

## **Geography under threat in Irish second-level education**

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### **Abstract**

Recent Department of Education recommendations for a revised second-level junior cycle programme in the Republic of Ireland omitted geography from its established position in the core curriculum. This paper describes the background to the revised curricular recommendations, the efforts undertaken by geographers to defend the position of their discipline and the outcome of their efforts. The evidence illustrates that, as in several other countries, the integrity of geography as a school subject was threatened by moves to broaden the school curriculum to incorporate new areas of study including technological, social and political education. As a result of winning political support, a ministerial commitment has been received that geography will remain in the core curriculum. A lack of clarity remains about its precise status in terms of the timetabled teaching hours that will be allocated.

### **Introduction**

The place of geography in the secondary or high school curriculum and the content of geography syllabuses have come under review in several countries in recent years with varying outcomes (Hill, 1992; Lidstone, 1994). In particular, threats have emerged to the integrity of geography as a school subject through what has been described by Walford and Haggett (1995), in the context of England and Wales, as 'a drift towards amoeba-like process-based integrated courses' (p. 9). Geography was included in the National Curriculum in England and Wales, in the late 1980s (King, 1989), but Rawling (1996) has pointed out recently that continued vigilance is necessary to protect the status of the subject within the curriculum. The Republic of Ireland provides one of the most recent examples of a country where the position of geography in second-level schools has come under review, as part of a broader reappraisal of educational provision. Specifically, proposals for a revised second-

level junior cycle (ages 12–15 years) curriculum, contained in a Department of Education White Paper entitled *Charting our Education Future*, published in April 1995, failed to mention geography as a subject in either the core or the non-core curriculum. A White Paper forms the basis for the introduction of legally-binding regulations and its content is therefore of key importance.

The omission of geography and its co-subject history from the proposed curriculum was interpreted, after some delay during which indications of the intent of the omission were awaited, as a serious challenge to the status of the two subjects in the junior cycle. Both are optional subjects in the second-level senior cycle. In parallel with their historian colleagues, geography teachers and university geographers responded publicly, in a range of different ways, to the proposed revised curricular framework. In response to political pressure, a commitment was given by the Minister for Education in parliament, in late May 1996, that geography and history will remain core subjects in the junior cycle school curriculum. This paper outlines the context in which a threat emerged to the position of geography in the junior cycle curriculum at second-level, the reaction evoked from geographers and the ministerial response. By way of introduction, the school structure at second-level and the status of geography in Irish junior cycle education are discussed briefly.

### **Geography in Irish Second-level Education**

There 782 post-primary schools in the Irish state, of four different types: secondary, vocational, community and comprehensive schools. Of these, secondary schools account for 59% of the total number and for 61% of the students (Department of Education, 1995) (Table 1). Some variations are present in the curricula provided in the four different types of schools, arising from their varying origins and evolution. Secondary schools have evolved from a mainly denominational framework of voluntary (fee-paying originally) Roman Catholic and Protestant schools where an emphasis was placed on an academic curriculum. These schools, which are privately owned and managed, have come under state control increasingly since 1963, associated with state funding of second-level education. Vocational schools were established in 1930, are under the control of county and city education committees and, as their title indicates, served a particular function in relation to vocational training in the past. In 1963 the concept of comprehensive schools was introduced to make provision for both academic and vocational secondary education to serve areas of the country where post-primary educational facilities did not exist (O’Flaherty, 1992). In 1970, legislation was

introduced which enabled secondary and vocational schools to share plant and resources as a means of extending the access of students in vocational schools to a more academic curriculum and with a view towards a more efficient use of resources in general. These schools became known as community schools.

**Table 1** Structure of second-level education in the Republic of Ireland

Type of school	Number of schools	% schools	% total students
Secondary	461	59	61
Vocational	248	31	26
Community and comprehensive	73	10	13

Source: Department of Education (1995: 43-44)

Because of their varying evolution and because schools other than secondary schools have emerged in part from the vocational educational sector, differences exist in the compulsory curriculum required to be taught in the secondary and the non-secondary schools at junior cycle. Geography, with history, forms part of the compulsory junior cycle core curriculum in secondary schools but not in the other three types of second-level schools. Large numbers of students in the latter schools nevertheless study geography and history in the Junior Certificate programme, reflecting the popularity of the two subjects. In 1995, some 92% of all Junior Certificate students presented for geography and history (Dáil Éireann, 1996a: 612). The Junior Certificate Examination is taken after three years of study and many students take the timetabled equivalent of eight or nine subjects. Geography and history have the status of two half-subjects in terms of the teaching hours allocated and therefore do not occupy an overgenerous amount of time in the timetable.

Considerable development has taken place in the geography programme taught at junior cycle in recent years to meet educational needs and to reflect developments in the discipline. A new junior geography syllabus was introduced in 1989 as part of a process of curricular review (Department of Education, 1989). The emphasis in this syllabus is on creating an understanding of concepts and issues and on developing skills rather than on relaying factual data for their own sake. The syllabus consists of three sections, each of which focuses on a broad theme: (1) the human habitat — processes and change; (2) population, settlement

patterns and urbanisation; and (3) patterns in economic activity. Each section is further subdivided into study/teaching units. Each unit comprises a list of key ideas which, through a series of specified studies, are explored in a local, national or international setting (Corcoran, 1989). This syllabus has been well received by both teachers and students, as the proportion of the latter taking geography for the Junior Certificate examination reveals, although there are some reservations about the time demands associated with the broad scope of the programme (Waddington, 1995). There is no evidence of a lack of interest in geography among students which might form a basis for downgrading the status of the subject.

### **Curricular Review and its Implications for Geography**

The Department of Education's (1995) White Paper, *Charting Our Education Future*, was preceded by protracted discussion on the content of the second level school curriculum over several years. In June 1992, a Green Paper was published by the Department of Education on *Education for a Changing World*, as a discussion document on which comments from interested bodies were invited in preparation for the publication of the White Paper. One of the pedagogic objectives of the junior cycle programme, as stated in the Green Paper, was 'to broaden Irish education — so as to equip students more effectively for life, for work in an enterprise culture, and for citizenship of Europe' (Department of Education, 1992: 32). This objective undoubtedly had implications for the revised curricular framework that eventually emerged in the White Paper. The Green Paper incorporated recommendations from the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) which advises the Minister on the content of the curriculum and on its assessment at primary and post-primary levels. The NCCA recommended that the programme for all students should include as core subjects: Irish, English, mathematics, history and geography or environmental and social studies, science or a technological subject. The Green Paper recommended that all students should receive education in science and in a new subject, technology and enterprise (Department of Education, 1992: 94). Study of a modern continental language was viewed as being necessary also. Religious education, physical education, art and music were recommended for inclusion in the available curriculum. In addition, developing social and political awareness was cited as being an important objective of second-level education and was to be encouraged through the formation of a student representative council in each school, as well as through the environmental and social studies programme or an expanded civics programme.

In March 1993 the NCCA published their response to the Green Paper (NCCA, 1993). This made further recommendations for the content of the junior cycle curriculum and for the structure of courses. It also introduced the concept of a common curriculum for the different types of schools, with provision for flexibility in meeting the national requirements. The set of required courses for the Junior Certificate from September 1996 was described as consisting of full courses and short courses (NCCA, 1993: 33). Full courses were to be provided in Irish, English, mathematics, science, history and geography or environmental and social studies (incorporating history, geography and civics education). Either full courses or short courses were to be provided in civic, social and political education, arts education and technological education. Short courses were envisaged as a method of accommodating new subject areas. In the case of civic, social and political education, arts education and technological education, it was recommended that short courses should be introduced as a matter of priority. The provision of optional courses was viewed as a means of broadening the range of educational experience.

The recommendations of the NCCA reveal that it was intended that history and geography should remain as two half-subjects in the compulsory core junior cycle curriculum in secondary schools with environmental and social studies as an alternative. The latter tends to be taught in non-secondary schools which may employ fewer teachers of geography and history. The NCCA proposals also recommended that areas relating to personal development and good citizenship, such as health education, civic, social, political, and media education, a European dimension, gender equity and information technology, should be provided through cross-curricular courses and subject-specific development. History, geography and business studies were recognised as having a particular role to play in incorporating the European dimension (Keane & McCartan, 1995). The development of modules of short courses was recommended so as not to increase the learning demands made on students or the teaching year for teachers. The NCCA also proposed optional programmes as a means of providing for additional flexibility. Whilst the NCCA recommended changes in the content and structure of the Junior Certificate programme, the removal of geography and history from the revised core curriculum, as presented in *Charting our Education Future* (Department of Education, 1995), departed radically from the Council's recommendations.

The proposed compulsory programme for all students in the junior cycle, as described in the White Paper will include a core of Irish, English, mathematics, a science or a technological

subject, and the equivalent of at least three further subjects from a wide range of full courses and short courses. All students are to have access to a modern European language and to a recognised full course in at least one creative or performing art form. The introduction of a creative or performing art as a full subject in the compulsory core curriculum is novel. The named subject areas comprise six out of the minimum of seven subjects that will be required for certification purposes. An extensive list of other subjects is cited as being desirable for all students but this list does not include geography or history. Some cognisance is taken of geographical knowledge in references to acquiring knowledge and appreciation of 'physical heritage and environment' (Department of Education, 1995: 48) but geography as such is not referred to; hence, the concern that emerged among the geographical community. The proposals in the White Paper suggested very strongly that geography was being omitted from the core curriculum and that geography was not even being recognised as a clearly defined non-compulsory subject. Moreover the status to be allocated to environmental and social studies, which incorporates a geography module, was unclear.

### **The Geographers' Response to the Threat**

Four sets of geographical interests responded to the omission of geography from the proposed junior cycle compulsory curriculum: namely, the Association of Geography Teachers of Ireland (AGTI); the Geographical Society of Ireland (GSI), whose membership includes professional academic geographers, teachers, planners and members of the general public; the Heads of Departments of Geography at third-level (Gillmor, 1995); and the National Committee for Geography, the co-ordinating body for geography in Ireland. Some exchange of documents and consultation took place between the groups but each acted independently.

All groups made a case for retaining the status of geography as a half-subject with history in the compulsory core junior curriculum in secondary schools. Broadening the argument to include all second-level schools did not occur because of uncertainty about the mechanisms by which recommendations for a common curriculum for all types of schools will be implemented. Such implementation requires negotiation with teachers' trades unions. Seeking compulsory status for geography in schools where the subject is not currently compulsory would cloud the case for its retention. On the basis of published and unpublished material, it is possible to identify three main arguments on which a case for the retention of geography was based. These are: (1) the long-established status of the subject in the compulsory core secondary junior cycle curriculum, which was supported by the NCCA in its

response to the Green Paper on Education in 1993; (2) the academic merits of geography as a school subject; and (3) the practical implications of geographical knowledge for individual and societal welfare.

The measures taken by the GSI in response to the White Paper are outlined here, based on personal knowledge of the details of that campaign. Following a resolution taken at the Annual General Meeting of the Society in February 1996, a submission was sent to the Minister for Education. A preamble expressed concern at the omission of geography from the proposed revised core curriculum and was followed by a series of responses to stated objectives of the proposed programme which, it was argued, are met by geography as a school subject. In addressing these objectives, emphasis was placed on the content, approaches to study and the skills that characterise the study of geography.

Among the defined objectives of education for societal and individual development, as stated in the White Paper, are ‘to ensure that Ireland’s young people acquire a keen awareness of their national and European heritage and identity, coupled with a global awareness and a respect and care for the environment’ (Department of Education, 1995: 10). In response to these objectives, reference was made to the concern of geography with both the physical and the human environment, with the interrelationships between them, and with conferring knowledge of place at levels ranging from the local to the global. The complementarity of geography to the study of foreign languages and its implications for creating sensitivity to the need for sustainable use of the earth’s resources were highlighted. The proposed junior cycle curriculum is also allocated particular objectives with regard to conferring ‘competence in literacy and numeracy and spoken language skills’ and competency in ‘computer literacy and information technology’ (Department of Education, 1995: 48). In addressing these issues, reference was made to the role of geographical project work and field studies in developing numerical and literary skills as well as graphical skills. The availability of user-friendly and reasonably-priced computer applications was noted as were the opportunities for interactive teaching and learning associated with computer mapping. The submission ended by asking for an opportunity to discuss these matters further with the Minister’s office, an opportunity which was not granted.

The letter to the Minister for Education was circulated to secondary school geography inspectors, the Chief Executive of the NCCA, opposition spokespersons on education in the

Dáil (the lower house of parliament), and to a wide range of other politicians. A synopsis version was published as a letter in the two main national daily newspapers. Lobbying of opposition spokespersons on education and of a wide range of politicians of all parties took place. A motion supporting the retention of geography and history in the junior cycle curriculum was passed at the annual delegate conference of the main university teachers' representative association (Cawley, 1996).

### **The Political Response**

In early May 1996 the Minister for Education offered reassurance through the letters' column of *The Irish Times* (Bhreathnach, 1996), a newspaper of record, that history would remain a compulsory subject for the Junior Certificate in secondary schools. In response to a series of parliamentary questions she stated that no change had taken place in the status of history and geography (the official designation of the subject) in the Junior Certificate curriculum (Dáil Éireann, 1996a: 612–3). A private members' motion was moved in the Dáil on May 28 by the spokesperson on education, in the main opposition party, asking that the government amend the White Paper on Education to include the two subjects in the core curriculum (Dáil Éireann, 1996b: 257). An amendment to the motion was proposed by the Minister for Education stating that the Dáil endorsed the commitment in the White Paper 'to promote and develop in pupils a knowledge and appreciation of their social and cultural heritage and environment through the study of history and geography at junior certificate level, and welcomes the Minister's commitment to maintain the status of history and geography as core curriculum subjects in the junior cycle' (Dáil Éireann, 1996b: 274). The amendment was carried, as expected given the government's majority voting power. Whilst not as strong a support for the two subjects as the original opposition-party motion, a commitment was nevertheless given to retain geography with history in the core curriculum. From her earlier statements this may be interpreted as applying to secondary schools but possibly not to other types of schools where the subjects are non-compulsory currently, although the introduction of a common curriculum could have implications in this regard. It is not clear if the status of history and geography as timetabled half-subjects will remain unchanged.

The debate in parliament on the motion in support of geography and history in the junior cycle curriculum reveals that the representations made by the geographical interests received careful consideration from politicians (Dáil Éireann, 1996b, 1996c). The debate also provides

insight into the speakers' recognition of the role of geography as a school subject. The role of geography in imbuing understanding and appreciation of natural environments from the local to the global was cited as were the skills in graphicacy, fieldwork, literacy, numeracy and spoken language conferred by study of geography. Reference was made to the awareness created of the need for sustainable use of the earth's resources and to the role of geography as a bridge between the environmental and the social sciences. The importance of knowledge of place as an essential part of educational formation was adverted to. The Minister for Education's contributions also seemed to reflect the influence of the submissions made to her. 'A study of geography enriches the understanding of the environment. It deepens our understanding of issues such as sustainable development and the development of the third world. It strengthens our European identity' (Dáil Éireann, 1996b: 278).

Notwithstanding the Minister for Education's commitment that history and geography will remain part of the core curriculum, the precise weighting which they will have in the curriculum remains to be confirmed. The lack of clarity in this respect gives some cause for concern because of lengthy references to the need to modify the curricular framework so as to accommodate new subjects and skills. The Minister referred to concerns about the overloading of the curriculum and the stresses for younger pupils associated with studying many different subjects with different teachers. She adverted to a need for inter-disciplinarity and cross-disciplinarity to be met by a combination of full courses, short courses and modules. The issue of a uniform curriculum or differences between schools was raised. Reference was made to a new programme in civic, social and political education (CSPE) to be introduced in all schools from September 1997. 'CSPE, taken alongside history and geography, will give an even greater emphasis to the acquisition of knowledge and appreciation of social and cultural heritage' (Dáil Éireann, 1996b: 282). The contribution of history and geography as elements in a European studies programme was mentioned.

## **Conclusion**

Recommendations for a revised junior cycle curricular framework in second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland, contained in a White Paper on education published in 1995, omitted reference to geography and history within the proposed core curriculum. School and academic geographers responded by publicising the omission of their subject and by seeking political support which resulted in a debate in parliament. Reassurance was given by the Minister for Education that 'a knowledge and appreciation of the social, cultural and physical

heritage and environment does, of course, mean a knowledge and understanding of history and geography' (Dáil Éireann, 1996b: 276). She has given a commitment that both subjects will retain their position in the compulsory core curriculum (at least in schools where they are compulsory currently), although the precise implications of this commitment remain to be clarified.

The threat to geography and history appears to have emerged from initiatives to extend the junior cycle post-primary curriculum to include new academic subjects, life and social skills including social and political education. Expanding the number of optional subjects, encouraging inter-disciplinarity and introducing short courses and modules are being considered, as means of reconciling limited school teaching hours with new programmes of study. Whilst the NCCA, the body that advises the Minister for Education on curriculum content and assessment, advocated that geography and history should be core half-subjects, some reorganisation of the way in which geography and history are taught appears to have been under consideration. The precise form of reorganisation that was envisaged is not clear but references during parliamentary debates to the role of geography and history in new programmes where both form only components, as distinct from being recognised as separate subject areas, suggest that an erosion of their current status at Junior Certificate level was planned. Such erosion may yet take place. Nevertheless, their status would be considerably less secure than currently, if the absence of specific reference to geography and history in the proposed junior cycle curriculum had not been clearly publicised and politicised. It is questionable whether the ministerial reassurance would have been given if active lobbying and political debate had not taken place.

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