

FORUM

GEOGRAPHY AND THE *WHITE PAPER ON EDUCATION*

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Abstract. Reference to Geography has been omitted from the *White Paper on Education* in the Republic of Ireland, not only from the compulsory core for the junior cycle but from the entire curricular framework. This article discusses the situation, calls for a response from Geography teachers and outlines the educational value of Geography.

Geography has been omitted from the curricular framework of the junior cycle of second-level education in *Charting our Educational Future: White Paper on Education* (Department of Education, 1995). This must represent the greatest threat ever posed to Geography in Irish education. It should be a matter not only of extreme concern to teachers of Geography but also it is an omission which would be severely detrimental to Irish education in general. Yet it is evident that many Geography teachers are unaware of this situation and of the potential threat to their discipline. It is the purpose of this article to inform teachers of the situation, to prompt actions which might be taken and to outline a case which can be made for Geography in education...

The White Paper and Geography

Geography is a compulsory subject at present in the junior cycle in the secondary schools of the Republic of Ireland, it is taught in most community, comprehensive and vocational schools, and it is one of the most popular subjects at Leaving Certificate level. However not only has it been omitted from the compulsory core in the White Paper but it is not even mentioned in the context of important subjects, nor does the word Geography appear in the entire curricular framework section. It seems incomprehensible that this omission could have been made by anyone familiar with contemporary Geography and modern educational needs.

The curricular framework in the White Paper is stated to apply to all second-level schools and to all students in the junior cycle. The references to other subjects and the importance attached to them in the document do not augur well for Geography in the junior cycle. The programme, which is necessary for certification, "will include a core of Irish, English, Mathematics, a science or a technology subject, and at least three further subjects from a wide range of full courses and short courses." (Department of Education, 1995, 49). Thus the minimum requirement is seven subjects, including the compulsory core of four designated subjects.

It is specified also, in the same paragraph and in bold print, that all students should have access to the study of a modern European language (presumably this means in addition to Irish and English) and to a recognised full course in at least one creative or performing art form. No other subject is named in this paragraph.

Elsewhere in the curricular framework section it is stated that, "Each school will be expected to provide students with experience in Language and Literature, Mathematical Studies, Science and Technology, Civic, Social and Political Education, Arts Education, Religious Education, Guidance, Counselling and Pastoral Care, Physical Education, Health Education including Personal and Social Development, Relationships and Sexuality Education" (Department of Education, 1995, 48-49). It is pointed out that some of these may involve formal timetabling of courses and others may be provided either on a cross-curricular approach or by specific short courses, classes, modules or other interventions at various times throughout the junior cycle.

The poorly organised structure, unbalanced nature and vague wording of the curricular framework section of the White Paper render it difficult to specify what may be the intended status of most subjects other than Irish, English and Mathematics. However the inclusion of a science or technology subject in the core and the specification of access to a language and a full course in an art form would seem to account for six of the minimum seven subjects in the programme. In addition there have been press reports that in the junior cycle the Civic, Social and Political Education course is to be compulsory and that Religious Education is to be an examinable subject. These considerations, together with the absence of any reference to Geography or History, tend to indicate strongly that it is not the official intention that they would be amongst the minimum seven subjects of the programme, or even recommended ones. This suggests that the best that could be hoped for is that students would take more than the minimum number of subjects and that Geography would be out on the fringe competing with others for a place amongst these few additional subjects. This would represent a huge and totally unacceptable diminution in the role of Geography.

The omission of Geography from the junior cycle curricular framework in the White Paper is contrary to the proposals of the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (1991, 12) and the recommendations in the *Green Paper on Education* (Department of Education, 1992, 94). In both these sources, a compulsory core was specified as comprising Irish, English, Mathematics, History and Geography or Environmental and Social Studies, and Science or a Technology Subject. It was stated by the NCCA that some vocational schools might have difficulties in providing History and Geography to all students and that the inclusion of Environmental and Social Studies as an option could facilitate such schools. Environmental and Social Studies was described as a new subject, combining History, Geography and Civics (elements of History, Geography and Social and Political Studies according to the Green Paper) based on the former pilot projects Humanities and SESP. It was being introduced in former pilot schools of these projects from September

1991. It is evident from the NCCA document and the Green Paper that the interdisciplinary Environmental and Social Studies was envisaged as being an alternative to Geography and History within the compulsory core in only a minority of schools and that Geography would be taken by most students in the Junior Certificate of Education.

The omission of Geography from the compulsory core and even from the major optional subjects in the junior cycle of second-level education would have critical implications for the discipline throughout the educational system. Students who had not studied Geography in the junior cycle would not have the inclination or the competence necessary to take it in the senior cycle, so that the strong position of the subject in the Leaving Certificate would collapse. The proportion of Leaving Certificate candidates taking Geography is already set to lessen somewhat through the introduction of the new Leaving Certificate Applied and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme - these alternatives seem likely to attract in particular some of the academically less able students who would have taken Geography in the Leaving Certificate Programme. Although prior study of the subject is not a prerequisite for entry to Geography at third level in the Republic of Ireland, it seems certain that lack of experience of the discipline at second level would lead to a major decline in demand at third level. An additional influence for some would be the disappearance of teaching opportunities in Geography. It is likely also that decline in Geography at second level and consequently in the colleges of education would impact detrimentally on the teaching of Geography in the primary school.

Responding to the threat

It seems that the White Paper poses a major threat to Geography, and there must be a great obligation on all those who believe in the educational value of the discipline to respond to this situation. Geographers have been slower than historians to react to the threat. The slowness of reaction may be attributable largely to ignorance of the situation, as very few seem to have read the White Paper or even to be aware of its implications. A further factor may be the traditional reticence of geographers in promoting their discipline.

A letter on behalf of all of the Professors and Heads of Departments of Geography in the universities and colleges of education in the Republic of Ireland has now been sent to the Minister for Education, with copies to the Secretary and Chief Inspector in the Department of Education. The letter criticises the omission of Geography from the curricular framework in the White Paper and outlines the educational value of the subject. The Geographical Society of Ireland and the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland are also making representations. An approach has been made to the Royal Irish Academy to convene a meeting of the National Committee for Geography to discuss the situation. As the co-ordinating body for Geography in Ireland, representations made by the National Committee and its National Commission for the Teaching of Geography should carry substantial weight.

In addition to these centralised responses, it would seem desirable that there should be widespread representations made to politicians of all parties and to the Department of Education by Geography teachers. This should be done not only by branches of AGTI throughout the state but also by individuals lobbying their local politicians and any others whom they consider might be influential. It would seem important to show a broad groundswell of reaction and that this should be done with urgency.

Representations should stress the great educational value of Geography, as many do not understand the nature and contribution of modern school Geography. That geography teachers know this is to no avail if the policy makers and the population in general are not aware of it. Geographers must market their subject.

Promoting the educational value of Geography within the individual school would be not only desirable but essential if the subject were not to be reinstated in the compulsory core of the junior cycle programme. This would be necessary whether it were given important specified subject status or, as appears from the White Paper proposals, if it were to be one of the fringe subjects competing for the last extra subject choices of students. There must be a commitment on everyone to endeavour to ensure that Geography is offered to students in her or his school. The valuable contributions of Geography should be stressed also in the devising of interdisciplinary studies and transition year programmes.

As an initial contribution to the making of a case for Geography, the remainder of this article is devoted to outlining something of the nature and educational value of the discipline but the teacher's own experience will be invaluable. The content of Geography is considered first in its treatment of the environment, spatial distributions and places, followed by the acquisition of skills and the general educational role of the subject.

Geography and environment

Study of the environment comprises investigation of the earth's surface, the atmosphere, water, soils, plants and animals. This involves both the nature of the environment, as in the study of landforms, and the processes involved, as in study of the forces which shape the landscape. The physical environment greatly affects human behaviour and affairs and, in turn, humanity makes major and increasing impacts on the environment. Study of this interaction between people and environment is a central focus of school Geography, encouraging an ecological mode of thought. This gives to Geography a unique role as a bridging subject between the natural sciences and the humanities. Examination of natural resources and of the economic activities based upon them highlights both the opportunities which the environment affords but also the conflicting interests which can develop between people and the environment, and consequently the need for rational and sustainable use of resources. The environment is taken to include also the human environment, as in study of the development and nature of the built urban environment, and people's perceptions of their total environment. Geography promotes environmental consciousness and conservation.

It is quite amazing that environmental education at second level does not receive a mention in the junior cycle curricular framework subjects in the White Paper and this highlights its defectiveness. Environmental matters are of huge importance today and will become increasingly more so. Also they have great interest and relevance for students. Geography is the root discipline from which environmental studies and concern have developed. By focusing on the environment-humanity interaction, Geography is the ideal context for balanced environmental education.

Geography and spatial matters

A fundamental and distinctive characteristic of Geography is that it is concerned with the distribution of physical and human features over the earth's surface or space; it is the spatial science. Students study the spatial patterns and processes involved in the distributions of population and settlement, of people's different economic activities, of social characteristics such as religion, language and health and of political organisation. A knowledge and understanding of the spatial dimension is necessary for a proper appreciation of many of the major issues which confront the modern world. Many problems have a spatial context, so that study of Geography results in greater awareness of problems and social responsibility. This is evident in relation to inner city areas, less developed regions and the Third World, for example. Study of different societies, cultures and ethnic groups promotes understanding and tolerance, internationally and within Ireland. The interdependence of peoples and the need for co-operation are stressed and a spatial awareness is developed in students.

Geography and places

Places and their landscapes have traditionally been a concern of Geography, on the local, regional, national and global scales. Place knowledge is an essential framework to an understanding of current affairs, even of one day's news. Study of the nature of places is important in matters such as regional development and Third World development. There is a responsibility to ensure that young people should try to understand the Third World; its study is of major significance in school Geography and is of great interest to students. Understanding of one's locality contributes to good citizenship and, at the other end of the scale, geographic education is essential in the context of international relations. The European Union stresses the importance of incorporating the European dimension into the school curricula of its member states and Geography is the main medium for doing this. As Ireland is increasingly affected by Europeanisation and globalisation, it is all the more inexplicable that Geography was omitted from the White Paper curricular framework on the eve of the twenty-first century.

Geography and skills

While the content of Geography is essential to proper education, increasing emphasis is now being laid also on the skills which are acquired and developed through

its study. Perhaps the essentially geographic skill is that of using maps. A knowledge and understanding of maps is of benefit to everyone. Showing information in other diagrams and photographs is also stressed in Geography. Thus the subject contributes greatly to the development of the skill of graphicacy - it is surprising that this skill was omitted from those listed in the White Paper (Department of Education, 1995, 47) in an age in which visual communication has become so important.

Numeracy skills are helped in Geography by the emphasis placed on interpretation of statistical maps, diagrams and tables and on the analysis of data. Field investigations are undertaken in an organised and scientific way, involving observation, recording, interpretation and presentation of information. This fieldwork brings the student into direct contact with the real world and provides scope for original research and preparation of reports. It contributes also to the development of social skills and the ability to work as a member of a group. A great variety of modes of enquiry, synthesis, evaluation and communication are used also in the classroom. The useful skills and the desirable attitudes and values which are engendered and developed through study of Geography in the junior cycle are indicated in the course objectives of the Junior Certificate Geography Syllabus (Department of Education, undated, 5-6).

Geography and education

Geography is a diverse subject which has great educational advantage in giving a broad training to the mind and practical value in touching almost every aspect of life. It is concerned with the complex world in which students live, so that it has direct relevance and interest for them. It is multidisciplinary in drawing together different subjects in the curriculum and showing the interrelated nature of knowledge. Geography is an indispensable part of the school curriculum in junior cycle.

The student of Geography is trained to see problems in a broad context, investigating a wide variety of possible explanations. This includes consideration of physical, historical, economic, social, political and personal influences, together with the interaction between them. This integrating and synthesising approach of Geography is increasingly being recognised as vital for an adequate comprehension of today's world and for an understanding of its processes of change and its problems. Also this balanced and comprehensive approach helps the development of an open and receptive mind, the ability to think in a clear and flexible way and the capacity to make good judgements. The adaptability which this geographical training provides is invaluable in a world of constant change.

Geography makes an essential contribution to the attainment of the principles and objectives of the junior cycle in Irish second-level education. This can be appreciated from a reading of the aims and objectives of the Junior Certificate Geography Syllabus (Department of Education, undated, 4-6). Geography accords with the curricular principles of the Junior Certificate, as stated in the White Paper (Department of Education, 1995, 47), in having breadth and balance, relevance,

quality, continuity and progression, and coherence. With regard to relevance, school students often remark that Geography is the subject which they find to be the most relevant of all the subjects in their experience because it deals with the real world. Students enjoy studying Geography. With regard to the objectives of the junior cycle, Geography contributes to all of those listed in the White Paper (Department of Education, 1995, 48). It can be stated categorically without fear of contradiction that only if Geography is studied can students be provided with an adequate "knowledge and appreciation of their social, cultural and physical heritage and environment".

It is ironic that the ignoring of Geography in the White Paper should come at a time when the position of Geography in the educational systems of other countries is being strengthened in response to modern needs. In Britain there had been a proposal for a core curriculum for the junior part of second level education which would not have included Geography but realisation of the importance of Geography has led to its reinstatement as a compulsory core subject. The role of the Geographical Association in rescuing Geography from marginality and being under threat was described by King (1989). Geography has recently been reinstated as a compulsory core subject in Sweden. Surveys which revealed the geographic deficiencies of Americans have led to substantial growth in school Geography in the United States.

An effort has been made here to demonstrate briefly that school Geography is a distinctive though varied discipline, with its own content, approach and skills. It is also multidisciplinary, having links with most other school subjects and bringing together the environmental and social sciences, giving it a uniquely integrating role. It has major practical and educational contributions to make in preparing students for their lives of work and leisure. Thus Geography should have a central and vital role in a balanced school curriculum preparing young people for life in the twenty-first century. That Geography should be given that status by continued inclusion in the core in the junior cycle of Irish education is essential in the interests of the future welfare of the country's children.

References

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