to ‘delivery’.

1. What is the geographical knowledge that young people need to know?

Geography provides powerful knowledge about the places and environments in which we live. A person without geographical knowledge cannot be considered educated. Such a person is at a disadvantage in the 21st century. Children pick up some geographical information from their homes, the media and their social lives, but school geography gives coherence to this and provides new knowledge that goes beyond the everyday and the incidental.

This can be summarised under four headings. The first three show the main ideas in geography. The fourth shows the methods and approaches used in geographical study and enquiry. The table captures the most powerful knowledge in geography.
### PLACE

**Know that:**

A place is a unique portion of the earth’s surface given meaning by the people who live in and use it.

Places range in scale and type from the smallest community or natural place, to the largest city, nation state or biome.

Places result from the interaction of physical and human features in different ways.

The character and meaning of our own place is open to interpretation and perspective.

Places exhibit immense variety and people in places enormous social, cultural and economic diversity.

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### SPACE

**Know that:**

A variety of physical and human factors influence the location and interdependence of places and the making of regions and landscapes.

The distributions and spatial patterns of phenomena created have a significant impact on people’s lives.

Interdependence affects our relations with other people in the world.

The need to move across space (spatial interaction) is a main driver in economic, social and cultural development.

Spatial interaction results in transport and communications systems, including the internet and electronic systems.

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### ENVIRONMENT

**Know that:**

An environment is the result of interaction of physical and human features creating the conditions and resources on which life on earth depends.

Environments range in scale and may be investigated from the smallest ecosystem to the planet as a whole.

Change in any environmental factor causes change in other aspects of the environment which may be to the benefit or detriment of life.

Human beings can effect environmental change and need to respect and understand environments.

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### GEOG. TOOLS

**Know about and how to:**

Use maps, atlases, globes (as distinctive to geography) and also Geographical information systems (GIS)

Use photographs, diagrams, illustrations, the internet, and a variety of media.

Use secondary sources like books, magazines, newspapers.

Derive knowledge and understanding from first hand fieldwork and outdoor experience of places, spaces and environments.

Learn how to write geographically, use geographical vocabulary, challenge arguments and construct own reasoned arguments.

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2. **What, therefore, should be taught in school geography?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLACE</th>
<th>SPACE</th>
<th>ENVIRONMENT</th>
<th>GEOG. TOOLS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Local place</td>
<td>• Examples of</td>
<td>• Topics and issues</td>
<td>• Maps – what they</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>knowledge in community and regional context</td>
<td>economic patterns, distributions and change in eg industry, leisure, agriculture</td>
<td>which show the interaction of physical and human elements, locally and globally</td>
<td>show us, how to use them and how to construct them</td>
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<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Britain/UK knowledge</td>
<td>• Understanding of resource distributions and food, water and energy security on regional, national and international scale</td>
<td>• Approaches to managing and living with changing physical and human environments</td>
<td>• How to use and apply geographic information systems (GIS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Broad overview of world including locational knowledge (continents/oceans, countries, significant features)</td>
<td>• Reasons for and processes behind the location and changing distributions of population</td>
<td>• How to investigate an environmental issue at first-hand or using primary sources</td>
<td>• How to use other sources – photographs, diagrams, internet, databases, electronic atlases and visualisers, film, libraries, newspapers, magazines and journals etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-depth studies of places different from their own</td>
<td>• Understanding of flows and movements of people, goods and ideas, with examples on a regional, national and global scale</td>
<td>• Processes involved in distribution and patterns of major physical features, including natural regions and ecosystems</td>
<td>• First hand investigation via fieldwork: photography, GPS, sketching, interviewing, meeting people etc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Study of places of great significance in and for the world today (China, USA, Europe)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Case studies of countries/communities to reveal the links between social, economic and environmental quality</td>
<td>• Writing descriptively and analytically about places, spaces and environments; constructing and challenging arguments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• In-depth study of places that are scenes of conflict at different scales (eg a local place, Afghanistan)</td>
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<td>• Exemplar studies of places where physical extremes or hazards dominate</td>
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</table>

3. **Specifying a minimal national curriculum requirements**

**By age 11, based on the above framework, children should know about:**

- ‘My own place’/community – in depth study
- ‘My country’ - overview of the UK – basic understanding of the shape and character of the countries, main regions, main physical features and rivers, important cities and current concerns
- ‘The wider world’ – locational knowledge and overview of the continents, oceans, key nations and major features such as hot/cold climates, hazard regions etc
The physical landscape – description and some explanation for change in the physical world including time scales (e.g., 'geological' time). Study to include something at a broad scale like a climate region/ecosystem and something at a small scale like a study of local landform or river/coast features.

Human geography – investigations of human distributions, including something at a broad scale like an overview of holidays and the leisure industry in Britain and something at a small scale like a study of a town.

The environment – including at least one issue capable of being investigated at a local scale and involving fieldwork, and one study looking at a world problem like the conservation of animal species, depletion of fish stocks, hazards and response.

Geographical tools – simple maps, plans, atlases, diagrams etc; use of photographs, film, dvd, internet; seeing, observing, measuring and interviewing at first hand; geographical vocabulary and geographical writing.

By age 14, based upon the framework, young people should know about:

- UK in the wider world – greater depth of knowledge and understanding about the physical, economic, social and political geography of the UK within the context of their own community and its place in the wider world.

- Significant world places – broad locational knowledge of the world's significant places; knowledge and understanding in greater depth of at least one major country or region important in the world today e.g., USA, China, Middle East, Southern Africa...

- Understanding others – in-depth study of a community quite different from their own in a country with different religious/ethnic characteristics e.g., in India, Afghanistan, Central American country, Central Asian republics...

- Living and working in Europe today – knowledge and understanding about the physical, economic, social and political geography of the Europe, including a greater depth study of one European nation other than UK.

- The environment and climate change – including an overview and specific examples of the character and differential impact of global climate change; also a more in-depth study of one physical/environmental issue e.g., local flooding, species decline and/or recovery.

- Changing landscapes in UK:
  - Physical geography and environmental study of the factors affecting landscape in a region or small area of the UK e.g., coastal region, mountain and moorland area, river valley;
  - Urban/built environment study of changing processes and conditions affecting an urban neighbourhood or a city.

- Geographical tools – using maps, plans, atlases, diagrams etc; using a GIS to analyse spatial patterns and in problem solving or decision making scenarios; using photographs, film, dvd, internet as both a source of information and as a means for communicating geography; using simple descriptive and inferential statistics to describe and analyse numerical data; using opportunities for first-hand fieldwork/out of class activity for seeing, observing, measuring and also for interviewing people; using specialist geographical vocabulary (like interdependence, globalisation, sustainability, scale) in more sustained and discursive geographical writing.
4. Localised ‘curriculum making’

In devising the school based geography curriculum, teachers will be able to use the framework and the minimum requirements in order to benchmark the body of geographical knowledge all children need to be taught. This is no straitjacket. Blended with adventurous pedagogies, popular geographies in the media and sensitive to children’s interests, experiences and curiosities, this benchmark provides teachers with the basis for creating the highest quality geographical contribution to the curriculum.

Teachers should be particularly aware of the need to balance extensive and more intensive geographical knowledge. For example, individual case studies should be studies in some depth, but never in isolation of the wider contexts and settings. Thus geographical ‘core knowledge’ (eg factual locational world knowledge) needs to be balanced by deeper conceptual understanding of patterns and processes – and vice versa.