

A Space for Social Justice in Geography Education?

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The push for more attention on social justice in geography education has gained a stronger sense of urgency and greater coherence in recent decades. This has occurred in tandem with increasing attention paid by geographers to what this discipline, perceived by some as inherently concerned with injustice and disparity (Smith, 1994; Merrett, 2000), can do to contribute to a more equitable world. This push for what Kirman (2003) termed as “transformative geography” (p. 93) in education calls for teachers to introduce students to the geographical aspects of social justice and focus on how these issues are located at a number of interconnected geographic scales (local, regional, state and international). This will allow students to practice the “discipline of geography for the well-being of people and the environment in order to improve the world” (p. 93).

However this endeavor has been met with ambivalence and hostility in some quarters due to worries about the devaluation and displacement of what is perceived to be core geographical knowledge in favor of other kinds of content more closely linked to active citizenship and social justice outcomes. This worry that Geography will be “emptied of content rooted in the conceptual frameworks of the subject” or “be regarded as a convenient ‘vehicle’ for broader general competences such as ‘thinking skills’” (Huckle, 1983) has fed suspicion of the push for attention on social justice. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to explore spaces of possibilities in the incoming Geography Ordinary ‘O’ Level Syllabus 2014 for teachers to engage students with social justice, to examine teachers’ perspectives on the viability of this endeavor, and to how a balance may be reached to address this simmering issue. This

balance, however, may not be able to replace the need for a fundamental resolution, at least in the Singapore context, on the direction(s) that Geography education needs to take in order to retain its relevance in a changing world (Chang, 2011).

This paper is divided in four main parts and begins with a brief review and discussion of pertinent literature on the discussion of the utility of geography in furthering the aims of social justice. The next section provides a discussion on the incoming ‘O’ Level Geography syllabus (2014) with regard to spaces (whether consciously created or indirectly opened up) in the document for geography teachers to engage or even promote social justice from syllabus themes and suggested resources. The third component augments the second section and focuses on findings from interviews about teachers’ perspectives on the efficacy of Geography for the social justice agenda and relevant pedagogical approaches. The key findings show that teachers feel a sense of insecurity with regard to the limits of advocacy for social justice. There is also tension between urging for more prominence for social justice and being labelled as moralistic. This paper concludes with a call for a more flexible curriculum supported by the Ministry of Education and for greater teacher agency and autonomy to incorporate social justice in their practice and spark students’ curiosity and engagement with the wider community.

The Moral Turn in Geography

Social justice, as noted by Merrett (2004, pp. 94-95), is a concept that is difficult to define. It primarily focuses on procedural justice (e.g. freedom to pursue goals) and on

distributional justice (e.g. freedom to be free from discrimination and inequality). A social justice agenda has made a comeback from the radical geography heyday of the 1960s and 1970s. It has become increasingly central to the geographical issues championed by geographers such as Harvey (1993), Merrett (2000) and Kearns (2001), who focus on issues such as socio-economic divides, environmental ethics, power relations, and discrimination entrenched in society. As Proctor (1998) argues, the geographical concept of place lends itself naturally to analyses of processes and phenomena that both empower and disempower the lives of people. The fluency in the way geographical terminology can be applied to researching these issues thus points to the responsibility imbued in learners of the discipline in uncovering and addressing issues identified. The increased focus on ethics or what Smith (1997) terms as the “moral turn” (p. 581) in geography parallels a growing awareness amongst geographers for a need for concrete action to bring about a “compassionate geography” (Kearns, 2001). Geographers, therefore, are “responsible for who we are, how we live and the social effects we have others” (Valentine, 2005, p. 485) and have a duty to share what we know.

These arguments have profound implications for geography education in terms of its learning outcomes, skills taught and core content. Indeed, Merrett (2000, p. 216), argues that teachers have the responsibility to “revive” the teaching of social justice as part of the tradition of geography. The implication of this, when distilled to a curriculum and pedagogical level, is that geography teachers need to have an ethical commitment to make a difference to our community and to achieve positive change in society (Valentine, 2005). When realized, this will reframe the Geography curriculum in terms of its explicit and implicit learning outcomes. This endeavor remains a difficult one because of a “chasm” that has developed between developments in geography taught in the university and the time warp that school geography seem to be trapped in (Goudie, 1993, p.338). There is, in addition, no mechanism to mediate the transition and change thus resulting in continuous battles

over ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of geography being taught in secondary school.

Concerns over the Social Justice in Geography Curriculum

Calls to consider the value of “values” in geographical education that underpin the desire for social justice and betterment of our changing world have been met with mixed response (Merrett, 2000; Kirman, 2003; Valentine, 2005). While there is enthusiastic response from some quarters, for many curriculum planners and educators, the response has been more ambivalent and subdued at best (Morgan, 2002; Russo, 2004).

There are two main reservations to this push for more attention on social justice. The first reservation stems from opposing views on what should be taught in the Geography curriculum. As Naish (1988) noted, geography teachers should not be asked to take on the burden of educating for a better world. Similarly, Marsden (1997) also opined that while geography can play a part in investigating the major world social and environmental issues, the “geography” body of knowledge in geographical education must not be evacuated. Such views have roots dating back to the immediate post-war period when British geography began to shake off its imperialist leanings and increasingly focused on the urban and the social to the dismay of geographers such as Wooldridge (1949, pp. 1-19, cited in Marsden, 1997). Wooldridge rejected the increasing focus on studies of the social (e.g. social studies), and claimed that that it will destroy the value of geography in education.

More recently, a report released in 2007 by British think-tank Civitas argued that the British geography curriculum, among others, was corrupted by political interference because it promoted social causes and values such as environmental justice in geography (Whelan, 2007). Standish (2007a), in addition, also warned against a blind infusion of contemporary issues, moral values, and lessons on personal responsibility in geographical education. He argued that

geography cannot be the vehicle for a moral agenda pushed by well-meaning curriculum and policy planners as it will end up emptying the subject of its traditional topical content and concepts. These worries clearly reflect the spat over the ownership of geographical education and the delineation of the subject (Lambert & Morgan, 2009).

The second reservation is based on the lack of readiness, on the part of geography teachers, to teach social justice. As most national curricula (including Singapore's) do not accord an official position to the pedagogy of social justice, there is no specific attention on how to teach students principles of social justice or to allow students to engage with related geographical themes such as rural-urban divides, environmental pollution in developing countries and food insecurity. Hence, teachers are then left to their own devices to incorporate social justice education in their teaching of geography. In their study of new teachers' experiences with grappling with social justice, Philpott and Dagenais (2011) interviewed 27 new teachers who graduated from a teacher education programme with some emphasis on social justice and found that gaps between academic ideals held by tertiary institutions, ministry curriculum and school environment created "pedagogical dilemmas" (p. 96). In addition, the lack of resources for teaching of social justice has also caused insecurity for teachers as there are few standards to guide the selection and use of materials. This is a concern as there is no set of coherent guidelines that educators can fall back on.

This also points to the larger question of whether teachers should go beyond what is directly prescribed in national curriculum and syllabi and act on their personal convictions in their classroom. Such individualized pedagogical approaches may lead to different learning outcomes that could be detrimental to students' test scores. These constraints, consequently, have discouraged teachers from incorporating social justice into their practice (Philpott & Dagenais, 2011). There is no agreement on whether the teacher in "geography teacher" should take precedence and this has contributed to a reluctance to

focus more attention on social justice through geography education (Lambert & Morgan, 2009). These concerns will remain as long as the gaps are not plugged or bridged. In the following section, I examine the 2013 Geography GCE Ordinary Level syllabus.

Exploring Social Justice in the Singapore Geography Curriculum

Geography is a compulsory subject for Singaporean students in Secondary 1 and 2 (ages 13 and 14) and students can select Geography as a core subject or as an elective for Secondary 3 and 4 (ages 15 and 16) for the Ordinary Level qualifying examination. The new Geography GCE Ordinary Level curriculum will be implemented in 2013. The key change between the outgoing and incoming syllabus is that there is a change in content knowledge with the removal of topics such as Development and the introduction of topics such as Health and Diseases. The syllabus document states that geography education is matched with the "outcomes and intent of 21st Century Competencies Framework" and that there should be "opportunities for students to engage in contemporary issues as informed, concerned and participative citizens and for lifelong learning" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2010, p. G7). This focus suggests that there is a distinct space for teachers to provide intentional opportunities for students to engage in and grapple with issues that are relevant to social justice. The curriculum also focuses explicitly on critical thinking skills and students are required to "hone their skills of sound reasoning and decision-making in analysis, comparison, inference and evaluation" (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2010, p. G9). The topics specifically mentioned in this section include Health and Diseases in which students are asked to be able to engage and show "social-cultural sensitivity and awareness towards local and global communities" (p. G9) and "Global Tourism", in which students should "demonstrate a sense of responsibility towards the preservation of the nation's heritage, sustainable development and sovereignty" (p. G9). While the level of engagement required of geography students is

not specified, these formal curricular goals signal the existence of possible spaces of engagement for the discussion of issues such as developmental divides and social injustice that are inherent in the content of these two topics. This is in line with the argument laid by Chang (2011) that geography education in Singapore needs to be “current and future-oriented” and should embrace Education for Sustainable Development (p. 154). This perspective is sympathetic to a social justice agenda as it is a pre-requisite for sustainable development.

However, despite these possible spaces of engagement in the curriculum, a closer examination of the syllabus document shows that the learning outcomes highlighted previously may not be closely aligned to other areas of content knowledge and attitude/values listed. For the topic on Health and Diseases, the attitudes/values described focus on the “need for individuals to exercise social responsibility” (Curriculum Planning and Development Division, 2010, p. G57) and to “appreciate the importance of remaining vigilant in the face of a disease outbreak” (p. G59). Similarly, Global Tourism includes attitudes/values such as “to respect cultural differences ... to appreciate the need to preserve the natural and built environment ... (and) to appreciate the far-reaching impact of technological development on growth of global tourism” (p. G39-41). These examples indicate a vague yet utilitarian bent in terms of the subject’s learning outcomes and values. For example, the objective of appreciating varieties of global tourist attractions serves no specific purpose. It also does not advocate any specific outcome given that it is not possible to measure or quantify this objective. Values of “sensitivity”, “responsibility” are not meaningfully diffused in these topics. It also appears that there is a disconnect between the earlier broader learning outcomes (aligned with the Competencies) and the narrower topic-specific learning outcomes. The emancipatory or empowering spaces offered in the 21st Century Competencies required of geography students have been much reduced or even lost in the subsequent components of the syllabus document. The “appreciation” aspect of these attitudes/values suggests a

passive geography student who is appreciative and aware of what is happening in the wider world but remains a bystander or passerby in a rapidly changing world. While this does not mean a total foreclosure of spaces for geography teachers to engage students in social justice agenda, it does create a zone of uncertainty for educators who wish to introduce social justice themes in lessons. As Philpott and Dagenais (2011) observed, this leads to self-policing on the part of teachers because many teachers tend to follow the official syllabus document very closely.

Conclusion

There is strong support in some quarters for incorporating a social justice agenda in geography in both tertiary and secondary school education. In the United Kingdom, there has been a concrete (albeit controversial) attempt to pursue this. In Singapore, this goal is not supported by a coherent pathway and guidelines for teachers, at least in the local secondary school context. Parts of the new curriculum focus on skills relevant to issues of social justice but this is not aligned to other attitudes/values listed in the document that are more utilitarian and content-based. In addition, even though there are teachers who have interest in the push to infuse social justice in the geography curriculum, there is a lack of resources and guidelines that provide adequate support to the teachers. Thus, a grey zone of uncertainty and insecurity lies in wait for teachers who want to incorporate social justice in the geography curriculum. If this is the pathway that curriculum planners want to move towards, it is then imperative that the gaps are addressed by the Ministry of Education to provide more guidelines in terms of the scope and sequence and the specific topical alignment between content taught and themes of social justice. This will enhance students’ awareness of the structural inequalities underlying contemporary problems and allow them to be able to know what action to take to address these issues. In addition, this will address teachers’ insecurity regarding what and how to teach. Concurrently, there should also be simultaneous effort to promote and accept teachers’ agency in resource selection.

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