

## Corrupting the curriculum? The case of geography

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This paper considers influences on the contemporary school curriculum in England. It does so mainly through a critical analysis of one significant critique of the curriculum made by the think tank Civitas in their collection of essays asserting the 'corruption' of the curriculum, published in 2007. The paper places the Civitas position in a wider perspective. It then focuses on one subject critique in particular – geography – drawing from a wider selection of writings which attempt to show the distortion of school geography under pressure from 'good causes' such as global citizenship and sustainable development. The main conclusions of the paper are that whilst the Civitas position takes a rather restricted view of subjects which denies how the discipline has developed in recent years, there is nevertheless an important point for teachers, as curriculum-makers, to note. However, the role of the subject disciplines in the school curriculum continues to evolve. The disciplines, not least geography, are far less static than the Civitas position appears to suggest.

**Keywords:** curriculum; education aims; subject disciplines; curriculum-making

### Introduction

In this paper we respond to a particular critique of the curriculum in contemporary English secondary schools. This critique suggests that the school curriculum has been appropriated by extrinsic purposes, often by government, and thus 'corrupted' from its true moral purpose. This case has been made most recently in the field of geography education by Alex Standish (2009, 1): 'extrinsic aims are in many cases serving to fill a moral vacuum previously occupied by geographical knowledge and skills. The outcome is that the intrinsic reasons for teaching geography are being lost to many teachers and students'. We on the other hand wish to argue that the issue is far more complex than apparently setting extrinsic and intrinsic aims in opposition to each other. Standish wants to resist much of the postmodern by resorting to the imagined security of the subject discipline. We want to be more circumspect and attempt to understand the evolving role of subjects in changing contemporary school curricula.

We acknowledge that the place of government intervention is a key component to consider. In England, until comparatively recently in historical terms, the school curriculum was largely professional matter determined in large measure by teachers and professional bodies. Things began to change following the so-called Great Debate launched by Prime Minister James Callaghan in 1976. Until this time the contents of the curriculum were remarkably settled, influenced by chief examination officers and textbook writers who sometimes had considerable standing and influence. This is to say that 'the subject', through academics and practitioners, was very influential in determining what was taught in schools, especially in grammar schools. Though the purpose of the Great Debate was ostensibly to make education a matter of public concern and discussion, 'its real purpose can be seen only as a step towards increased centralization and

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control' (Kelly 1989, 167). From the ensuing publication in 1977 of the Green Paper *Education in schools: A consultative document*, a process was set in motion which culminated in the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the introduction of a National Curriculum. The subject-based national curriculum set out what should be taught and, as Rawling (2001) shows in her authoritative case study of curriculum politics, this had the effect of removing from teachers and other professionals (such as examinations officers and textbook writers) from the intellectual work involved in curriculum planning and development. Instead the curriculum was expressed in 'statutory orders'.

If anything, successive governments since 1988 have become ever bolder in grasping control. The curriculum had successive revisions through the 1990s and into the present century, usually with the intention to simplify and reduce the burdens of a cumbersome curriculum on teachers and students. However, it has had to make room for statutory new 'subjects' such as citizenship introduced in 2000, a plethora of advice on what constitutes effective teaching through the 'national strategies' and an extensive 'new agenda' of social concerns such as sustainable development and more recently community cohesion. This has been accompanied by the tightening grip of 'league tables' and a culture of naming and shaming for poor performance, driven by Ofsted introduced in the 1990s and expanded in 2007 to regulate care for children and young people, and inspect education and training for learners of all ages.

This, then, is the backdrop for what in recent years has been the re-emergence of curriculum debates concerned with the question of what knowledge, skills and values should be taught in schools. This has included several high profile interventions. For example, from the official perspective, in 2004 the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) launched its 'Futures' programme which was concerned with how the school curriculum should respond to a series of 'challenges' presented in the twenty-first century, and which informed the eventual revised national curriculum to be taught in schools from September 2008. There is increased interest in curriculum innovation, and, again as an example, the Royal Society of Arts has developed an alternative curriculum – *Opening Minds* – based on five 'competences' that are deemed essential to successful adulthood.

Developments such as these are not uniformly welcomed, and in this paper we discuss one, relatively high profile critique, of recent curriculum reforms from the think tank Civitas (Whelan 2007). In particular, we focus on its criticisms of curriculum developments in school geography, a subject which, at the time of writing, is experiencing a 'crisis'. Although still a popular subject in schools, the number of candidates sitting examinations at 16 and 18 has declined in recent years; indeed, schools are no longer required to offer geography as an option beyond the age of 14. New arrangements in Key Stage Three (11- to 14-year-olds) such as shortened programmes designed to enable earlier focus on league table related GCSE programmes or the introduction of skills based curricula, marginalize geography in secondary schools. Furthermore, Ofsted, recently reported on the poor quality of geography teaching in schools (Ofsted 2008), citing a number of possible reasons including low levels of support for non-specialists.

### **Corrupting the curriculum**

*The corruption of the curriculum* (Whelan 2007) is an edited collection which includes an introduction by Frank Furedi and chapters on English, geography, history, foreign languages, mathematics and science. The contributors share the belief that there has been a steady erosion in England of important educational principles and ideals: 'Over the past two decades the school curriculum has become estranged from the challenge of educating children' (1). This, the authors argue, has been the consequence of government intervention in the school curriculum, for teachers are no longer free to 'impart a body of academic knowledge to their students' (Civitas press release, 11 June 2007, 1). According to the book:

- Science is no longer about teaching established and accepted scientific knowledge ('truth') but instead equipping students with a 'scientific literacy' that allows them to question established ideas.
- Foreign languages are no longer concerned with opening up other cultures and literatures, but limited to functional skills.
- History is no longer concerned with narrative and the big sweep of chronology, but with inauthentic comprehension exercises of 'sources a–f'.
- Geography is 'no longer about maps' but indoctrinating young people with 'environmentalism' in the name of 'global citizenship'.

### **Frank Furedi and the diminished self**

We interpret the authors' arguments about the 'corrupted' curriculum as part of a broader argument associated with the work of the sociologist Frank Furedi who, as noted earlier, wrote the introduction to the *Civitas* book. In a series of books and articles published since 2000, Furedi has developed an argument about what he regards as the current tendency to see human beings as vulnerable, at risk and lacking a strong sense of agency (Furedi 2002, 2004, 2005). In his introduction to the *Civitas* pamphlet Furedi argues that 'the school curriculum has become a battleground for zealous campaigners and entrepreneurs keen to promote their message' (Furedi 2007, 2). Increasingly, the content of the curriculum is not determined by its academic weight, but according to whether it promotes particular values about what it means to be a good citizen. Furedi draws upon the work of the philosopher Hannah Arendt to suggest that the crisis in education is a normal state of affairs because education is torn and has to mediate between the legacies of the past (tradition) and the challenges thrown up in the present. This is an important dynamic that can lead to creative solutions but the 'British education establishment' has distanced itself from the past and devotes itself to searching for and inventing values 'appropriate' for our times:

What is distinct about our time is the reluctance of educators to attempt to develop a system of schooling that can mediate between the old and the new. The growing tendency to reinvent subjects, modernise them or make them more relevant is driven by the objective of inventing a new tradition. (Furedi 2007, 6–7)

Furedi identifies three 'destructive influences' on the school curriculum. First, contemporary pedagogy has lost faith in the importance of knowledge and the search for the truth. Increasingly educators insist that there is no such thing as the truth and children are told that there are no right or wrong answers. This has important implications for the curriculum, since if the meaning of truth and the status of knowledge are negotiable, then so is the curriculum. Furedi proposes that 'Such a promiscuous attitude towards knowledge creates a situation where there are no real pedagogic barriers against pressures to politicise the curriculum' (2007, 8). Second, there is the 'enthronement of philistinism' in pedagogy. The striving for intellectual standards is condemned as elitist by some educators because they are not inclusive. Finally, in recent decades it has become common to regard children as fragile, emotionally vulnerable beings who cannot be expected to cope with real intellectual challenge. Increasingly the therapeutic objective of making children feel good about themselves is seen as the primary objective of schooling.

### **The case against geography**

The chapter on geography in the *Civitas* book was written by Alex Standish, who, in a series of newspaper and web articles published since 2000, has consistently challenged what he sees as political interference in school geography and the tendency to replace a core body of knowledge

and understanding with a relativist focus on 'values'. In this section, drawing from some of Standish's articles, we summarize the points that Standish levels at school geography.

Standish (2007a) argues that the school geography curriculum is being 'politicized' with a serious effect on the intellectual development of pupils. He dates this trend to the mid-1990s when several factors came together that gave rise to the new geography curriculum. There were, according to Standish:

- (1) The declining interest in the subject in schools, which meant that geographical associations and some geographers began portraying the subject as a suitable vehicle for delivering the themes of global citizenship; responsibility for the environment, fighting social injustice, promoting cultural diversity and tolerance, and human rights.
- (2) Contemporaneous government initiatives to develop a citizenship national curriculum.
- (3) The tendency for non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with global issues to latch onto the notion of global citizenship education to promote their concerns.

Standish thinks that the geography curriculum became a fertile site for these political concerns, and that some teachers have welcomed these developments because the themes of global citizenship have filled a moral vacuum:

Rather than teach pupils difficult and abstract theories about landscape formation, climate, urbanization, economic development, etc, they have opted to engage pupils' interest in trendy topics like global warming, fair trade, and poverty reduction. (Standish 2007b, no page numbers)

Standish highlights two examples of where this has happened. The first is a 'pilot' OCR geography GCSE where pupils get the chance to study, for example, 'geography in the news' or investigate what Tesco is doing to improve its environmental credentials. The second is the Geographical Association's publication *Geography: Teaching the global dimension* (DEA 2004) which contains an activity that requires pupils to calculate their 'ecological footprint'. For Standish, the only possible outcome of such an activity is to replace learning about how the world is changing with lessons in personal morality.

Standish identifies three concerns with this issues-based approach to the teaching of geography. First, it devalues subject knowledge. It replaces much of the geography curriculum with lessons in self-exploration and it encourages students to think of knowledge as something fluid and to question the validity and sources of knowledge. Second, the focus on values is intrusive and discourages independent thought. There is a strong moral imperative behind the examination of values in that the messages are that pupils should consume less, buy environmentally friendly or fair trade products and view western intervention in the South as a positive process. In this way, global citizenship education seeks 'to shape the personalities of individuals themselves'. Third, the treatment of global issues offers misleading accounts of how the world works. For example, he argues that it is 'deceptive' to tell young people that by changing their consumption patterns they can change the world. Offering simplistic messages may have the effect of leading young people to be more disillusioned with politics and the potential of humanity to change the world for the better as their individual actions will not have the effect they hoped for.

In some ways Standish's observations offer important warnings, since they alert geography teachers to the danger of teaching geography in what we have described elsewhere as in a 'morally careless' manner (Morgan and Lambert 2005). Standish argues for a more rigorous school geography and deeper learning, adding:

Such learning only comes from a comprehensive education that offers pupils not only knowledge about the world but a theoretical and conceptual framework through which they can situate ideas. This framework is sorely lacking in many geography textbooks today. (Standish 2007a, 55)

This is a criticism that some geographers in school will recognize and have sympathy for. In some ways it has been recognized to some degree by the government, which has been anxious in their secondary curriculum revisions to emphasize the 'key concepts' or 'big ideas' of subjects. Not that the KS3 programme of study for geography really does provide 'a theoretical and conceptual framework'. At best, it proposes seven broad ideas<sup>1</sup> that arguably suggest an 'architecture' for the subject. But this is not a theoretical framework. Indeed, in this sense it encourages a theoretical and conceptual pluralism, for what is meant by 'space' or 'place' (for example) depends very much on how it is theorized, and the purpose to which we put this idea. Nevertheless, the 2008 programme of study represents a new opportunity for this kind of discussion. However, that Standish's arguments contribute to a wider attack, on the way government interference has contributed to the demise of traditional subject areas in schools, perhaps negates any credit that may be claimed for these reforms.

Having set out Standish's arguments about the current state of geography in the school curriculum, we want to focus on three issues. These are: the place of values in education; the idea that the geographical subject is a 'diminished self'; and the question of a 'politics-free' geography curriculum. This discussion will lead to some concluding reflections on the nature of a critical approach to geography teaching and the place of geography, as a subject discipline, in the school curriculum.

### **The place of values**

Standish argues that moves to introduce values to the geography curriculum date from the 1990s when the education commission of the International Geographical Union (IGU) proposed that geography education should nurture certain values and attitudes in pupils, such as concern for the environment and respect for other people (IGU-CGE 1992). He thinks that this leads to a content free curriculum where values take precedence over content or geographical knowledge. In fact, moves to introduce values education into school geography date from the 1970s when it was argued that geography teachers should foster personal decision-making on social and environmental issues by dealing with both knowledge and values in the classroom. There were a variety of techniques to allow teachers to develop these approaches such as values clarification, values analysis and the discussion of moral dilemmas. Advice was provided for teachers on how to handle controversial issues. An example was the University of London Examinations' Board 16–19 project's 'route to enquiry' which overtly encouraged both an objective and subjective examination of geographical issues (see Naish et al. 1987).

Values education has indeed become a central part of geography teaching and finds a place in the introductory texts produced for intending teachers (Balderstone 2006; Lambert and Balderstone 2000). However, it is important to recognize that the introduction of values into schools came at a time when it was increasingly recognized that geographical knowledge is not neutral but reflects particular ideological concerns and ways of seeing the world. This means that teachers were encouraged to explore the human interests that underpinned the geographical representation of places and spaces. There were some serious costs involved in this. For instance, critics of values education pointed to the ways in which it was based on the individualistic premises of moral psychology and philosophy which tended to downplay questions of politics and power. In this sense values education was idealistic. In line with this there was a tendency to simply recognize and map values rather than undertake an examination of how these values are socially constructed. Finally, it was recognized that the development of values education might be linked to the wider economic contexts shaping education systems. The rise of values education was linked to the tendency to manage workplaces through rational forms of management and bureaucracy:

Values education can be seen as a form of therapy; an excuse to change the individual student rather than the structure of the school or the wider society. Its strategies allow the school to extend its rationalizing ethos to the private and personal disposition of students and so prepare them for a society which readily blames the individuals for their own misfortune. (Huckle 1983, 61)

There is certainly need for an informed discussion about the proper place of values education in geographical education. The questions we would ask are whether indeed particular values are routinely promoted in school geography, and the extent to which students take them up. This is a matter for serious research, rather than conjecture, into the manner in which school subjects such as geography are 'made' by teachers working with young people and the wider resources of the subject discipline.

### **School geography as a diminished self**

The second theme discussed by Standish concerns the idea that current approaches to education are based on a 'diminished self'. As indicated earlier, this can be seen as part of a larger argument developed, for example, in Furedi's *Therapy culture* (2004). According to Furedi, contemporary societies are concerned with the problems caused by the weakening of the tradition of authority on the conduct of everyday life. Tradition represents the institutionalization of the authority of the past. Drawing upon the collective memory of the past and the institutions that embody it, tradition provides a model for action and readily understandable identities for the individual. However, processes such as urbanization, economic development, changes in transport and communication have led to a decline in tradition and uncertainty about how to live. It is not the loss of tradition that is itself the problem, but the particular response to it, which in the current time is expressed in the idea that individuals and communities are fragile, weak and lack the means of solving their own problems. This is what has led in schools to the rise of the therapeutic ethos, but it also affects the ways in which societies imagine themselves. This is expressed in the idea that we live in 'the politics of fear'. Here there is a down-grading in belief about the achievements of humanity. Indeed there is a concern that what previously counted as progress and development has in fact turned out to be destructive of others' cultures and ways of life and has had deleterious effects on the planet.

An example of this may be seen in a book review by Standish of Butcher's (2003) *The moralization of tourism: Sun, sand...and saving the world?* (Standish 2005). The book argues that the tourist industry has embraced a moral agenda through the development of 'new moral tourism' whereby traveling, trekking and trucking are replacing sun, sea and sex. These developments include ecotourism, agrotourism and sustainable tourism and have a moral side to them in that they seek to preserve the environment and respect traditional culture. They are opposed to mass tourism. According to Standish, the book shows how the moralization of tourism has been driven by governments, NGOs and multinational corporations. The point that Standish focuses on is how the moralization of tourism 'has problematized the relationship between the tourist and the host, to the detriment of both' (336). This is because the weight of responsibility for historical, social and economic relationships between host nation and tourist is shifted to individual tourists. Thus the tourist becomes a vehicle for cultural imperialism and comes to represent western technology and environmentally destructive activity. The answer is to impose a code of self-conduct on individual tourists, specifying how they should behave when they are visiting. 'Codes of conduct place a distance between the tourist and the host because they start from an assumption that unfettered human activity and relations are problematic' (336).

Standish worries that there is an over-stated concern and respect for 'difference' that has the effect of seeking to preserve existing cultures and environments. The argument is that these cultures and environments are 'fragile' and in need of protection: 'the effect is to confine societies

to a primitive existence and a fragile relationship with their natural environment instead of transforming this relationship through meaningful development' (337). The new moral tourism, with its idealization of Third World cultures and environments seeks to limit the development of these societies by denying them the benefits taken-for-granted in the First World. In other words, there is a particular geographical imagination at work here that sees development as harmful and destructive. Standish concludes his review by suggesting that this geographical imagination is also at work in other debates (often addressed in school geography) involving culture, globalisation and development. Thus, in the case of globalisation it might be argued that some geographers have tended to see globalisation as a powerful and unstoppable process that threatens to destroy local (less powerful) places.

To summarize, Standish argues that in picking up such contemporary themes uncritically, school geography risks becoming diminished. Its focus is often on the individual and the consequences of their actual or potential behaviours. This is sometimes accompanied by attempts to encourage young people to empathize with people in distant places (socially and culturally as well as literally) on the basis of very limited information and experience. Any benefits derived from such approaches, perhaps in motivation, immediacy or presumed 'relevance' are countered by the significant costs incurred by facing away from the development of knowledge and understanding.

### The politics of the curriculum

Finally, what about the complaint that there has been an overt 'politicization' of the school curriculum? According to this perspective moves to introduce citizenship or teach about sustainable development are anti-educational because they seek to tell children and young people what to think. Subjects should be constructed as neutral bodies of facts and concepts that are taught in order for students to decide for themselves. At first sight, *The corruption of the curriculum* seems like an updated version of an earlier attack on the school curriculum: *The wayward curriculum* (O'Keefe 1986). This edited collection was published by the right-wing think tank the Social Affairs Unit and was subtitled 'A cause for parents' concern?'

There are striking similarities in the arguments made about the school curriculum:

Standards are under assault; the intellectual underpinnings of the curriculum are being loosened; easy fashions hold ephemeral sway, even though their cumulative effect could be to collapse the intellectual consensus; and, above all, there is the repeated claim that the history and culture of society are under threat. (1986, 12)

The book was concerned with the 'newer subjects' such as peace studies, urban education, anti-racist education and women's studies which were seen to have the effect of politicizing teachers and crowding out the more established and important subjects.

There is an important place for this type of polemical writing. Thus the Social Affairs Unit described itself as an educational trust committed to 'the promotion of lively and wide-ranging debate on social affairs and the sociological analysis of key controversies in contemporary culture'. So what are the politics of the Civitas writers? We argue that it is significant that Alex Standish has published his critiques of the school geography curriculum on the web-based publication Spiked-Online, and represented his arguments in events organized by the Institute of Ideas. The writers associated with these organizations have been very successful at getting their message across, which is to argue for a form of libertarianism which is critical of the state's attempts to remould citizens. In education, as well as the Civitas book, writers associated with the Institute of Ideas dominate the RoutledgeFalmer *Guide to education* (Hayes 2005). This book takes the view that education has been affected by a loss of faith in politics and the progress of human society. We see similar arguments being advanced in Mike Fitzpatrick's (2004) book

about health policy. Fitzpatrick is a regular contributor to 'Spiked-Online'. As a GP, he argues that his work is less and less about treating people's illnesses and more and more about advising them how to live their lives, telling them to give up smoking, drinking and eating more healthily and taking exercise. Here we see the same argument about the role of the state making moral interventions in people's lifestyles. Finally, Austin Williams (2008) has recently published *The enemies of progress: The dangers of sustainability* which is a polemic against the all-pervasive influence of sustainability and environmentalism in society. He includes a chapter on education which makes similar arguments to Alex Standish, and again we see the tendency to reference the usual suspects (Williams includes Dennis Hayes, Jim Butcher and Alex Standish). We are certainly not suggesting (as the Guardian writer George Monbiot has) that these writers are part of a conspiracy. However, we are concerned that the representation of school subjects found in these texts offer a false impression.

### Reconsidering subjects in the school curriculum

In his chapter Standish argues for 'resuscitating the embryonic political subject' that is geography, so that young people have access to the 'essential intellectual and social tools that will enable them to assume political responsibility as adults' (Standish 2007a, 56). Drawing from Furedi, he wants geography teachers to resist the therapeutic, rather than intellectual, goals that now drive the curriculum designed to 'save the world' through tinkering with lesson units on recycling, or fair trade, which sometimes seem quite overtly focused on banal instructions on how to behave: banal, because they lack the theoretical and conceptual frameworks that can support critical engagement leading to deeper understanding. The geography curriculum, he argues, has been occupied by those who have political objectives embedded in 'environmentalism' and 'global citizenship'. Standish hints that associations such as the Geographical Association (GA) colluded with government to deliver its agenda, and it is true that the GA makes much of its commitment to help teachers with certain policy priorities that they are asked to address, like sustainable development, climate change, social cohesion and cultural diversity. It is argued, for example in the GA's 2009 'manifesto' *A different view*,<sup>2</sup> that these are, after all, matters that geographical perspectives can help us understand more deeply.

The fundamental question here is about the nature of school subjects. What they are for and what purposes they serve. Standish writes almost with a kind of wistful sense of loss, using the title 'geography used to be about maps' with only the slightest irony. His response to the particular concern of political interference is to laud the subject itself, as if subject knowledge *itself* were natural, stable and legitimate, and not a human creation subject to change. In so doing, he argues for the importance of the body of knowledge in its own right and the need to pass this tradition on to young people. Whilst acknowledging that his take on knowledge is far more than a mimetic descriptive account of the world 'as it is', he fails to engage adequately with advances in geographical thought that, for example, shed light on the limitations of the discipline's search for explanation, particularly following the 'scientific revolution' of the 1960s and 1970s which was influential in the codification of school geography in the 1991 national curriculum for England and Wales. He also avoids questions concerning educational aims, as if these were in effect a given, unqualified part of the subject curriculum. But what, apart from its own 'importance', is school geography for? Why should it be taught?

There is today widespread acceptance that educational processes are least productive when teaching is thought of as a one-way street between teacher and pupils. There is also broad acceptance that the contribution of subject teaching is limited if it is restricted to purveying a settled and already-constituted body of facts. Furthermore, we agree that school subjects should never be entirely divorced from their wider disciplinary origins, because it is this helps teachers

understand them in less restricted ways: for example, as an induction to 'ways of seeing' the world rather than simply an accumulation of 'facts'. These perspectives provide a dynamic for re-visioning the place of school subjects in the curriculum. Thus for instance, when we focus not only on what the students get, but also on what they make of what they get, we gain fresh insight on how much learning is perspectival and contingent. Taking this notion further, we can see young people become agentive in the curriculum-making process, encouraging teachers to focus on what *they* make of what the students produce in return for the lesson experiences they design. There are dangers in this, as we have described in the previous sections of this article, but these are safeguarded against if a strong sense of subject discipline prevails. It is how we ensure that this is the case (and indeed what this means) that is arguably the biggest challenge for those who are charged with the education and training of teachers.

### **A place for geography in schools today**

Geography in the school curriculum has always been a selection, depending on the nature and circumstances of its creation. As Peter Taylor (1993) observed of the wider discipline, 'Geography is a social institution' (93), its value being defined as it is reproduced through the work of its practitioners. The same holds true of school geography. Taking the lead from the expanding university sector, reflecting the socio-political circumstances of the time, school geography saw substantial revision and change during the 1960s and 1970s, moving away from a descriptive regional coverage of the world to claim a more scientific basis. Writing before the introduction of the national curriculum, Ron Johnston (like Taylor, a professor of geography) summarized a view about geography in education which not only picks up these changes but also suggests a possible theoretical framework for school geography which remains relevant today:

Geography's origins lie in the need to present material about the world to its citizens – in a packaged format acceptable to the powerful vested interests in society. Initially, this involved emphasizing the differences between places and the singularity of regions. More recently, the positivist orientation within geography has stressed commonalities among places, whatever their creations, environments, histories and cultures. Geographers have disengaged themselves from studying and promoting the uniqueness of place, and consequentially have contributed to a general ignorance of the world as a complex mosaic. This disengagement must be corrected... and geographers must once again take the lead in portraying the complex variability of peoples and environments, avoiding both the generalization trap of treating the empirical outcomes (as against the real mechanisms) as the consequences of general laws of behaviour and the singularity trap of considering each place as a separate entity. Such a task, of description-in-context, is necessary to human survival. (Johnston 1985, 24–5)

The work required to bring to school geography the theoretical clarity that underscores Johnston's statement has arguably not been done during the intervening years during which time has seen the establishment of the national curriculum. Apart from the codification mentioned earlier in this article, the significance of the latter is in the impact it has had on how teachers interpret their work (Rawling 2001). Although teachers have remained self-reliant and imaginative as classroom practitioners, and are said to be better 'trained' than ever under more prominent national level guidance over how to teach, they have not been encouraged to take forward curriculum thinking at the level of aims and working at depth with the subject discipline. That this needs to be done is increasingly apparent, for the curriculum is increasingly at risk of being diminished – at worst, to a pedagogic adventure with a high value placed on skills and competence, at the expense of knowledge and understanding. There is a need to engage a debate on the place of school subjects and subject disciplines in curriculum-making (Lambert 2008; Morgan 2008).

It seems that in geography there is a case to answer as school geography becomes more and more disconnected from the academic discipline and therefore prey to other influences. Bill Marsden acutely observed this in his discussion 'on taking the geography out of geography

education' (Marsden 1997). The school curriculum is subject to several influences and the point Marsden makes is that the subject discipline needs to be a significant part of the mix – partly to keep other matters, including social and political agendas, in check so that educational purposes are served in a balanced way.

## Conclusion

The issue raised by the Civitas critique is primarily in our view to do with aims. As we have tried to show, it is also to do with teachers' work – specifically their role as curriculum-makers, a process guided by educational goals. Teaching geography (or indeed any other subject in school) may no longer be a sufficient end in itself, if ever it was. Subject disciplines have a justifiable place in the curriculum because they serve, and can contribute to, a range of educational purposes in particular and significant ways. What this means in a complex 'knowledge society' (Gilbert 2005) demands a sophisticated response. Whilst mindful of the diminished self and the risks of teaching for 'good causes' (Marsden 1997) it remains vital to keep the educated person as our main focus. Teachers are probably ill advised to set out to 'change the world' through what they do, but they surely want to change individuals, by challenging them and equipping them to think. Subjects connect us to a range of intellectual traditions, but are also shot through with arguments about how to make sense of the world. Young people need grounding in both. Acquiring knowledge, developing understanding and practising significant 'ways of seeing' contribute to the *capability* of people to function in society (Hinchliffe 2007a, b).

The school curriculum is the vehicle for arranging the introduction of coherent educational encounters and experiences for young people. It is important to understand that 'the curriculum' and its components, understood ideologically and politically, are not 'pure', uncorrupted or neutral. It is more complicated than this, partly because it passes through the hands (and heads) of teachers and young people. Teachers in particular are agentive in the curriculum-making process and need to be able to draw on 'the subject' in this intellectual work. It is a peculiarly under-research aspect of education, namely the role and significance of subject knowledge growth in a person's capacity to teach well.

## Notes

1. Place, space, scale, interdependence, cultural diversity, human and physical processes, environmental interactions and sustainable development.
2. See [www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview](http://www.geography.org.uk/adifferentview).

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