Alan Kinder

The power of geography

Alan focuses on the power of inspirational curriculum content to prepare students for their future lives.

Accompanying online materials

Introduction and approach

This article comes largely from a personal rather than a research perspective, since the ideas within it are derived from the many years I have spent teaching geography to young people, working with geography teachers on curriculum development and participating in debates over National Curriculum and qualification frameworks. The immediate personal context is one where, as Chief Executive of the Geographical Association (GA), I am periodically invited to explain to non-geographers, 'what's the point of learning geography?'

But there is also a national context. I have argued previously that the National Curriculum for geography affords considerable freedom over detailed content selection (Kinder, 2013). As more schools convert to academies, fewer are subject to the statutory Programmes of Study in any case, and so one could argue that the majority of key stage 3 geography teachers now have greater curriculum freedom than at any time since the introduction of the first National Curriculum in 1991. It therefore seems a good time to revisit the question, 'what geography should we teach?'

This question has of course been subject to close attention over the years (e.g. Kinder and Lambert, 2011). Nor is this process unique to the UK: the nature and content of the geography curriculum has come under scrutiny in many other countries across the world (see, for example, the 'Wikigeo' (IGU, n.d.)). In this article, I make no attempt to establish a theoretical framework but instead wish to offer some foundational content elements for the 11–14 curriculum – what we might regard as its 'geological underpinnings'. My approach is to start with a metaphorical blank page and to ask, 'what geographical themes should be taught at key stage 3, i.e. the final stage of statutory-for-all geography education?' By doing so, I hope to focus on the power of geography to inform and inspire young people, to challenge and educate them and ultimately to equip them to live and function as adults in society. My focus is on curriculum *content*, rather than the outcomes arising from a high-quality geographical education, such as spatial and relational thinking (GA, 2012), or the development of investigative skills though fieldwork or enquiry (Roberts, 2014).

Physical processes and landscapes

As the GA's Manifesto for geography (GA, 2009) makes clear, part of the power of geography is to both 'satisfy and nourish' the connection with and curiosity about the world experienced by every human being. This creates a strong argument, I think, for the curriculum to take young people *beyond* themselves and their everyday experiences by studying the extraordinary physical variety of Earth's surface. There is (or can be) a visceral feel to this geography: exploration of the sheer scale, diversity and majesty of Earth's landscapes and natural environments; encounters with the extremities of climate, natural history and topography. 'Awe and wonder' are not the only responses to anticipate here: the scale of the world, the idea of deep time or the indiscriminate violence of some natural phenomena can make humans feel vulnerable and inconsequential. At the same time, they stir curiosity in young minds, which may begin to wonder, for example, how an unearthly landscape was formed (Figure 1). This reminds us that geography at every level has the potential for both explanatory and descriptive power, meaning that students in this key stage need to be taught the processes which create landscapes in order to better understand the world in which they live.

Figure 1: The unearthly landscape of hoodoos in Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah.
Photo: © Alan Green

Figure 2: The extraordinary ability of humans to adapt to extreme environments. Touareg in Ténéré Desert, Niger. **Photo:** © Alessandro Vannucci

Societies and cultures worldwide

Of equal importance is for students to be given opportunities to appreciate the range and variety of human societies across the world. This is geography as 'the study of the Earth as home to humankind' (Johnston, 1985). It is true that the human population and occupation of the Earth causes significant challenges, both for us and for the natural environment, and that our numbers and the way some of us live our lives exerts pressure on natural resources and systems. But before we confront young people with these challenges we should introduce them to the quite extraordinary ability of humans as a species to adapt to environments right across the planet (Figure 2): this is after all the reason our numbers have multiplied. Which of us is not intrigued by the people living in the wettest, coldest, hottest and highest places of the world? Urbanisation is equally significant and can be equally exciting to students in this age range. Cities are one of humankind's most enduring accomplishments, and despite the historic and contemporary concerns they create around issues such as migration, transportation and environmental impact, they remain remarkably successful forms of social, political and economic organisation. Only geography can help us understand a seeming contradiction: just as modern technology allows us to communicate across distance more easily than ever, more and more of us choose to gather together in cities.

Human welfare, development and globalisation

If studying the human occupation of the Earth is inherently geographical, then so too is investigating variations in human welfare. Regarding human development over time, there are some noteworthy achievements to be celebrated with key stage 3 students; as well, of course, as some very significant challenges. Chief amongst these is global inequality, and the fact that 1 % of the world's richest individuals own the majority of its wealth is a striking illustration of the moral, political, social and economic problems it poses (Figure 3). Geography's insight is to show us the ways in which people produce and consume resources, lend and invest money, arrange terms of trade, colonise and decolonise and so on have the most profound effect on patterns of wealth and inequality. Geography therefore helps young people begin to make sense of the range of processes we now call globalisation. Geography's power is, I think, that the subject does not treat globalisation as an inevitable 'force of nature', but as myriad decisions enacted through human agency; connected to political and economic power, and therefore uneven and asymmetrical. Some examination of globalisation and global development must surely, therefore, form part of 11–14 study.

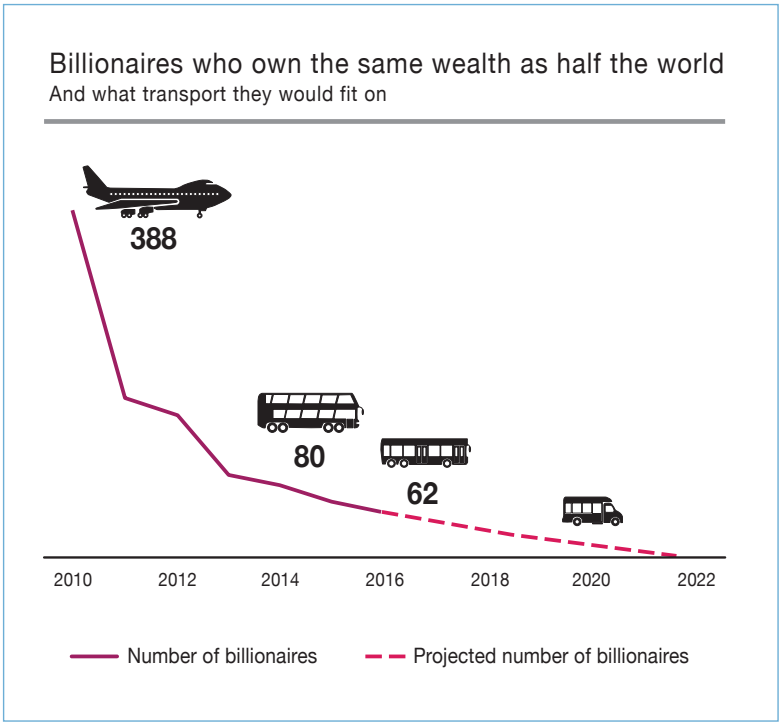

Figure 3: The number of people who, as individuals, own the same wealth as half the world combined. **Source:** Oxfam, 2016.

Identity

Returning to the GA's Manifesto (*ibid.*), we are reminded that geography also has power at the personal scale, because it helps young people investigate their own identity (and often multiple identities). Geography helps us ask, 'who am I and what is my place in the world?' through:

- careful study of our locality, which helps reveal a young person's sense of place and community (see, for example, *www.geography.org.uk/projects/makingmyplaceintheworld*);
- exploring ideas such as diversity, difference and similarity by studying both local *and* distant places, our own *and* other countries;
- understanding the complexity of places – their uniqueness, but also the way they are shaped through external connections, which helps deconstruct stereotypes and avoid the danger of the 'single story' (Adichie, 2009);
- taking students from naming and locating countries, to understanding how places, territories and borders help shape our culture, identity and sense of self (Rawling, 2016; Massey, 2006) (Figure 4).

Human-environmental interaction

Perhaps geography's greatest educational contribution to key stage 3 is the way it brings physical and human realms together. Writing about geography's place in the world, an eminent geographer claimed that the 'great challenges of the 21st century are geographical in their formulation, analysis and consequence, and they transcend the physical/social divide' (Dorling, 2016). The growth of academic 'nexus studies' as an approach to understanding food, water and energy security, climate change and many other contemporary issues seems to back this assertion.

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Figure 4: A small fence separates densely-populated Tijuana, Mexico, from the relatively sparse outskirts of San Diego, USA. Hundreds of thousands of people try to cross the border from Mexico into the United States every year. **Photo:** © Sgt. 1st Class Gordon Hyde (CC BY-SA 3.0).

I infer from this that the 11–14 curriculum should include study of human-environmental interactions, and that regular reference to the environmental, social, economic and political dimensions of study – with analysis of the way these dimensions are interdependent – can have a powerful influence on students' future habits of mind.

This brings us to perhaps the most powerful and profound message for inclusion in our key stage 3 curriculum – the Anthropocene. Earth scientists now talk of the 'game changing' impact humans are having on multiple Earth surface systems (chemical, sedimentary, biological, etc.). In January 2016, the respected journal *Science* (2016) announced that the Earth has endured changes sufficient to leave a global stratigraphic signature distinct from that of the Holocene, meaning that we have entered a new geological epoch in which the actions of humans will be recorded in the very fabric of the surface of the Earth. What more geographical topic is worthy of study for young people today?

Conclusion

I finish this somewhat subjective outlining of the geography curriculum by simply asking: what's in yours?

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