

GEOGRAPHY — ITS EMERGENCE ON THE SECONDARY SCHOOLS CURRICULUM IN TRINIDAD & TOBAGO

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Some geographers may contend that the apparent environmental alienation as demonstrated in the current despoliation of our landscape is a necessary evil in the modernisation process. But they will also hasten to argue that development is irrational if not accompanied by attempts to maintain the environment in a healthy ecological balance. The inability to rationalise the effects of economic development on the land and people may be assessed as a partial failure in geographic education.

This article will attempt to trace some developments in geographic education (in Trinidad and Tobago) which while having some positive effects in the development of the country, might have had some of the negative outcomes implied in the statement above. It focusses firstly on earlier developments in the subject during the colonial experience and then on the recent attempts to indigenize and make the geography curriculum more relevant.

The earliest recorded ideas for localising the secondary school geography curriculum came in 1869 when Patrick Keenan recommended that the local history, resources, material phenomena etc. be taught (Williams, 1968). He placed a fifty percent limitation on the localisation effort but nevertheless showed a sensitivity to the localisation problem particularly in the area of environmental studies.

Keenan found that the curriculum of Queen's Collegiate School (now Queen's Royal College) was too heavily dominated

by the requirements of the Cambridge University examinations and its classical subjects emphasized too much cramming. St. Mary's College had on the contrary a more localised and practical curriculum but had to capitulate to the anglicising zeal of the colonial governments if it wanted to benefit by the grants-in-aid.

Both of these pioneering boys' colleges had to submit to the wishes of the colonial government as part of the latter's control policy and to the needs of the foreign transient population and the local intelligentsia and creole elites in maintaining a grammar school education which showed little signs of extrinsic value. In the array of classical subjects taught, Geography struggled as a preliminary course of lower status as it was not offered for awards of scholarships (Gordon, 1968; Hall, 1976).

Even though the Report on Secondary Education of 1916, the Mayhew-Marriott Report of 1933 and the Moyne Report of 1939 (Gordon, 1968) doubted that such classical subjects done were best suited to the needs of the colony, there was much local opposition to the recommendations which sought to de-emphasise the traditional education.

Because of the comparatively low level of educational research and practical adaptations of research in schools during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century a gap existed between the development of field Geography and what was taught in the schools. While geographers were trying to relate and explain the existence and distribution of spatial phenomena in order to derive generalisations and catapult the subject into a more systematic discipline, schools in England were experiencing an academic lag. They were insisting on the learning of long bits of facts and generalisations which did not connect to reality (Hall, 1976). This lag existed even further into the 20th century in Trinidad and Tobago as the 'crucial' aspects of Geography consisted of cramming off names of "countries, capitals and chief products" — the "capes and bays" Geography (Gunn, 1971). These developments must have given rise to the feeling that Geography was meant for the less able.

Although the post World War I years witnessed a growth

in the teaching of Geography at university (Hall, 1976), there was no immediate improvement in Trinidad and Tobago even though the two established boys' colleges were taught mainly by English and Irish masters. Eric Williams commented on the irrelevance in education and he notes that the European landscape dominated the Geography syllabus; the text books were unsuitable to West Indian children – things West Indian were omitted. (Williams, 1968).

Emerging from pleas for the greater voice in our own destinies, one request sought to change this by suggesting

. . . the desirability of transferring to the West Indies, control of the Overseas Certificate Examinations for which Secondary pupils now sit . . .

(CXC, 1979)

This was supported by the Maurice Committee's recommendation that the University College of the West Indies become "the authority and examining body for the Secondary Schools Final Examination" (The Cabinet Committee on General Education, 1959).

Growing social awareness and political agitation for self-government influenced the Cambridge Syndicate to respond positively to requests from the Advisory Committee in the Caribbean to include the West Indies among regions to be suited for local Geography examinations from the mid 1950's. With this option came a compulsory map-work question based on an Ordinance Survey Map of a different part of a Commonwealth Caribbean island in each year's examination. This was a radical change from the previous Regional Geography papers which tested knowledge (almost exclusively) of Europe and the British Isles with optional sections on North America, S.E. Asia, and the Southern Continents.

During the two previous decades (1960's and 1970's) the Geography Association of Trinidad and Tobago figured prominently in the curriculum localisation efforts. The association comprising mainly of teachers, recommended several modifications in the Cambridge Syllabus especially as it affected Caribbean Geography. It kept alive and promoted the excitement in local Geography by publishing a journal, spon-

soring lectures on local themes, workshops and field trips.

Gradually, as self-government and sovereign states came into being, and as the need for regional integration became evident, education emerged as an essential institution to be controlled for great local and regional development. Thus under the Caricom agreement a semi-autonomous regional examination body, the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC), was formed after several meetings held between 1961 and 1973 which involved education personnel from Caribbean Commonwealth governments, the University of the West Indies (U.W.I.) and in the latter part of the period) advisors from the Cambridge and London Syndicates. (CXC, 1979).

This move certainly satisfied the request for localising examinations made as far back as 1869 by Keenan and as recently as 1967 in the Draft Plan for Educational Development in Trinidad and Tobago. But the mere act of putting into local hands the privilege of certifying local secondary school students need not be a significant contribution to meaningfulness and relevance in Caribbean education if one's philosophy is informed by foreign values.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE SECONDARY EDUCATION CERTIFICATE GEOGRAPHY SYLLABUS

For the production of the Geography syllabus (as well as other subject syllabuses), the CXC encouraged participation by inviting National Subject Panels representing each of the fourteen countries comprising Caricom to design models for a Geography syllabus bearing in mind the principle of suitability to the people of the area. The Trinidad and Tobago panel consisted of Geography Teachers (who were members of the Geography Association of Trinidad and Tobago), personnel of the School of Education (University of the West Indies), and a co-ordinating official of the Ministry of Education and Culture. (CXC, 1979).

Several draft syllabuses were produced throughout the region. These did not differ substantially in their basic content nor philosophical positions. The major differences were

in the Regional Geography content of the syllabuses in terms of approaches and emphases on the amount of local (territorial) Geography input. The settlement of these differences was achieved by the Regional Subject Panel which gained consensus on the final draft in April 1977. The syllabus document entitled "Secondary Certificate Geography" was issued to schools in June 1977 for operation by September 1977.

The implementation was done against the minority view that the syllabus should be used as the basis for a five-year curriculum development project from which testing and re-designing would have been possible, as well as for the necessary re-orientation of teachers. The official response to this proposal at a plenary meeting of the Geography Association of Trinidad and Tobago, was that the regional governments needed this examination to be operational by June 1979. Although introduced in political haste, teachers lauded the effort but were not blind to the challenges that the new syllabus imposed.

What emerged in Geography anyhow was a syllabus that not only stated the content to be tested in the examination, but a curriculum guide which gave a rationale for doing the subject; a justification for its place on the curriculum; the objectives of the subject, as well as details of the concepts, skills, and activities to be mastered by the learner. It is truly a superior document to the Cambridge Syllabus in terms of the help and guidance it gives the teacher as well as the learner and follows more closely the modern conception of syllabus development (Bailey, 1974; Thomas, 1976). In short, its design is more in keeping with the 'New Geography', which emphasises the teaching of the structure of the discipline.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

The C.X.C. Geography Syllabus does not only imply a change from the fact-based to the structure-based syllabus, but a change in the approaches to learning and teaching. It demands a strong orientation to and belief in inquiry methods which require teacher change as well as the provision of a

healthy minimum supply of resources to teachers and students.

In an effort to gauge the effects of the introduction of the first CXC syllabus, a brief limited survey was conducted among twenty-one (21) teachers in North Trinidad in schools representing the spectrum (except the Junior Secondary Schools.) In one school, three teachers returned one questionnaire on which they collaborated, hence calculations are based on nineteen returns. The questionnaire sought to get information on teachers' response to the changes in volume of work, quality of content, classroom practices, materials needs and the examinations based on the new syllabus.

Asked whether the CXC demands a larger volume of work, only three teachers (15.79%) said that the CXC Geography syllabus involved less work for them than the Cambridge. Four teachers (21.05%) said it involved the children in less work. The others felt that the volume of work for teachers and students remained the same. A majority of teachers (79.95%) said that the themes or topics were more wide-ranging than the Cambridge.

There were numerous comments on the "vagueness" of the CXC syllabus. This "Vagueness" apparently provides teachers with a problem of content selection and delimitation — a transitional adjustment from the fact-based Cambridge syllabus. There is no doubt that as the clarity of understanding of teaching structure evolves, the built-in limits provided by concepts will aid in the choice of specific content to be used, varying obviously with the students' cognitive development or the difficulty of the concept or skill to be mastered. The "vagueness" in such a syllabus is necessary, so that content is not narrowly prescribed.

None of the teachers surveyed said that skills coverage of the CXC Geography syllabus was less than its Cambridge counterpart. Eleven (57.89%) felt that the skills demand was greater and eight (42.11%) said that both syllabuses were equally demanding. This reflected a slight recognition that geographical skills in both concepts and methods had to be increased. Although Cambridge never outlined the geographical

skills in the same way as the CXC, it does seem that the latter is more thorough and comprehensive in its variety, amount and quality. This is in keeping with its implicit movement towards developing techniques in the subject in the array of student activities suggested.

Relevance does not necessarily stop at localisation or West Indianisation of content. In Geography, relevance implies the observance of the spirit of the subject; the development of the sensitivities that will allow for the greater caring, appreciation and control of one's environment that will result not only in geographic learning but will help in economic and social growth and the preservation and conservation of the environment as is expressed in the rationale and aims of the CXC Syllabus (CXC, 1979).

The field-work component of the syllabus is still being worked out and in the meantime the delay may retard the experience of relevance in the more practical areas of the subject. Teachers have expressed the fear that the proposed contribution of almost 20% to the final mark in Geography for field work may reduce the kinds of practical inputs expected and this may nullify the greater relevance to be derived. Teachers who commented on the disparity between the large volume of work required in the classroom and the small volume tested at the examinations may be hinting at the greater need for a larger percentage of the final grade to be allotted to internal assessment especially in the light of the inquiry methods and learning activities which demand greater assessment of process. This will necessarily call for changing assessment procedures, teacher education as well as setting up checks in the form of standardisation procedures, etc.

Geography, whether taught in the traditional or contemporary way, requires a great deal of text and non-text material. Eleven (57.89%) teachers thought that the CXC demanded the use of more materials. On the contrary, they recognised a deficit between the demand and the availability of the materials. Ten (52.63%) felt that the materials (some texts, documents, audio-visual hard and soft-ware) were either in short supply, difficult to get or unavailable. This obviously

meant that teachers and students resourcefulness and creativity must be taxed to the fullest in searching, researching and designing materials.

In trying to ascertain what changes in classroom practice did occur, teachers were asked whether their workload had increased, decreased or remained the same in the following areas (for CXC Geography) — planning and organization, lecturing, questioning, discussions, problem-solving, motivational strategies. Between eight (42.11%) in planning and organization and twelve (63.15%) in questioning said that there was no increased emphasis on the named teaching techniques. All other teachers said that their work in all these areas had increased except for four (21.05%) teachers in lecturing and one (5.26%) teacher each in discussion and motivation skills who reported decreases in the use of these skills.

Although one cannot draw an undisputed conclusion about actual changes in practice from the foregoing, it would appear that there is increased activity in the discovery techniques of the instructional spectrum, i.e. between two and five (10.52% and 26.31%) respondents were emphasizing discovery learning. The fact that half of the teachers had not changed their routine practices may mean that they had made the transition from traditional approaches especially as four (21.05%) claimed that they lecture less. Although this has not been verified by field observation and it has the halo effect of the self-report instrument, it does show up the recognition of the syllabus demands for the use of inquiry methods.

Nevertheless, the answers which indicated the change in student activities revealed that teachers encouraged classroom questions, small group work, field and library projects more than they did in the past as from two (10.52%) to five (26.31%) of the teachers encouraged inquiry oriented activities involving high cognitive and affiliate drive components for greater achievement motivation. Group-work, individual projects, field studies increased though minimally and compared favourably with the only significant decrease in the area of note-taking.¹ This corresponded favourably to the decrease

in lecturing noted above. There is a perceived shift in teaching strategies to accommodate the change towards the CXC syllabus.

RECENT EFFORTS AT IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF INSTRUCTION

The recognition of change in the type of and approaches to instruction does not necessarily mean a change in the quality of instruction and to ask teachers to self-report on such an issue would have produced information varying in dependability. Nevertheless, I would proceed to describe briefly some efforts made to improve the quality of geographic education.

The In-Service Diploma in Education programme inaugurated in 1973 marked the first attempt at Secondary School teacher education. Geography teachers on this course are catered to in both the basic (Theory of Education) and specialist (Social Studies Curriculum) aspects of the course. The curriculum allows for the transfer and integration of educational theory in Geography i.e. in designing and developing curriculum; learning, teaching and testing in the subject. It is intended to provide teachers with basic understandings in education and teaching. Advanced work in Curriculum with special emphasis in being offered in the Master's programme recently started.

In support of improvement in the teaching of Geography, the Geography Association of Trinidad and Tobago and the subject Sub-Committee of the Secondary Education Certificate in liaison with the Ministry of Education have sponsored several workshops in an effort to up-grade and up-date teachers' proficiencies in such areas as item-writing; the systems approach to the study of cases; case-study reporting; field-study project implementation and assessment; statistical techniques in Geography etc. In addition, the Teacher Centre

1. Note-taking is distinguished from Note-making. The former implies a copying of dictated teachers notes or lectures, the latter is a more creative, purposeful activity and skill.

U.W.I. started a newsletter series for the purpose of encouraging the exchange of materials. This unfortunately did not receive the anticipated response for participation among teachers which indicates the need to rethink the approach for gaining involvement in such an effort.

Although such schemes aimed at delivering quality geographic education are laudable, one must be cautious about the temptation to provide too much in terms of text materials production. For instance, in a recent workshop teachers were reported to be engaged in the writing out of cases in order to fill the need for case-study materials. The fact that teachers located information, researched it and wrote up reports for eventual reproduction and distribution, subverted the aims of the CXC syllabus which intended that students do that type of activity. This may be construed as a retrograde step which will encourage a certain amount of note-learning for examination. A more prudent response towards the problem of text-materials for case studies would have allowed for sharing of materials and the know-how of teaching skills to guide acquisition and storage of materials, as well as directing and stimulating student efforts. In the light of materials and teacher shortages in the subject, this type of workshop may seem an expedient and useful exercise.

Although the title of this article refers to the emergence of Geography, it should not be construed to mean that an "emerged" or "final" state can be reached. The subject has evolved and levels of acceptability and respectability have been attained and no doubt the impact of its practical aspect will be observed in improved caring for the environment in the future. In the light of pending discussion of a Geography Department at U.W.I., St. Augustine (U.W.I., 1983), the subject will no doubt gain in meaningfulness and a fillip to its prestige at Secondary Schools will be experienced if these proposals are accepted.

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