

# The daring discourses of *Teaching Geography*?

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*Teachers should have a sense of their own history in order to help mediate the dominant and often derogatory discourse surrounding their profession* (Apple, 1986, p. 187).

Professional journals such as *Teaching Geography* provide powerful ‘discourses’ – ways of speaking – that help readers put their own practices into perspective. As they attempt to control the dissemination of legitimate knowledge and to earn cultural capital, journals are where issues are contested. What gets published depends on market forces and political legitimacy (Apple, 1986). This article explores the discourses revealed by the Editorials in *Teaching Geography*.

*Teaching Geography*, founded in 1975 and now celebrating its 40th year, represents and interprets geography education from the GA’s perspective. As the only subject association representing school geography in England, the GA has considerable authority in shaping the discourse about school geography. *Teaching Geography* has played a key role in debates about why, what and how geography should be taught in English schools. These debates are part of the wider struggle over who controls education and for what purpose. The birth of the national curriculum for England in the late 1980s and its subsequent reviews have been a major part of this ongoing struggle.

## Discourses about geography education

Discourse analysis is based on the premise that texts, as in journals, not only depict particular versions of reality but also help create and sustain them (Denscombe, 2007). Discourse analysis accepts that texts are ‘products’ and that considerable time, money and effort are required to produce them, so it is important to ask questions about their purpose.

The purpose of analysing *Teaching Geography* as a ‘text’ was not only to explore its representation of reality, but also to understand who and what wields influence in geography education. The focus of the discourse analysis was primarily on *Teaching Geography*’s Editorials, as these are where strong statements about the purposes and practices of geography teaching are made. Editorials have the power to set agendas, frame debates and shape opinion and are, thus, political in nature (Le, 2010). Editorials from 134 journal issues (volume 1, 1975 to volume 35, 2010) were analysed. Editorial themes were compared with concepts and issues found in wider educational discourse. The study asked to what extent the journal:

- reinforces certain educational ideologies
- reflects particular social, political or historical conditions
- exerts power or influence
- portrays a representative version of events
- excludes or suppresses certain ideas or voices.

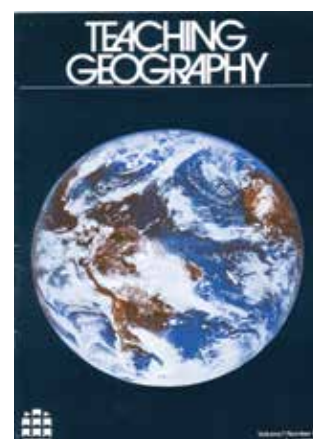
## The dominant discourses of *Teaching Geography*

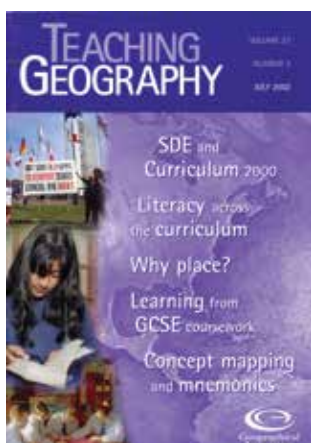
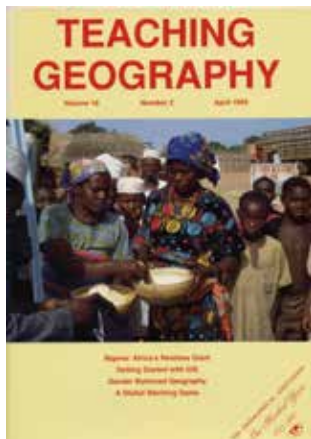
For 40 years *Teaching Geography* has professed to be at the ‘forefront of the curricular debate’ and claimed to help ‘formulate teacher opinion so it becomes effective opinion’ (Bailey, 1979). *Teaching Geography*’s first editor, Patrick Bailey (1977) argued that the ‘rights and wrongs’ of government policy were ‘not the concern of *Teaching Geography*’: rather, the journal ‘would make public statements about geography’s contribution to education’. Ironically, this declaration positioned the journal outside the most significant educational debate of the time. The ‘Great Debate’ signalled a sharp change in educational ideology, challenging as it did the principle that ‘no one but the teacher has any right to say what goes on in schools’ (Jones, 2003, p. 95). The Great Debate set the ‘ball rolling for the politicisation and growing influence of right-wing politicians on educational policy’ (Rawling, 2001, p. 30) and marked the move, during the 1980s, towards increased centralization and state control over the school curriculum (Lambert and Morgan, 2009, p. 148).

Despite the politicisation of educational discourse in the 1980s, in which the new Conservative government blamed a decentralized and largely autonomous curriculum for causing educational ‘failure’ and ‘low standards’, the journal’s ‘apolitical’ stance continued. Rawling (1987) noted how the journal was ‘well placed’ to ensure the national curriculum debate centred on the GA’s ‘Case for Geography’. This confidence in the journal’s ability to influence government policy was, however, challenged by certain correspondents. A letter to the journal’s editor from Fred Martin (1987) accused the GA of ‘inertia’; this was reiterated by J. Lewis, who argued that ‘geographers’ knowledge and expertise is wasted by a coy reluctance to make public statements ... in the “real world” of political wheeling and dealing’ (Lewis, 1987, p. 194).

Accusations of inertia within the GA may have been reflective of the more general lack of debate during the 1980s about what school geography should be. Rawling (2001, p 64) has subsequently argued that the geography education community, at the time, failed to manage the

*Indra examines the discourse about geography education in this journal’s Editorials since the first issue in 1975. The journal has expended considerable energy and expertise in defending the subject against shifting political priorities and continues to be instrumental in creating a legitimate version of school geography.*





struggle between older and newer geographies. Unfortunately for geography, this lack of debate meant that inherent subject differences were 'glossed over', and left the subject 'dangerously exposed' (Rawling, 2001). At the time, the GA was engaged in making sure that geography was deemed a worthy subject for inclusion in the evolving national curriculum, and so chose to go along with a utilitarian version of the subject, rather than traditional or more progressive approaches.

Rawling (2001, p. 30) later confessed that the geography education community had wrongly assumed the government would call upon their expertise during the curriculum negotiations of the 1980s. Geography educators were out-manoeuvred and some, like Walford (2001), believed the government 'butchered' the Geography Working Group (GWG) recommendations. As Editor of *Teaching Geography*, Rawling (1988) warned at the time that '15 years of curriculum development ... were at risk'. She later reiterated that the GA effectively chose to reinforce the dominant New Right rhetoric of 'real subject' and 'utilitarian value' during curriculum negotiations (Rawling, 2001, p. 42).

Following the publication of the 1991 Geography Orders, *Teaching Geography* complemented the new government guidelines with practical advice on how to plan for and implement the national curriculum (Rawling, 2001, p. 73). In effect the journal ruled out an alternative, more progressive discourse, and alternative versions of school geography – 'enquiry-based learning', 'issues-based investigation' and 'values' education were effectively removed from the 1991 Geography Orders (Rawling, 2001, p. 47).

### New Labour's 'Education, Education, Education'

In January 1997 Elizabeth Barratt Hacking admitted that during a time of such unprecedented educational change the journal had neglected the crucial role of offering teachers space to discuss alternative ideas. She tried to reassure readers that the journal would reposition itself at the 'forefront of new ideas, stimulating reflection, debate, dialogue and action'. This repositioning coincided with the election of a Labour government in 1997, who were swept to power on the promise that they would prioritise education.

However, New Labour reinforced neo-conservative educational ideology by emphasising accountability, standards and reliance on market forces (Rawling, 2001, p. 123). Its policies promoted 'targets' and 'performance measures' and moved educational discourse towards the language of 'excellence'. By 1999, Guest Editor Roger Carter (1999) used the term 'Meccano model' to describe the way the new government made the national curriculum by 'adding bits and taking bits off'. Carter (1999) warned that despite political priorities switching to the promotion

of citizenship and environmental sustainability, there was still no 'clear overall rationale' for the national curriculum.

*Teaching Geography* Editorials in the early 2000s embraced the notion of 'raising standards'. As Guest Editors of the 2000 October 'special' issue, Julia Jones and Rob Lodge (2000) highlighted three articles within the issue that addressed assessment for raising standards (target setting, exam technique and ICT assessment). They also highlighted the possible integration of geography with certain GNVQ courses, key skills, IT and the marketing of geography to students and parents, all to raise standards (Jones and Lodge, 2000).

### The discourse of curriculum politics

Some argued that the journal's acceptance of the discourse of standards, targets and excellence jeopardized geography's integrity and distinctiveness as a discipline (Rawling, 2001, p. 139). Others accused the GA of failing to engage more critically in curriculum politics. According to Lambert and Morgan (2009, p. 154), some geographers thought the GA 'colluded' with New Labour to deliver the government's geography curriculum agenda. This agenda embraced the themes of citizenship and sustainable development and moved away from an emphasis on subject disciplines (Rawling, 2001, p. 74). Furedi (in Whelan, 2007, p. 7) argued that this shift away from subjects was an 'erosion of integrity' and that subject knowledge was being threatened by partisan dispute and political experimentation.

In the late 2000s the journal expended considerable effort on describing new curriculum-making opportunities made possible by the 2006 Action Plan for Geography (APG). The APG was set up to fund curriculum development and CPD in the wake of the key stage 3 curriculum review. Key concepts and processes formed part of the restructured curriculum and Roberts' (2007a) reassured teachers that geography's 'key concepts and processes are not new and should not be feared'. In trying to reassure teachers and by praising the review for creating 'exciting challenges to make the curriculum more meaningful', Roberts (2007a) encouraged teachers to rediscover their self belief and use their 'professional judgment'. This message was reaffirmed by Biddulph (2009), who applauded the 2009 GA manifesto for speaking to teachers as expert professionals who are able to discuss the purpose of geography, rather than as technicians who simply deliver subject content.

While *Teaching Geography* has not explicitly engaged in the wider debate about teachers' professional status, the journal has championed the cause of geography specialists. As far back as 1979, Patrick Bailey predicted that cost cutting was likely to mean non-specialists would teach geography. The 1980s push for 'humanities' integration was seen as a major threat to geography's disciplinary integrity, and Editors were adamant that specialist geography teachers

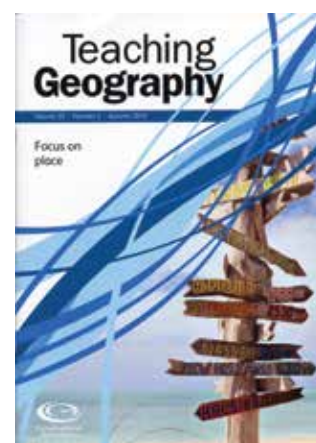
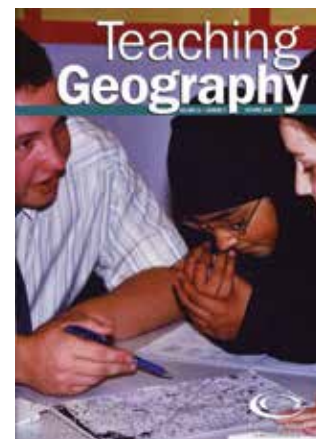
needed to be trained and recruited. Boardman (1992) was keen to promote the IGU's Charter for Geography, which argued geography should be an autonomous subject taught by specialist teachers. Similarly, Roberts (2008) stressed that the geography education community needed to 'argue the case for specialist geography teachers'. The 'slenderer' 2007 key stage 3 programmes of study could not simply be 'delivered' (Roberts, 2007b). A 're-thinking' was required by specialist geography teachers who could, argued Biddulph (2010a), use 'different forms of enquiry' that 'think beyond the positivist models' and which champion 'young people's geographies' (Biddulph, 2010b).

## Conclusion

Over the course of the last 40 years *Teaching Geography* has been instrumental in creating a legitimate version of school geography. In the past the journal has called for compliance and adherence to professional and curriculum standardization. More recently the journal accommodated New Labour's constantly changing curriculum agenda. The new political landscape of a Conservative government now influences how the journal discusses school geography. Given this new dynamic, it is essential that geography teachers have a sense of both their own and their discipline's history. | TG

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## Online resources

The complete archive of *Teaching Geography* is now available online to all subscribers. Go to [www.geography.org.uk/tg](http://www.geography.org.uk/tg) and a link will take you to a fully-searchable archive hosted by JStor where you will be able to find all the Editorials mentioned here.

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