

# Powerful Geography

A Curriculum with Purpose in Practice



Mark Enser

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# Introduction

“Anything is geography.”

These three words defined the thinking around the geography curriculum when I started teaching in 2004 and, for a while, this seemed hugely exciting. Geography is such a broad discipline that we could – we were told – study anything in our classrooms, put anything into our programmes of study, at least until we had to prepare for an exam specification, and we could call it geography. And so we did. We would create units on the geography of crime in which pupils would consider how different stakeholders felt about a crime that had taken place and, as a result, develop empathy, or study the geography of sport and plot the location of Premier League football stadiums and, as a result, relate the subject to pupils’ interests. They could study the geography of fashion and learn about the deplorable conditions of sweatshops and, as a result, hopefully change their shopping habits. What mattered wasn’t the content but the *result* of studying it.

The problem is that once we decide that “anything is geography”, it starts to become clear that therefore *nothing* is geography. If geography is the development of empathy, the study of things familiar to pupils, and an attempt to make them more conscientious consumers, then what unites it as one subject? How do we define this subject? As I will describe in this book, our subject became lost as it was turned into a vehicle to deliver learning around a range of social issues – according to political priorities – and soft skills to prepare pupils for the needs of an imagined 21st century. Although you could see elements of this in a range of subjects, I think it was a particular issue in geography because it is an unusually messy discipline.

Geography, as a field of study, has a long history stretching back at least as far as the ancient Greeks and the scholar Eratosthenes, who originated the term, coming from the title of his book *Geographica*. However, as an academic university discipline its history only reaches as far back as the 19th century, and much of its expansion occurred in the early 20th century as a way of providing geography teachers to schools. This adolescent subject is still testing its boundaries and seeking to define its role (something which we will discuss further in Chapter 2). As it has gone through this period of reflection it has become too easy for it to be led astray by those who would use it to further their own ends.

## Powerful Geography

These years of confusion are a huge shame as geography has the potential to be a truly *powerful* subject. An understanding of the planet that we call home – how it works, how human and physical processes interact and lead to change – can transform those who study it and open up new vistas from which they can view the world. It is this notion of powerful geography that I wish to explore in this book, building on the idea of powerful knowledge developed by Michael Young and of GeoCapabilities developed by David Lambert and others. I hope that this book will be a practical guide to developing a curriculum with a clear purpose behind it – a purpose which is carried out in practice in the classroom.

I will argue that a powerful curriculum *needs* a clear purpose driving it. Without this clear purpose we will once again get led off into the territory of “anything is geography”. The first part of this book will therefore consider the issue of purpose by looking at the role of the school in society and then showing the place that geography occupies within it. We will then consider the history of our subject so as to better understand where we stand today and look in more detail at how we lost sight of geography in the geography classroom. The first part will conclude by discussing how the concepts of powerful knowledge and GeoCapabilities can help us to find our way again.

The second part is a practical guide which illustrates how to put this theory of curriculum purpose into practice. It explores the steps which must be taken to create a powerful geography curriculum by deciding on content and places to be studied, putting the components into a sequence and then using all this to *do* geography. It will also discuss the extent to which we need to consider the future and respond to the concerns of the wider world when planning our curriculum.

It is worth stressing at this point that this book is not just for heads of department and subject leads. The curriculum is not created by one person writing out a programme of study but by each and every teacher in the classroom. The word *curriculum* derives ultimately from a Latin word describing the route of a race, a journey. It is, excitingly for us geography teachers, a map. It is the individual teacher who takes their pupils on this journey and so it is the individual teacher who must take responsibility for understanding their map, especially as they will inevitably alter the route as they teach, finding new tangents to explore and bringing in examples and references from their own lives, interests and experiences. A curriculum is created many times over: set out by national bodies, interpreted by subject associations such as the Geographical Association and Royal Geographical

## Introduction

Society, written by individual school departments, and then created again in the classroom as the teacher brings it to life.

This book is, in part, a response to the worrying trend in education towards the deskilling of teachers. It is becoming an increasingly common expectation for a curriculum to be written by a small team of highly experienced teachers within a school trust and then delivered, as written, by far less experienced teachers across the trust, or even by teachers in schools outside of the trust. We run the risk of creating a culture in which, instead of teachers, we are technicians whose role is simply to deliver the vision of another. Not only will this create problems for the profession, in terms of developing such curriculum-makers of the future and in terms of teacher retention (who went into the profession to be a technician?), but it will also create a weaker curriculum because the teacher who created it needs to be there to bring it to life.

One of the forces that has allowed this deprofessionalisation to occur is the perceived diminishing of the teacher's role in the classroom. Gert Biesta argues that this diminished role came about as a result of the application of constructivist ideas about learning, saying:

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**teaching has become increasingly understood as the facilitation of learning rather than as a process where teachers have something to give to their students.<sup>1</sup>**

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This view of education led to a belief that teachers were simply in the room to draw out of pupils that which they already knew – an idea going back to Socrates. However, Biesta argues that education requires something more than *immanence* (what comes from within): it needs *transcendence* (that which comes from without). Biesta's concern is that we have removed the teacher from education and turned them, at best, into a facilitator of learning or a learning resource. He argues that we need to tell a different story:

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**This is a story where teachers are not disposable and dispensable resources for learning, but where they have something to give, where they do not shy away from difficult questions and inconvenient truths, and where they work**

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1 Gert Biesta, Receiving the gift of teaching: from "learning from" to "being taught by", *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 32(5) (2013): 449–461 at 449.



actively and consistently on the distinction between what is desired and what is desirable, so as to explore what it is that should have authority in our lives.<sup>2</sup>

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In this alternative story, schools are not only places of learning, as one can learn anywhere, but are places where pupils are *taught*. It is here that they receive the gift of teaching, the one thing that other social institutions cannot provide.

There is another worrying trend in education, which is the move to make schools agents which serve the needs of wider society. It may be unclear why I deem this worrying, so widespread a belief has this become, but I will argue that the competing and clamouring voices are leading to confusion over the purpose of schools and, as a result, over the purpose of teaching geography. I often find myself thinking back to the phrase coined by the American geographer David Wadley, who calls for academic institutions to be gardens of peace that stand outside the needs of the vibrant neoliberal city.<sup>3</sup> Here, in the garden of peace, we can enjoy the study of the world for its own sake and reach our own conclusions, untroubled by the rest of the world's urgent demands that we serve them. Here in the garden of peace we can be teachers helping to pass on the gift of teaching to our pupils for no reason other than the fact that it is a gift that they have the right to be bequeathed and the fact that it is our duty to bequeath it. What we are left with is a question about what this gift should look like. And that brings us to Part I – the purpose of our curriculum. Enter the garden of peace.

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2 Biesta, Receiving the gift of teaching, 459.

3 David A. Wadley, The garden of peace, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 98(3) (2008): 650–685.

Part I

# Purpose



## Chapter 1

# School – what is it good for?

## Different possible purposes

One of the problems we have in shaping a curriculum in our schools is that there is scant agreement over what schools should be trying to achieve. This leads to various voices all trying to have their say and insisting that schools should fulfil a function that they deem vital. For example:

- Schools attempt to provide childcare for parents so that they can work (look at the chaos that results if schools are closed).
- They are asked to raise children and equip them with life skills (see the endless calls for children to be taught how to cook basic meals or to learn to garden).
- There is an expectation that they will develop pupils' character (to make them resilient, or equip them with grit or a growth mindset).
- They need to cultivate pupils' moral character (so that they have empathy and behave in a socially responsible way).
- We expect them to equip young people with skills that make them employable (these "employability skills" vary but include a mix of practical capabilities and favourable personality traits, such as the ability to work well in teams or be creative).
- They need to look after children's mental health and make them happy (or teach them how to be happy and "mindful").
- And, in amongst all of this, they need to provide a broad and balanced academic curriculum that equips them with qualifications that demonstrate their ability in a range of subjects.

## Purpose

Even if we were to strip all these expectations away and argue that the primary purpose of a school is, as discussed in the introduction, to be a place where pupils are taught, we are still left with the question about what they should be taught. As Gert Biesta says:

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Perhaps the briefest way to put it is to say that the point of education is not that students learn [...] In contrast I wish to suggest that the point of education is that students learn something, that they learn it for a reason, and that they learn it from someone.<sup>1</sup>

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He goes on to argue that schools fulfil three functions within society:

- 1 **Qualification** – in which pupils learn to *do* something through the acquisition of knowledge and skills.
- 2 **Socialisation** – which here refers to the initiation into different traditions or *ways* of doing and being.
- 3 **Subjectification** – in which pupils become the subjects of initiatives and actions rather than the object of the initiatives and actions of others.

In other words, schools are places in which pupils are taught the knowledge and skills that allow them to do what they could not do before. They are taught how to think in new ways, apply knowledge in different ways (mathematically, geographically, historically, etc.) and develop the capabilities to use this knowledge as they see fit in the future.

This purpose of schooling seems fairly straightforward and uncontentious but, as this chapter will show, nothing could be further from the truth. The purpose and methods of schooling have been debated for centuries and have left a legacy of confusion and a tangle of competing ideologies that need to be cleared away if we are ever to create our garden of peace – with a clear purpose at its heart – in our schools.

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1 Gert Biesta, What is education for? On good education, teacher judgement, and educational professionalism, *European Journal of Education* 50(1) (2015): 75–87 at p. 76.

## Uncertain foundations

Education – specifically the purpose thereof – was on shaky ground from the very start due to the influence of one of the founders of Western philosophy. Education, according to Socrates, should be concerned with teaching the young to be moral creatures who can differentiate between truth and lies, good and evil, right and wrong, etc. Education was about the *examined life* – people must be aware of the reasons why they make the decisions they make. This was, in part, because education was seen as something that was only necessary for the ruling classes, and Socrates, along with Plato, was concerned with how to create just societies by ensuring these ruling classes made just decisions.

Perhaps one of Socrates' biggest influences on education today is the idea that the role of the teacher isn't really to teach at all, but is to draw out of the pupil that which is already inside of them through questioning that would lead to some sort of revelation. This is the immanence, also termed a *maieutic* process, discussed in the introduction. It is an idea of education that may make sense if you are largely concerned with the ethics of human actions, starting by exploring the fundamental principle of fairness and then questioning to help the pupil realise how this might apply to complex moral problems, but as a principle it is hard to apply if you want to teach your pupil something outside their own field of experience, and this would include most of what we think of as geography.

It would be very difficult to use a maieutic process to teach something like the movement of the earth's tectonic plates. Our understanding of how plates move is based on the careful study of the lithosphere by many generations of scientists, geologists and geographers. This knowledge isn't within our pupils waiting to be teased out; it needs to be imparted in one way or another, and this idea of imparting knowledge is antithetical to the Romantic ideals that remain at the heart of our educational values.

## The Romantic ideals

One of the most influential voices of the modern era is that of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His thinking and writing influenced the French and American revolutions, the poetry of the Romantics and some of the underlying ideas and values that have survived in the education world into the 21st century. His views can perhaps be seen most directly in the work of the founders of progressive and constructivist schools of thought in education: Jean Piaget, John Dewey and the often-overlooked Herbert Spencer.<sup>2</sup>

It is in *Émile* – part novel, part teaching handbook – that Rousseau most clearly sets out his vision for education.<sup>3</sup> The book, over some 500 pages, describes the education the protagonist receives at the hands of his tutor (a barely disguised stand-in for the author himself, who, it should be remembered, had abandoned five of his own children at foundling hospitals shortly after their births), who raises him and guides him from birth to the age of 25. Central to his approach is the belief that education should happen as close to nature as possible, away from the corruptions of wider society. This natural education would be led by the needs and desires of the pupil. They would learn by following their own lines of enquiry and pursuing their own interests so that they can discover things for themselves. They would not be told the answers by a teacher, nor have knowledge imparted to them, but the teacher would act as the guide by their side, setting up situations in which the pupil could learn for themselves based on what they already know.

Despite the Romantic ideals of freedom and pupil-led learning, a clear curriculum is still presented by Rousseau. *Émile*'s freedoms are largely illusionary, with his tutor having a very clear plan regarding what he should eventually learn and what his character should become. Everything that *Émile* purportedly "discovers" for himself is the result of having been closely led to that conclusion by his tutor. There is also little in *Émile* that suggests how this vision of education might be rolled out to the masses. Everything in the book is predicated on the idea that a tutor can craft a highly personalised curriculum to meet the needs of a single pupil, leading them to the next stage of learning at the exact point at which they are ready for it. It is hard to envisage how this could happen for a teacher in front

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2 Kieran Egan, *Getting It Wrong from the Beginning: Our Progressivist Inheritance from Herbert Spencer, John Dewey, and Jean Piaget* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

3 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile, Or On Education*, tr. Barbara Foxley (London: Dent, 1911 [1762]).

of a class of 30 pupils, especially in a secondary school where they might see hundreds of pupils over the course of a week. This approach lacks the pragmatism needed for mass education.

## Pragmatism

In Rousseauian and ancient Greek thinking, education is designed for a very different audience. Socrates and Plato were largely concerned with educating their society's future rulers, and even by the Romantic era most writing on education focused on its provision only for a small ruling class. For the majority of people, a school-based education was not deemed necessary. Most children learnt what their parents knew or were apprenticed to a trade within their community.

This had started to change by the end of the 19th century. As every geographer can tell you, employment structures were changing, and people were flowing out of the countryside and into the cities. It was no longer enough for young people to rely on received knowledge from their parents; society needed them to be prepared to go into a much wider range of occupations that often demanded at least basic levels of literacy and numeracy. School could no longer be the preserve of the elite; there needed to be schooling for the masses.

This posed some problems for those putting together a curriculum for these new schools. A classical curriculum, which provided the kind of education enjoyed by those creating policies and practices for new schools, had been designed for the leisured classes. This curriculum focused on classical history and natural sciences, perfect for a gentleman who wanted to appear cultured at parties, but – it was felt – lacking the utility for the working classes (or for women, who didn't require this form of education to fulfil the role society had allotted them). This desire for utility in education was nothing new. Philosopher John Locke, writing in the late 17th century, favoured a utilitarian education, although his definition of utilitarianism made room for Latin, natural philosophy and classical history. Much of this was to be swept away by the pragmatists at the start of the 20th century.<sup>4</sup>

This desire for pragmatism seems to have stemmed from two beliefs. Firstly, that schools should be providing an education that meets the needs of society, largely

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<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Tate, *What Is Education For? The View of the Great Thinkers and Their Relevance Today* (Woodbridge: John Catt Educational, 2015).

# *Powerful Geography* breaks down the core elements of curriculum planning to empower teachers to design and deliver their geography curriculum effectively.

In recent years the emphasis has shifted away from a focus on pedagogy (the *how* of teaching) and towards curriculum (the *what* of teaching). Ofsted's revised inspection framework reflects this shift, and their plans to "deep dive" into subject areas – meaning that teachers and department heads now need a much greater understanding of curricular structures – leave many educators having to think about their subject in new ways.

Luckily for geography teachers, however, bestselling author Mark Enser provides plenty of insightful, subject-specific guidance in this all-encompassing book.

Mark explores both the purpose of the geography curriculum and its various applications in practice. He details how teachers can take their students' learning beyond the acquisition of knowledge to transform how they see the world. He also tackles the changing nature of school geography, shares a variety of case studies, and offers his take on how best to facilitate geographical enquiry and fieldwork.

**Suitable for department heads and classroom teachers of geography in secondary schools and subject leads in primary schools.**

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At a time when perhaps we have lost sight a little of who, what and how we teach, *Powerful Geography* drags us back and unashamedly puts robust curriculum thinking centre stage.

**Dr Rebecca Kitchen, CPD, Curriculum and Marketing Manager, Geographical Association**

By applying sound educational theory to curriculum practice, *Powerful Geography* provides precisely what the teaching profession needs.

**Alex Standish, Associate Professor of Geography Education, UCL Institute of Education**

Mark takes us on a journey towards greater clarity about what it means to truly teach this multidisciplinary subject with purpose.

**Michael Chiles, Geography Trust Lead, The King's Leadership Academy, and author of *The Feedback Pendulum***

*Powerful Geography* powerfully offers geography curriculum leaders and teachers the opportunity to reflect on key curriculum questions and the means to navigate existing geography education scholarship.

**Grace Healy, Curriculum Director, David Ross Education Trust**

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