

# Policy matters

By Alan Kinder, Chief Executive, and Susan Pike, President 2020–21



Written by the CE and President, with occasional guest contributions, *Policy matters* provides updates on GA policy/direction as well as current projects and wider curriculum matters.

## Building compassion

Given the range and complexity of the challenges we have all been facing over the last 12 months, trying to sum up the position of geography education at the current time feels like a task that may lie beyond the scope even of *Policy matters*! However, as we have noted in recent issues, the collective resilience, resolve and compassion of the geography teaching community continues to provide a source of inspiration and hope. The recent GA Annual Conference was a superb example of this. Held online due to COVID-19 restrictions, Conference was attended by nearly 800 geography enthusiasts and provided a kaleidoscope of insights and information. Whilst the event also created a very palpable air of refreshed belief and connection across our community, converting the huge range of research, scholarship and ideas presented throughout Conference into practical actions presents a challenge in itself. Several teachers have suggested using session recordings each week for the next year as the basis of their CPD. This is certainly one way of digesting the sheer breadth of material available, as well as being another reminder of teachers' seemingly-endless capacity for turning challenges into opportunities in order to enhance their practice.



Pupils in St Mary's National School, Dublin 1 share their perspectives on and connections with people and places.

## Diversity and inclusion

The GA's Conference programme was particularly strong this year in relation to social and environmental injustices, especially the relationship between geography, colonialism and racism. Members of the GA have been giving renewed thought to racism over the past year, following the murder of George Floyd in spring 2020. At the strategic level, the importance of diversity was one of the strongest themes underpinning the creation, during 2019–20, of a new GA strategic plan for 2020–25. When the new plan was launched in September 2020, the GA reaffirmed its commitment to promoting greater diversity in geography education and across the Association, and to bringing disciplinary knowledge to bear on contemporary challenges (Kinder, 2020). At the practical level, through participation in online communities sharing ideas for decolonising the geography curriculum and through journal articles and Conference sessions (see box), GA members have begun to open up conversations around:

- the relationships between imperialism, colonialism, development and social or environmental injustices
- the association between British geography and geography education with the country's imperial and colonial past
- ways in which the contemporary geography curriculum can and should help us acknowledge racism today, but also better understand ways in which it continues to affect society through the lived experience of adults and young people
- the kind of society we all wish to live in, drawing on geography's 'futures' dimension and recognising that geography as a school subject must continue to offer children and young people positive possibilities of change and hope for the future, and not simply confront them with global and local problems created by adults
- ways in which the GA itself needs to change, in order to draw in and draw on a more diverse range of voices.

Creating an Association which is more diverse is an enormously important task and one that requires action at every level. Over the last few months, several hundred members responded to phase one of the GA's 'listening exercise', by providing us with additional (anonymised) information about themselves and by giving feedback on how well the GA meets their needs. The data suggest that whilst GA membership is well balanced in terms of age, teaching experience and gender identity, it also reflects a subject which remains disproportionately and disconcertingly white. Since the long-term aim must be to encourage a wider range of people to study geography and to become teachers of geography, two strands of work are now underway.

In relation to the need to re-examine the

geography curriculum, the GA is embarking on the creation of a curriculum framework, which will draw in evidence from the widest range of sources in order to establish the aims, concepts, skills and content components that should underpin the geography curriculum in the 2020s. Whilst this work progresses, the work of individual teachers to attend to questions of social and environmental injustices will continue to be shared, through GA journal articles, events and website materials. The contributors to GA Conference, who included teachers and

## Conference sessions

- Dr Patricia Noxolo presented on Caribbean in/securities and creativity, calling for redefining racial disparities in geography as an in/security to enable strong and consistent links between colonial histories, racialized inequalities and global catastrophes.
- Dr Leon Sealey-Huggins explored the histories of colonialism, imperialism, and the racist forms of social organisation in relation to the climate breakdown in the Caribbean.
- Bob Digby, David Holmes, Catherine Owen, Nick Laphorn and Jon Wolton held a panel entitled *Compassionate Fieldwork*, exploring how fieldwork can become more 'compassionate'.
- Orlaith Roche, explored how concepts such as 'identity' and 'Britishness' can be taught through geography using curriculum artefacts.
- Debbie Watson looked at how by becoming researchers in their own communities and children can deepen their understanding of migration and what makes a compassionate community.

## Journal articles

- 'Tackle the racists 1: decolonising the space and institutional memory of the university' – Gerry Kearns (*Geography*, 105, 3, pp. 116–25).
- 'Fundamental British Values: geography's contribution to understanding difference' (*Primary Geography* 103, pp. 23–25) – Fatima Pirbhai-Illich and Fran Martin.
- 'Classroom strategies for tackling the whiteness of geography' – Charlotte Milner (*Teaching Geography*, 45, 3, pp. 105–7).
- 'How to start a conversation about diversity in education' (*Teaching Geography*, 46, 2, pp. 59–60) – Charlotte Milner, Hina Robinson and Hafsa Garcia.

## Teaching Resources

- WorldWide Week resources – this pack of resources has a theme of 'Compassionate Geographies' and focuses on Bree Picower's framework for social justice. Find them at: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Compassionate-geographies>

academics from around the world with diverse backgrounds in terms of their age, ethnicity and perspectives on geography, demonstrated how much can be achieved and how much we all benefit from including a wider range of voices in the conversation.

The second strand of work concerns the extent to which the GA can better meet individual teachers' needs and can work pro-actively to welcome every teacher of geography into its professional community. Here, phase one of the listening exercise suggested there are some practical steps we can take to make community news and information available more flexibly and to create more opportunities for dialogue between GA members and between the Association and its membership. We are already following up on these ideas, for example by inviting new members to meet with others, in a welcoming and informal online space. During the summer term, we'll be running a number of group discussions to talk in more depth about teachers' views, needs and priorities – and ways in which we can better meet these. A working group on diversity has been established by the GA's Governing Body to address hidden barriers to participation and to drive the work needed to encourage all teachers to be part of our community, regardless of their age, experience, ethnicity, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability or indeed their geographical location. We will be asking members of the geography education community to be involved in this work from the outset.

## The Sewell Commission Report

What really sits at the heart of any project of this kind is an acknowledgement that there is an issue that needs to be tackled and that the responsibility lies with us to improve the outcome. That is why the publication of the 'Sewell Report', the recent report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities (2021), caused such widespread dismay. From the perspective of teachers of our subject, the first concern revolved around the way in which the idea of geography is misrepresented in the report. The word is used 21 times within the main text and, as the geographer Tim Cresswell has pointed out, in several instances the authors present geography as an unexplained cause of ethnic and racial inequalities in the UK (Cresswell, 2021). For example, the report points to geography as being amongst the 'roots of ... disadvantage', as 'holding back equality' and as being a factor in the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 on people from minority ethnic groups (p.10–11). In a curious case of circular reasoning, it appears to blame the economic disparities between minority ethnic groups in different parts of the UK on 'economic geography' (p.60) and even ascribes some of the differences in educational outcomes across ethnic groups to 'geography' (p.55). As Cresswell observes, the report 'tangles place with race, gender and class

in misleading ways' and fails to explain how place and space intersect with racism and other political, cultural and economic processes to produce and reproduce inequalities across our society.

The GA is equally attentive to what the report has to say about education, especially geography education. Here, rather than celebrating the richness of the young people we teach in terms of their identities, heritage and culture, the report attempts to downplay the importance of children's lived experiences, histories and geographies. Its concern with 'getting children off the streets' (p. 88) and with test performance presents a rather narrow and sterile view of childhood at odds with that of many GA members. As an Association, we do of course welcome the recommendation in the report that the Department for Education (DfE) should receive 'new additional funding to systematically target disparities using proven interventions (p.81), as educational inequality has been the focus of several *Policy matters* in recent years (for example Summer, 2018 and Summer 2017). It is disappointing that the report's authors seem unaware of recent work by the DfE to 'level up' educational outcomes, which included the Teaching and Leadership Innovation Fund. This fund supported, amongst other impactful initiatives, the GA's professional development programme for over 1000 teachers from schools serving socially and economically disadvantaged communities, as part of its *Critical Thinking for Achievement* project. The report's recommendation that the DfE 'work with an appointed panel of independent experts to produce a well-sequenced set of teaching resources to tell the multiple, nuanced stories that have shaped the country we live in today' also signals a lack of awareness and understanding on

the part of its authors and compels us to ask: what 'expertise' is actually being recommended as needed and is there any evidence that this is not already widely available across the geography education community? Given the faulty understanding of the processes that shape Britain on display in the report, we suggest that examinations of racism and neo-colonialism through the lens of the geography curriculum would be better handled from within our subject community than by a small number of externally-appointed experts.

## References and further reading

- Commission on race and ethnic disparities (2021) *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: The Report* at <https://bit.ly/3eY3yiP>
- Cresswell, T. (2021) 'Victims of Geography?: On the Spurious Use of the Word "Geography" in the Sewell Commission Report. 7 April. <https://bit.ly/33ITbQk>
- GA Projects: Critical Thinking for Achievement available at: <https://bit.ly/3xNYDtn>
- Kinder, A. (2020) 'The GA's strategic plan 2020–25', *GA Magazine*, 46, pp. 6–7.
- Kinder, A. and Laphorn, N. (2018) 'Policy matters', *GA Magazine*, 39, pp. 8–9.
- Kinder, A. and Biddulph, M. (2017) 'Policy matters', *GA Magazine*, 36, pp. 8–9.



GA Conference workshop 2018.