www.rigeo.org ISSN: 2146 - 0353
RIGE
Riview of International Geographical Education Online
Review of International Geographical Education Online ©RIGEO Volume 5, Number 2, Summer 2015

Primary Geography in the Republic of Ireland:

Practices, Issues and Possible Futures

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Abstract

In the Republic of Ireland, geography is recognized as an important subject for children to learn and all pupils take it throughout their primary school years. The current curriculum, the Primary School Curriculum – Geography, follows a tradition of innovative, child-centered geography curricula in Ireland. This article outlines the history of geography as a primary school subject in the Republic of Ireland to put current practices in schools into their historical context. It draws on all available research, curricula, reports and resources in primary geography to consider a variety of issues, including national policies and funding for primary geography as well those relating to teaching and learning in schools. Finally possible futures for primary geography in primary schools are considered.

Keywords: Primary education, primary geography, geography education, geography in the Republic of Ireland.

Introduction

Learning in primary geography is evident through displays and activity in classrooms, corridors and grounds of primary schools across the Republic of Ireland (Pike, 2016). Geography is liked as a subject to teach and learn in many settings because of the contribution it can make to the many dimensions of children's learning as well as for the intrinsic value of the subject (Pike, 2006, 2011, 2016; Smyth, 2010; Waldron et al., 2009). However, in other settings children's experiences of the subject can be far more limited (Cummins, 2010; Pike, 2006, 2011; Waldron et al., 2009). This paper examines the background to geography in primary schooling in the Republic of Ireland and the benefits and concerns of the subject today. It begins by setting the scene and providing an historical background.

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Primary Geography in the Republic of Ireland

Curriculum change in primary geography in the Republic of Ireland has been characterized by cycles of the introduction of curricula followed by only partial implementation of each said curriculum (Waldron et al., 2009; Smyth, 2010; Pike, 2011). This is illustrated in Table 1, which has been adapted from the work of Rawling (2001).

Table 1.
A curriculum implementation cycle for primary geography in the Republic of Ireland (adapted from Rawling, 2001, 140).

	Context of influence	Context of curriculum	Context of practice
1900 'Revised programmes'	Ireland was a colony of Britain. Wish to move away from rigid system of past.	New programme with constructivist child-centered philosophies but top-down in nature.	Freedom of methods and wider content. Lack of implementation due to attitudes and lack of finance.
1920s Irish State curriculum	Independence and foundation on the Irish state. Emergence of cultural nationalism.	Written curriculum revised and issued with dominance of Irish language. Subjects integrated.	Problems with implementation due to funding and many teachers' lack of competence in Irish language.
1971 Curriculum Na Bunscoile (CnB)	Social and economic changes in 1960s. Various reports on childhood and child-centered education.	Little consultation. Curriculum books issued to all teachers. Geography and Social and Environmental Studies featured. Some in-service provided.	Principals unfamiliar with ideals and practicalities, little resourcing, insufficient in-service. Curriculum not implemented
1999 Primary School Curriculum (PSC)	New curriculum required to reflect rapidly changing Irish society.	Curriculum books issued after period of consultation. Curriculum and guidance books issued to all teachers. Phased in-service over 7 years.	Broadly positive reaction to changes. In-service for all teachers – one day. Higher level of implementation than for previous curricula.
2015	Views of curriculum / text book overload.	Period of consultation. No systematic / national research on practices of geography in curriculum.	Awaiting curriculum review.

As Table 1 indicates, in the Republic of Ireland there are many factors in the development and implementation of curricula, including:

- National and directives policies in education;
- Funding of education: for staffing, teacher education, continuing professional development, research and resourcing of primary geography;
- Teaching and Learning expectations and practices in schools.

Horgan and Douglas (2001, 139) describe curriculum provision in the Republic of Ireland as a 'curricular pendulum' oscillating back and forth from the traditional, didactic approach to one of child-centeredness, although in relation to geography, as Table 1 shows, the curriculum has been broadly child-centered. Figure 1 illustrates that both curricula and practices in primary geography have moved left and right along a continuum of teaching and learning. Broadly, teaching and learning in schools has sat to the left of this model but curricula have tended to promote activity to the right (Close et al., 2003; Pike, 2006; Waldron et al., 2009). In reality, as argued below, practices in classrooms appear to have moved in more complex ways.

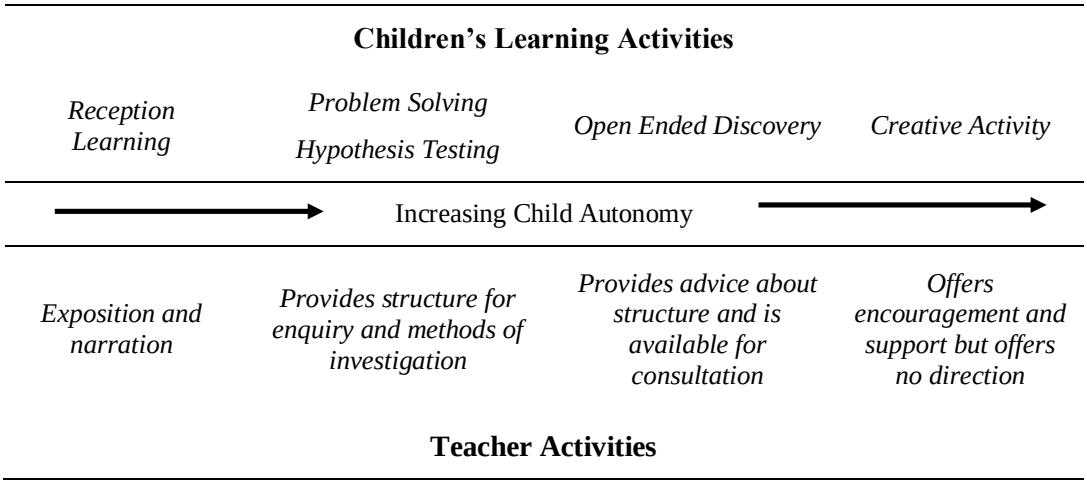

Figure 1.
A model of teaching and learning in primary geography (Naish, Rawling & Hart, 1987, 45)

In this article I draw on this model to explore past influences in primary geography, by critically analyzing the changing research, curricula, reports and classroom resources in relation to the subject. The current influences on practices are then considered before outlining possible futures for primary geography.

The Historical Context for Primary Geography

It can be argued that the history of teaching and learning in schools generally and of primary geography in the Republic of Ireland provides a context for much of the current practices (Pike, 2006, 2011, 2016; Walsh, 2012). Universal education in Ireland emerged from the harshness of the Penal Laws, banning the practicing of any aspect of Catholicism, including through education. The result of these laws was the establishment of illegal 'Hedge Schools'. These were the ultimate in a geographical

experience as the lessons were generally held in temporary dwellings often hidden in hedgerows! In fact, lessons were mainly of the '3Rs' (language and mathematics) and were taught through Irish, with practices firmly to the left on the continuum in Figure 1. The value placed on the education provided by the Hedge Schools indicated a national passion for education which remains in evidence today.

State schools, referred to as 'National Schools' were established in Ireland in 1831, for all children. It took until 1870 for a thorough review of the system, when the Powys Commission reported on its investigation of activities in schools. The Commission made recommendations for each subject from infants (4 year olds) to sixth class (12 years old and over). Changes arising from these recommendations included obligatory reading, writing, spelling and arithmetic for all classes, with geography from age 9 (Walsh, 2012). Further recommendations were that children were to be examined in all subjects, and schools would be financed according to the results gained. Again, this placed education firmly to the left in Figure 1. These changes resulted in harsh learning environments, with learning by rote becoming universal. However, it is important to note that both standards and attendance in primary schools improved during this time

Geography featured in schools at this time, but was not a specific subject in the 1900 'Revised Programmes', as subjects were no longer to be compartmentalized but to be taught seamlessly in an integrated manner (Commissioners of National Education, 1901). Interestingly, teachers were permitted a choice in the methods used in class (INTO, 1995; Walsh, 2004). The curriculum also promoted the use of the local area across subjects, suggesting children be taught *'not merely to take in knowledge from books but to observe with intelligence the material world around them'* (INTO, 1995, 7). As shown in Table 1, this curriculum was not implemented due to lack of finance, the attitudes of teachers, a lack of resources and the top-down nature of the proposals (INTO, 1995, 7).

Geography was listed with as a joint subject with history in the first curriculum after the foundation of the Irish State in 1922, and from 1926 it was recognised and taught as a separate subject (Walsh, 2012). Free from British rule, the curriculum created by the first Irish government was nationalistic in nature. The promotion of the Irish language took precedence over other dimensions of learning (Walsh, 2004, 2012). And so geography was restricted to the study of Ireland and nature study, and was, effectively, removed as a subject (INTO, 1995; Walsh, 2012).

By the 1960s, for a combination of reasons, ideas about education had changed significantly. In 1971 a new curriculum was published in Ireland, the *Curriculum Na Bunscoile* (*CnB*) (DES, 1971a, 1971b), consisting of two bi-lingual books, outlining the requirements for the all subjects, including geography. The influence of changing ideas about education, including England's Plowden Report on primary education, on the *Curriculum Na Bunscoile* was evident, with reduced content requirements and a range of methodologies recommended, emphasising 'discovery learning' (DES, 1971b). Across the curriculum there was an emphasis on the child's lives and communities as the basis of learning, with a requirement for the use of the local

environment in all subjects (DES, 1971b, 134-135). This curriculum represented a departure from the teacher led practices common in schools at this time (Walsh, 2012). However, once again, it became evident that the methodologies and content outlined in this new curriculum were not being reflected in classrooms (INTO, 1995). At this time practices in primary geography were not specifically researched. Evidence from a range of sources, including personal accounts and interviews with teachers, indicate that practices remained rooted in the didactic methods of past times (INTO, 1995). Later surveys found that although teachers were positive about this 'new' curriculum, these attitudes were not being reflected in classroom practice (INTO, 1995). The most important factors affecting this failure in implementation appeared to be the lack of professional development for teachers and the lack resources in schools (INTO, 1995). Overall, though, it has been argued that the *Curriculum Na Bunscoile* did change schools in relation to their ethos, and teachers' attitudes to children changed for the better, as schools became more welcoming places (Gash, 1985; INTO, 1995).

Primary Geography Today

The current curriculum was the result of a number of reviews and reports in the 1990s (Primary Education Review Body, 1990; INTO, 1995; DES, 1995; 1999) with the result that a new Primary School Curriculum (PSC) was introduced in 1999. Geography became part of an area named Social, Environmental and Scientific Education (SESE), alongside History and Science, as outlined in Table 2. In principle this curriculum for geography was similar to the *Curriculum Na Bunscoile*. There was a clear child-centered approach, with as much emphasis on methodologies as content.

Table 2.
Subjects in the Irish Primary School Curriculum (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 40)

Curriculum Areas	Subjects
Language	English, Irish
Mathematics	Mathematics
Social, Environmental & Scientific Education	Geography, History, Science
Arts Education	Art, Music, Drama
Physical Education	Physical Education
Social, Personal & Health Education	Social, Personal & Health Education

Since 1999 geography has been one of the subjects taught in all primary schools in the Republic of Ireland from Junior Infants (4 years and over) to 6th class (up to 13 years). As for all subjects in the PSC (DES/NCCA, 1999a), there is a detailed geography curriculum, the *Primary School Curriculum – Geography* (PSCG), with accompanying *Primary School Curriculum – Geography: Teachers' Guidelines* (PSCGTG). These were published by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and the Department of Education (DES) in 1999 and were the result of a partnership between many agencies (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 78-9). The key elements of the primary geography curriculum are outlined in Table 3. The PSCG is

wide ranging and provides children with many opportunities to learn effectively about the world (DES/NCCA, 1999b; 1999c). Like others before it the curriculum places an equal emphasis on what is taught in geography (content) and how it is taught (approaches).

Table 3.
The Primary School Curriculum for Geography - Overview (DES/NCCA, 1999a)

Skills & concepts in geography	Strands in geography
• A sense of place & space • Maps, globes & graphical skills • Geographical investigation skills	• Human environments • Physical environments • Environmental awareness & care

Overall, three dimensions to learning are evident in the PSCG:

- Principles, outlined in the aims and objectives, with an emphasis placed on the agency of children and, specifically, their ability to work as geographers;
- Skills, such as investigation (enquiry) and graphical skills;
- Content, the topics children can study: the locality, the natural environment, people and work, etc.

The PSCG suggests children fulfill these dimensions by taking part in a wide range of geographical learning. This learning can be broadly divided into thinking, learning and being geographical (DES/NCCA, 1999a). Some examples are:

Thinking geographically:

- Develop a sense of place: an understanding and appreciation of the major characteristics of different places.
- Develop a sense of space: an understanding of how natural and human features are located and distributed in local and other environments and how and why they relate to each other.
- Use and value creative, innovative thinking in the exploration and/or resolution of human and environmental issues.

Learning geographically:

- Develop knowledge and understanding of natural and human environments in the locality, region, Ireland, Europe and the world.
- Study the impact of environmental conditions on the lives of people in the locality and in other areas, and come to appreciate some of the ways in which humans use, modify or influence their environments.
- Learn of and come to value the diversity of peoples, cultures and societies in Ireland and throughout the world, acquire an awareness of human interdependence and develop empathy with others.

Being geographical:

- Engage in active exploration of local and other environments as an intrinsic element of learning.
- Acquire the ability to use and understand appropriate investigative methods in the study of natural and human features and phenomena in local and other

environments.

- Develop an ability to acquire, analyze and communicate geographical knowledge using a wide variety of sources, including oral, written and graphical forms, models and globes, information technology and other media.
- Extend, refine and apply artistic, linguistic and mathematical skills.

As can be seen from these statements, the PSCG is ambitious and wide ranging, and relates to knowledge, understanding and appreciation of local, national and global environments and the development of geographical skills, including those of enquiry (DES/NCCA, 1999a). As illustrated in Table 4, the curriculum is described by skills and content in geography, although it is designed so that these different aspects of the subject can be taught together. Throughout the curriculum there is a wealth of options, ideas and suggested examples to help teachers achieve this mix in geography lessons (DES/NCCA, 1999b; 1999c). All of the themes of the curriculum can be studied through investigating a variety of places, including the locality, a contrasting area of Ireland, a European and non-European place. In relation to skills, only the requirement that children should learn through investigation is explicit for all class levels, as outlined on Table 4; otherwise teachers can select and use a range of skills to be developed in lessons.

Overall, the PSC curriculum for geography is progressive, recognizing children as active agents in their learning (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c). It encourages teachers to draw upon the capacity of children to develop a depth of understanding about different people and places and to develop empathy with others (DES/NCCA, 1999b, 1999c). The curriculum also recognizes children's action within their schools and communities and the capacity to think about change through their geographical learning, encouraging *'positive environmental action and a commitment to sustainable lifestyles'* (DES/NCCA, 1999b, 16). Children aged 8 year and upwards, are required to '*suggest and discuss possible actions or solutions and the effect of these on people and environment'* and examples given are: participate in the resolution of the issue if possible, help in an anti-litter campaign, collect items for recycling, help to design the route of a cycle way, write letters about the issue or problem, and design posters (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 61&84). The curriculum requirements and guidance do fall short of incorporating the potential for children's participation and action in local communities (Pike, 2010).

Table 4.
Geography in the Primary School Curriculum – Progression (DES/NCCA, 1999b)

	Concepts and Skills	**Strands**		
		Human Environments	**Natural Environments**	**Environmental Awareness & Care**
Infants	A sense of place and space Maps, globes and other graphical skills	Living in the local community People and places in other areas	The local natural environment Weather Planet Earth in space	Caring for my locality

	Geographical investigation skills			
1st and 2nd class	A sense of place and space Maps, globes and other graphical skills Geographical investigation skills	Living in the local community People and places in other areas	The local natural environment Weather Planet Earth in space	Caring for my locality
3rd and 4th class	A sense of place and space Maps, globes and other graphical skills Geographical investigation skills	People living and working in the local area People living and working in a contrasting part of Ireland People and other lands County, regional and national centers	The local natural environment Land, rivers and seas of Ireland Rocks and soils Weather, climate and atmosphere Planet Earth in space	Environmental awareness Caring for the environment
5th and 6th class	A sense of place and space Maps, globes and other graphical skills Geographical investigation skills	People living and working in the local area People living and working in a contrasting part of Ireland People and other lands County, regional and national centers Trade and development issues	The local natural environment Land, rivers and seas of Ireland Rocks and soils Weather, climate and atmosphere Planet Earth in space Physical features of Europe and the world	Environmental awareness Caring for the environment

Although the PSCG did not change significantly the provision for children in primary geography, the lack of implementation of the 1971 PSC meant that this 'new' curriculum had the potential to transform how geography was being taught in schools (Pike, 2006; Waldron et al., 2009). The geography curriculum was eventually introduced through a single day of professional development for teachers in the school year 2005/6, six years after its publication. This day included outlines of the curriculum as well as practical elements, including fieldwork. However, the limited time provided, as well as the location of the hotels (not schools) where the introductions took place, meant an opportunity was missed for all teachers to consider alternative models of teaching and learning in primary geography (Cummins, 2010).

Issues in Primary Geography

Resolving current issues and enabling future directions for primary geography depend on the impacts of national policies, teaching and learning expectations and practices, and funding. These factors will be considered in turn within this section, before possible futures for primary geography are outlined:

Policies Relating To Primary Geography

Geography remains a subject at primary and secondary levels in schools in Ireland. The primary curriculum and Junior Certificate cycle at secondary level are both under review, with information relating to this on the NCCA website making explicit references to skills based curricula whilst recognizing the importance of subjects, including geography (NCCA, 2011). The lack of research in primary geography by the NCCA and the limited research by the DES, show geography is not a priority for decision makers in education. It indicates that this lack of recognition of the importance of the subject reveals a limited understanding of the role and value of geography in a broad range of children's learning experiences.

Funding Of Primary Geography Education

In Ireland there is limited financial provision for primary geography. Generally, teachers are not paid for subject leadership responsibilities for geography in primary schools. The recent employment of one lecturer in primary geography bought the number of lecturers in the field up to just 3.6 full-time equivalent staff nationally. DES primary inspectors are now generalists, who may or may not support and comment on the curriculum, teaching and learning of primary geography. With national priorities on literacy and numeracy (DES, 2011), geography is often not reported on in Department of Education Whole School Evaluation reports. In fact, the only relatively recent national report on the teaching of geography by the DES tended to discuss the organization of geography, rather than issues relating to learning (DES, 2008). Overall, it revealed a very limited view of the subject. Furthermore, across the two recent NCCA reports of numeracy and literacy, there is just one mention of geography (Kennedy et al., 2012; Dooley, Dunphy & Shiel, 2015). However, research carried out, largely in colleges of education by post-graduate students has provided fascinating and informative findings, as indicated in this paper. From this range of research it is apparent that teachers are the key to the potential of primary geography for developing children's learning across the curriculum. They can have a major and positive impact on children's learning in geography, for instance through developing their wealth of skills and aptitudes, involving engagement with others, critical thinking skills and enhanced well-being. The move towards longer provision for primary geography initial teacher education will support teachers in their teaching of geography in schools.

Funding within schools for resources remains a major issue in primary geography in Ireland. This has two major dimensions for teachers: professional development, and resources for the subject. Firstly, in relation to professional development, in Ireland this system remains somewhat ad-hoc as teachers choose to participate in courses ran by a large range of suppliers. With school budgets very limited, such courses for geography are invariably paid for by the teachers themselves and taken in their own time. In schools, there may be time spent on developing geography, although it is very difficult to assess how often such practices take place, and geography plans and policies may be created simply because they are a statutory requirement. However, a recent development is the use of social media, particularly Twitter, for teachers to

share their practice and arrange 'teach-meets' in schools. Secondly, in relation to resources, textbooks, workbooks and atlases are purchased or rented by parents in Ireland. Although there were textbooks before the 1970s, it was with the 1971 *Curriculum Na Bunscoile* that the use of textbooks and workbooks for primary geography became commonplace in Irish primary schools. This has resulted in children learning too much content in a superficial way in geography, with a corresponding loss of time to think and work as a geographer while using a range of geographical skills (Pike, 2006; Cummins, 2010). However, it appears that such practices are changing (McNally, 2012; Pike, 2012). Research has shown that changes from using textbooks to workbooks has a positive effect on children's learning in geography (Green, Shaw-Hamilton & Walsh, 2014; Smyth, 2010; Pike, 2016). Within schools, the practice of asking parents for a contribution for primary geography for the purchase of a range of resources is having a very positive impact on children's learning.

Teaching and Learning Expectations and Practices in Schools

Internationally, it has generally been accepted that all aspects of geography are best taught using a range of methodologies, with an emphasis on open methods using an enquiry process, including the use of fieldwork (Catling & Willy, 2009; Scoffham, 2010). These approaches are explicitly stated in the 1999 PSC for geography and are exemplified in the accompanying handbook. However, as Catling argues, curriculum change depends on implementation (Catling, 2003), and there is evidence of varying degrees of implementation of the current curriculum (Pike, 2011, 2012; Waldron et al., 2009). The curriculum is interpreted in a range of ways, with many schools embracing all the approaches to teaching and learning primary geography shown in Figure 1. However, other primary schools tend to focus on the content only, with evidence that children's roles and activity in geography are sidelined (Cummins, 2010; Pike, 2011; Waldron et al., 2009). Yet, it has been found that in some schools children are making decisions about their learning in geography through enquiry approaches (Pike, 2012, 2016). Where this occurs, children are very positive about their learning (Green, Shaw-Hamilton & Walsh, 2014; Smyth, 2010).

Possible Futures for Primary Geography

The future of primary geography in the Republic of Ireland is uncertain. With reviews of the primary and secondary curriculum taking place at this time, the most positive developments could be that:

- Teachers continue to take on board the principles and practices of the PSCG, and provide quality learning opportunities in primary geography. Geography also provides opportunities to enhance other subjects.
- Research in primary geography is funded and encouraged, at national and local levels.
- Initial Teacher Education provides the opportunity for extended periods of learning, modelling the best of practices in primary geography and teacher education.
- Opportunities are provided for online and face-to-face professional development

for teachers, to allow the continued development of quality learning and teaching in primary schools.
- Resources for primary geography move away from the use of textbooks, with schools being creative about resourcing the subject.

Conversely, worse case scenarios may include:

- Teaching and learning in primary geography is curtailed because of other education priorities, such as greater priority for literacy, numeracy and well-being.
- Research in primary geography continues to receive only small scale research funding.
- Geography continues to be an under-staffed and under-taught element of initial teacher education courses. There continues to be lack of provision for accredited professional development for teachers in geography.
- Most schools continue to rely on textbooks as their only geography resource.

In reality the future of primary geography in Ireland will probably feature aspects of both these scenarios. What is certain is that the time for teaching quality geography lessons will be under pressures from the range of different curriculum initiatives, some of which would be enhanced by consideration of the role of geography in children's learning and well-being in primary schools were that to be considered.

Conclusions

As outlined above, there is evidence that children's experiences in primary geography are improving. The considerable potential of primary geography in developing children's geographical knowledge and understanding (Norodha, 2012; Pike, 2011), geographical skills (O'Neill, 2010) and understanding of global issues (Ruane at al., 2010; Noronha, 2012; Oberman et al., 2014) is beginning in a number of primary schools to be evident. Where this occurs, children enjoy and value their learning in and from their geography lessons (Smyth, 2010; Pike, 2011, 2016; McNally, 2012; Noronha, 2012). Much of this development is due to these teachers embracing the range of content and methods that are possible to use in geography, even when their own knowledge of geography and expertise in geography education may be limited due to a lack of geography in their initial teacher education and professional development provision (Smyth, 2010; McNally, 2012; Pike, 2012). In many other schools these possibilities are beginning to be recognized, though teachers remain unsure about geography and tend to rely on published resources, particularly textbooks (Cummins, 2010; McDonald, 2012). There remain many issues in primary geography in the Republic of Ireland, but the enthusiasm of children, teachers, principals and teacher educators is ensuring that many children receive their entitlement to engaging and enlightening experiences in their geography lessons. It is hoped that this will grow.

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