



REPORTS, INFORMATION, AND DISCUSSION

Teaching Quality in Geography: What Are We Trying to Achieve?

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It is important to ask questions about teaching quality in geography education. It is frequently reported (e.g., MORGAN, 2020) that the level of *geographical knowledge* among the general population is poor, the inference being that geography teaching is deficient. Although public debate following such revelations can appear to reduce the idea of geography in the popular imagination to an element of trivial pursuits, we do not lose sight of the subject's profundity in educational contexts: after all, there is nothing more important than exploring and understanding human relations in the world and with planet Earth. However, it is for this reason we believe questions of teaching quality cannot be addressed solely by technical, empirical research directed at the efficacy of certain procedures, processes, or techniques. Discussions about high quality teaching are inseparable from the quality of the curriculum thought that lies behind the teaching.

What we mean by this—and what it implies for how teachers are prepared and even how teaching itself is understood—requires careful deliberation. DARLING-HAMMOND (2021, p. 307) has authoritatively stated that “[...] evolving definitions of teaching quality around the world increasingly see teaching as rooted in a wide-ranging knowledge base that combines an understanding of content, pedagogy and learners which is focused on meeting students’ diverse social, emo-

tional and academic needs—rather than just covering the curriculum.”

We certainly agree, for teaching quality is complex and context-dependent, and it brings us to the very core of teachers’ professional practice and identity. However, we would add to this a deeper exploration of questions relating to knowledge itself, not least to get us away from the dead hand of DARLING-HAMMOND’S (2021, p. 307) final words— “[...] just covering the curriculum”. When we refer to curriculum thinking we are far removed from the technical (although important) issues of *coverage* and *sequencing* and so on. We are interested in the *knowledge itself*: what gives it warrant; what makes it significant and worthwhile; and sometimes what makes it joyful. In our contemporary conditions of post-truth, echo chambers, conspiracy theories, and global climate emergency it has become extremely important to reappraise how teaching—that is, how the curriculum is enacted with young people—is understood. In short, we might spend less time on measurable *learning outcomes* and a lot more on the quality of the educational encounter, the focus of what is called curriculum making (LAMBERT & MORGAN, 2010; MITCHELL, 2020).

In a similar way, Majella DEMPSEY (2023, p. 39) has recently argued that “[...] curriculum is the great public project of our time in education [...] [to create] [...] a discursive space where alternative ways of being can

be imagined". To date, the public project has been dominated by modes of control and regulation towards normative cultural, social, and economic ends. In the future, she argues, the new publicness of education could centre on the quality of educational encounters themselves in helping young people live in and with the world—whereby "[...] each student can experience the curriculum as something active and an ongoing process of developing a voice" (DEMPSEY, 2023, p. 41). The curriculum is envisaged as a space in which dominant narratives can be challenged. The teacher's job is to ensure that the appropriate scaffolding is in place for this to happen, ensuring students' right to be agentive in their curriculum encounters.

Of course, this vision is more or less what has been on the progressive education table for over half a century, and certainly since the social and cultural transformations and struggles of the 1960s. For example, POSTMAN and WEINGARTNER (1971, pp. 202–3) called for a new education which would produce people who were "[...] actively enquiring, flexible, creative, innovative, tolerant, liberal (and) who can face uncertainty and ambiguity without disorientation". The authors did not hold back on what they thought was wrong with the old education predicated on inculcating young people with an *archaic canon* consisting of

- absolute, fixed and unchanging *truths*
- certainties, and binary right and wrongs
- readily identifiable cause and effect explanations (avoiding complexity)
- knowledge as *given*—and authoritative in the sense that it is accepted without question.

This enduring critique of the old education persists to this day partly because such calls for the radical re-working of education to move us from curriculum product to process; to be far more student centered; to listen to diverse voices and questions; to loosen the grip of given, predetermined knowledge and to prize students' meaning making—are themselves an insufficient platform for relevant curriculum making.

Gert BIESTA (2017, p. 27) has characterized such progressive trends as resulting in the "learnification" of education, a process that *undermines* teachers and teaching. Ironically, it also fails students too, for at worst a learnified curriculum becomes the willing servant of neoliberal fast-capitalism, producing competent, socially skillful, and highly flexible human capital—but in some significant ways *untaught*. In the prologue to his book, BIESTA (2017, p. 3) reflects on the "swing" between old and new education, frequently described as that between traditionalist and progressive educational thought:

What is remarkably absent in the discussion is the consideration of a *third option*, one where teaching is positioned at the progressive end of the spectrum and is (re)connected with the emancipatory ambitions of education (original italics).

It is the search for a third option that also stimulated YOUNG and MULLER's (2010) discussion of *three future curriculum scenarios*—like BIESTA (2017), dismissing both traditional knowledge delivery (Future 1, or POSTMAN and WEINGARTNER's [1971] old education) and the progressive, anything goes, learnified alternative (Future 2). Future 3 was later expanded on and justified (YOUNG ET AL., 2014) but not (yet) really exemplified.

However, the significance of our argument, taking us beyond the limits of both Futures 1 and 2, is that it focuses not on the curriculum as *text*, one that purports to lead towards or even deliver learning outcomes and/or attainment targets, but on curriculum as *conversation*. In the latter preferred formulation, it is the quality of the educational encounter that is the main curriculum concern. Attention then shifts from the technical competence and efficiency of teachers to implement and deliver the authorized standards towards the *knowledge work* that lies behind the design of productive lessons which ultimately can create the *state of dialogue* identified by BIESTA (2017).

Curriculum thinking was a key principle that formed the core of GeoCapabilities, a project involving European, US, and UK partners which sought to develop some mechanisms to support deeper engagement among teachers with the educational potential of geography in schools (LAMBERT ET AL., 2015; BUSTIN, 2019; BLADH, 2020; BIDDULPH ET AL., 2020; MITCHELL ET AL., 2022). Another key principle was that of powerful knowledge (YOUNG, 2008; YOUNG ET AL., 2014; YOUNG & MULLER, 2016; BÉNEKER, 2018; MULLER & YOUNG, 2019) wrapped up in the potential of specialized disciplinary knowledge to enable students (in Bernstein's memorable phrase) "[...] to think the unthinkable and the not yet thought" (BERNSTEIN, 2000, p. 30). GeoCapabilities consciously made a virtue of stretching across theoretical perspectives which, although raising difficulties for some theorists (e.g., DENG, 2022), offers an approach to conceptualizing the knowledge work of teachers which forms the essential component of their curriculum making.

In fact, despite his critique of GeoCapabilities DENG (2022, p. 612) goes on to argue that the curriculum should be "[...] *future oriented* in the sense that it aims at the formation of autonomous and responsible individuals who can thrive and flourish in the present and future world" (original italic). He sets out an ambitious program of work to achieve

this including efforts to clarify *the formation* of school subjects in ways that embrace the knowledges that “[...] have the potential to contribute to human powers” (DENG, 2022, p. 612). He seeks ways to formulate subject curricula that support—rather than constrain—curriculum making in classrooms “[...] so as to unlock and actualize the potential of the subject” (DENG, 2022, p. 612).

To enable this *unlocking*, DENG (2018) has for years called for the development of teachers’ *theories of content*. We think GeoCapabilities has begun to do this work partly through its attempt to operationalize Future 3 curriculum thinking. And yet, there is much work still to do. Reflecting on the three future scenarios, MULLER (2023, p. 28) writes that:

The proposal for Future Three envisaged a return to a new ‘knowledge-centric’ curriculum that would allow for the wider democratisation of specialised knowledge. The initial presentation of this schema was, in retrospect, rather too stage-bound, with one Future succeeding another as if in natural progression. It is perhaps better to think more dialectically about it. There are aspects in each of Future One and Future Two that were seen as genuinely liberatory at the time and deserve at least consideration in a re-modelled Future Three.

Future 3 curriculum scenarios do need to be modeled (as GeoCapabilities has begun to do, BÉNEKER ET AL., 2023) but they are no ready-made panacea. To extend Muller’s point above, it is probably true that high quality teaching has always had many Future 3 characteristics embodied by the *approach* to knowledge outlined in this brief commentary. In this sense, Future 3 might be seen more a means to restore certain principles of liberal, democratic education committed to opening minds and encouraging critical engagement similar to those embodied by the German tradition of *Bildung*. Our claim is that Future 3 thinking must embrace more thoroughly the knowledge work revealed by Young, Muller, and others: work that ensures teaching becomes more community responsive and inclusive of indigenous ways of knowing the world, *in addition to* addressing the realist knowledge beyond their (and their teachers’) direct experience. Through a renewed focus on the knowledge itself we intend that the enacted school curriculum enables young people to become more intellectually prepared to grasp the epochal questions that we all face, such as the climate emergency.

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