

## Think Piece – Teaching about diversity

John Morgan

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*This paper is adapted from one of the 'Think Pieces' written as part of the GA's GTIP project with the Teacher Development Agency in 2008/9. The project intention was to develop geography materials for PGCE courses, to inform and to encourage reflection on a range of themes and issues in geography education. In this Think Piece, John Morgan, then Reader in Education at the University of London Institute of Education, explores issues surrounding the teaching of diversity in geography. He argues that teacher educators need to promote awareness of the issues and encourage a thoughtful and reflective approach.*

### Introduction

In this Think Piece, I want to explore the issues surrounding the teaching of diversity in geography. From the start, it should be noted that this is one of the most difficult areas for new geography teachers to engage with. In my experience, new teachers are sometimes overwhelmed by the prospect that they have a responsibility to teach for diversity, when it is very clear that society as a whole has yet to tackle these issues. Instead, the educational task for those involved in the education of geography teachers is to promote an awareness of the issues and encourage a thoughtful and reflective approach.

This Think Piece starts with a reflection on the challenges of teaching about diversity prompted by the publication of the *Curriculum Review: Diversity and Citizenship* (DfES, 2007). The reflection argues that school geography tends to focus on studying spatial patterns at the expense of social processes, and that, even when social processes are studied, these tend to avoid the complexity of the political, economic and cultural forces that underpin questions of identity and diversity.

### Mapping diversity

In January 2007 the Department for Education and Skills published its *Curriculum Review on Diversity and Citizenship* (the Ajebo Report). The review was commissioned:

*'in response to a growing debate about whether UK society engages with issues around "race", religion, culture, identity and values... in a way that meets the needs of all pupils. Do we, as individuals and as a nation, respect each others differences and build on commonalities? Do we appreciate our own and others' distinct identities?'*

These are important questions, and they have a geographical dimension. The Ajebo Report says that pupils should be able to explore and understand the whole range of their own identities – personal, local, national and global, as well as those of the wider community.

In theory, school geography has an important part to play in contributing to this vision and the Ajebo Report seems to recognise this. For example, in the first few pages of the report there is a map which shows the distribution of the 'non-white' population at the time of the 2001 Census. Here at last, there may be some recognition of something that geographers have claimed for a long time now – 'geography matters'. The inclusion of this map had me reaching for Daniel Dorling and Bethan Thomas's (2004)

wonderful *People and Places: a 2001 census atlas of the UK* and the recently published sequel *Identity in Britain: a cradle-to-grave atlas*.

There can be little doubt that technology is making visible and accessible large amounts of data that allow us to map the social world – this is no mean advance, as many geography teachers have long struggled to get their hands on up-to-date statistics. However, reading the commentary that accompanies Dorling and Thomas's map quickly disabuses the reader of the transparency of the map. They point out that '*In most cases minority ethnic groups became slightly less concentrated over time although that is difficult to see from the maps (you have to read the footnotes)*'. In terms of the actual geography that forms the background to the Ajebo Report, Dorling and Thomas note:

*'The UK remains a white desert with a few oases of colour, but these oases are spreading out. The Indian, Chinese and other Asian populations are moving out of the cities to more distant suburbs and small towns. The Black Caribbean population behave similarly, despite declining in number (due partly to emigration). People of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin remain very concentrated in particular areas of initial settlement, but they too become more dispersed out of these areas in the 1990s... Increased segregation by ethnicity is not a feature of mainland Britain'*.

In this case then, the map is not the territory, which, in the Ajebo Report, is the widespread concern about the state of relations between diverse (and here we're mainly talking ethnicity) communities that make up the UK's population. In the rest of this Think Piece, I argue that this poses a significant challenge to geography teachers, symbolised by the shift from a visual representation of a pattern (on a map) to a textual representation of processes.

### **Pattern and process**

'Pattern' and 'process' are words that are familiar to geography teachers, but they have a particular baggage because they are heavily implicated with a specific moment in the history of geography in which geographers sought to employ 'models' (statistical and conceptual) to represent the human world. They sought to look for order and rational scientific explanations. There is nothing wrong with these theories and models per se. However, it is important to note that it requires a pretty high level of reflexivity to recognise that models are not neutral, but contain subtle messages about the nature of human activity. In this case they tended to see people as subject to laws of motion (push and pull actors, the gravity model) rather than as complex thinking and feeling people shaped by culture and histories of dwelling in places. In short, individuals with complex and diverse identities that are given shape from 'cradle to grave'.

Maps are a poor way to capture this diversity, since in order to draw one you have to assume (for the time being at least) that identity exists in a simple one-dimensional form. This means that maps showing the geographical distribution of people who have identified themselves as belonging to a particular ethnic group is problematic since they cannot answer important questions such as: how do the people identify themselves, what does ethnicity mean to them? People may wear these identities lightly, as in Stuart Hall's metaphor of identity as a 'bus ticket', something that gets us from here to there but is then discarded. They may cling to their identities, or alter their use as and when necessary, as in the case of some third generation Greek-Cypriots in Holloway or Wood Green who tend to simply call themselves Greek as opposed to Turkish.

One danger of maps is that they tend to reify and homogenize a complex issue (the same goes for other axes of identity such as disability or sexuality). While mapping patterns may open up different ways of seeing the world, it also closes down others. One option is to avoid controversy by ignoring these aspects of people's lives altogether, but this seems to be an evasion and denial of the fact that such

issues are an important part of understanding the making of geographies. As a solution to this problem, Jeremy Black (2000), in his book *Maps and Politics*, suggests that 'the obvious strategy is to focus on what seems most meaningful and mappable, and to recognise the resulting bias. The complexity of the relationship between space and society is such that the limits of what maps can convey as analytical texts are reached quite quickly'.

The shift towards understanding **process** is highly problematic for geography teachers and has become more challenging with the advent of the 'postmodern' turn. It is probably better to say that this is the relational turn in which identities (of both people and place) are no longer seen as bounded or singular but are co-constructed in relation to other people and places. This means that what signs stand for is never finally fixed. Identities, as they say, are in flux. One consequence of this is that some of the older and unhelpful arguments about multicultural and anti-racist geography teaching are replaced by a focus on the local and contingent. But it also presents challenges for teaching and learning.

### **The challenge of teaching diversity**

So, words like diversity and identity have real connotations for geography educators, but in line with much educational practice there has been a reluctance to connect with their meanings in a theoretically engaged way. Mac an Ghail (1999) argues that there is a tendency to avoid asking what anti-racism means and instead focusing on what it does not mean (i.e. it is not about a monocultural curriculum, it does not mean assimilation). He also points out that there is also a focus on 'delivery' and strategies that 'work':

*'Once anti-racism has been established as an institutional problem, the analytical work is assumed to be completed and there is a reductionist attempt to deliver the best anti-racist policy'.*

Finally, attempts to teach about issues of diversity often remain at an idealist level that fails to address the material conditions for countering racism. It is, of course, asking a lot of geography teachers (or any teachers for that matter) to do all this. However, there is an argument that school geography should 'develop a sensitivity to place and landscape and a critical awareness of one's location within economic and social structures which inevitably limit freedom'. To this end there is a need for geography teachers to teach about (again following Stuart Hall) racism in 'all of its complexity'.

So how does all this fit in with the concerns of the Ajebo Report? In preparing to teach geography, I think we need to be honest about the problems faced by school geography, which, I would suggest, simply does not at the moment have a language sensitive enough to deal with the complex issues of identity and diversity. This means that geographical patterns are emphasised at the expense of process, and where process is studied, it tends to focus on spatial processes rather than social processes.

### **References**

- Black, J. (2000) *Maps and Politics*. London: Reaktion Books.  
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