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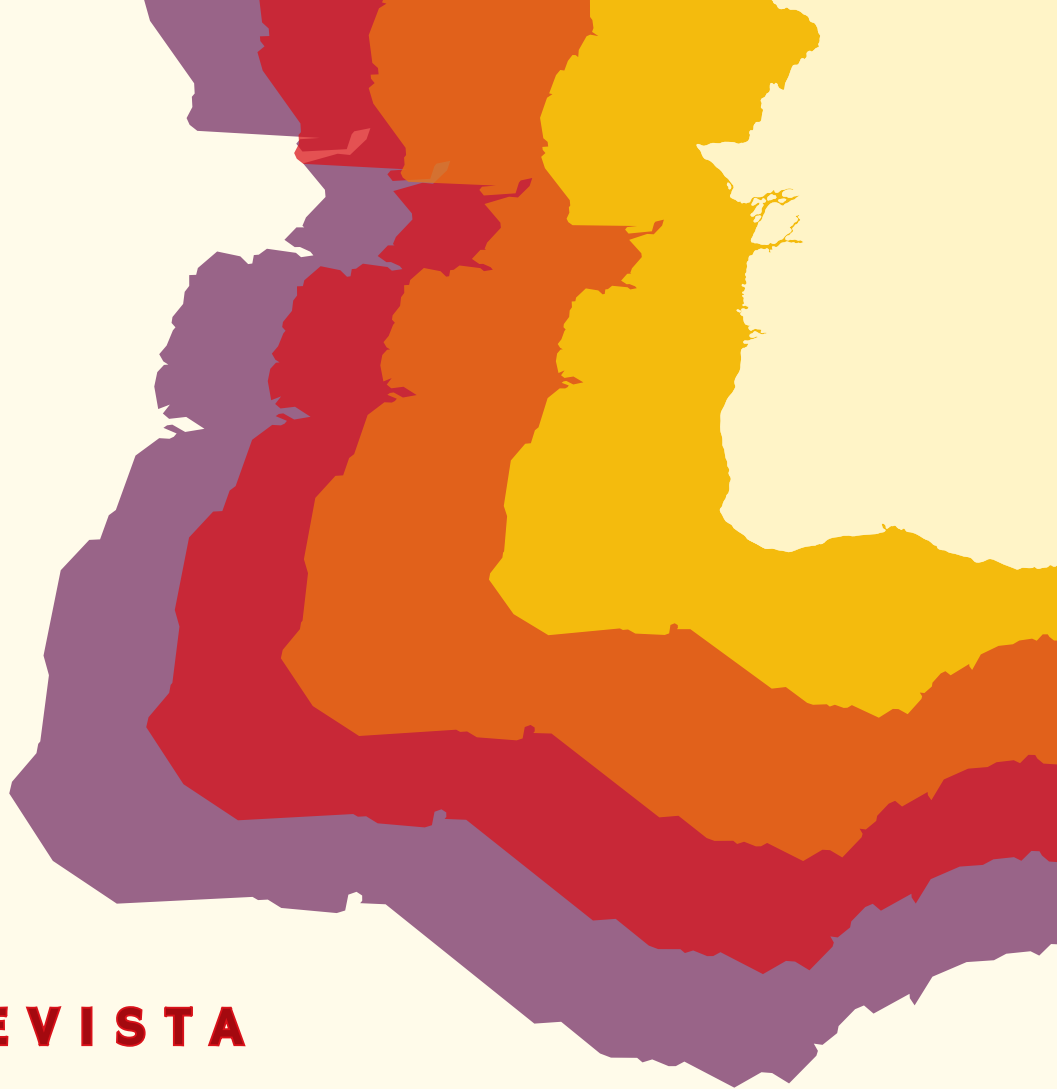
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ENTREVISTA

**Entrevista com Margaret Roberts:
O currículo de Geografia e os seus
fundamentos teóricos**

*Interview with Margaret Roberts The Geography curriculum and
its theoretical foundations*

*Entrevista con Margaret Roberts: El plan de estudios de
Geografía y sus fundamentos teóricos*

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Interview with Margaret Roberts¹ The Geography curriculum and its theoretical foundations

The aim of this text is to present some reflections on the Geography curriculum based on an interview given by Margaret Robert, one of the most important and highly regarded geography educators working on the development and delivery of geography curricula in the United Kingdom.

We therefore start with central considerations about the curriculum with reference to an educational project that is emancipatory and that can have meaning and significance in the existence of social subjects. In other words, the curriculum should include dimensions such as: structuring content, problematisation, decoding power relations, learning theory and psychology, multireferentiality and intersectionality and, last but not least, political education, as a synthesis of all of the above (Barthes, 2017, 2019, 2022). At this point, we'll just try to highlight these elements, since they come through in the dialogue with Margaret Robert, and in her work (Roberts, 2023)

The definition of structuring content refers to the action of dialogue with teachers and researchers about the processes of constructing a geographical approach that has social reality as a reference, but that goes beyond it in breadth and depth. This means that the learner's daily life is a reference, but not the point of arrival or departure. This has been a mistaken trajectory of the epistemological simplisms and reductionisms that have been constructed. Everyday life is simply a zone of development, which is articulated with scientific knowledge and concepts, which is where the role of the school ends, in the formative processes of the subjects. Formative processes are understood as a set of dynamics involving scientific content (geography), procedural content (the activities consolidated by teachers and students) and attitudinal content, the values that are required and practised in the pedagogical process. In this way, the structuring contents give meaning to the training process and move away from the common sense that has been the foundation of the reproductive models of curricula implemented in various countries. One example might be our climate and ecological emergency. The emphasis on defining this global crisis as geographical content reverberates in the daily lives of the subject's through various climatic phenomena: Floods, wildfires, , severe weather , etc. All these dynamics are linked to various forms of production and social reproduction of life (Albuquerque et al., 2021). These events are also part of everyday life, but they are rarely articulated as such, or are neglected as everyday, since they are given by geographical scales

¹ The proposal for a dialogue with Margaret Roberts was constructed during her presentation at the Geography Teacher Educators Conference at the University of York - UK.



that are not articulated (e.g., local, regional, global). This means, for example, that climate change is linked to the model of agricultural production in peripheral countries, in the forms of expropriation of indigenous lands, histories and knowledge (Wall-Kimmerer, 2013), in the potential increase in the use of pesticides and related adverse health outcomes (Zinyemba, Archer and Rother, 2020), but at the same time, in the relations of dependence that are established between peripheral and central countries, such as in the deterioration of the terms of trade, the logic of value of companies that speculate and expand their fictitious gains anchored in the assets and effects of their territorial corporate control (monopolisation of the territory) (Oliveira, 2016). Thus, the dynamics of everyday life are not the common sense of global heating and environmental education of an environmentalist nature and education for consumption, because often these subjects don't consume, but of a clarity of the complex of complexes that surround it. These are what we call structuring elements, and when we analyse a curriculum in Brazil, such as the BNCC, in which the word deforestation is not mentioned once, we realise how much the structuring content is isolated from everyday life, even though this dimension of life is hugely promoted².

This means, therefore, that the discourse of everyday geography does not necessarily represent a link with the concrete reality, the lived experience, of the students. This process is linked to the dimension of problematisation. Over the years, problematisation has been taken to mean problem-based teaching. They are completely different things. Problem-based teaching makes the logic of stimulating answers the model for learning, vis a vis the idea of competences and skills, which are clearly mimicked in the objects of knowledge. Problematisation represents exactly the process of building a conceptual map that we proceeded with from the concept of climate and ecological emergency (Suarez, Kircher, Santi, 2024). Problematisation represents the construction of a complex of complexes, which can only be achieved through a process of mediation. At this point it is important to consider that the teacher is not a mediator, as in the one who stands between the structuring content and the learner. At this point, the teacher is a subject who mediates, because they develop the mental and cognitive processes with their students that allow them to construct the complex of complexes. This means that the teacher has methodological clarity about the procedural content, which leads students to carry out mediations and synapses, which in turn leads us to understand that the procedural content must produce emotions in the learning path, as highlighted in the research of Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) on emotional thought, and that these emotions are surrounded by objectives of formulating a human genericity, becoming human, where values are therefore interconnected, such as solidarity, companionship, humanism, equality, among other aspects that make up the attitudinal

² The word 'everyday' has 60 occurrences in the BNCC proposal.

content. Emotions guide the judgements and actions taken in how learners transfer school experiences from the classroom and into real-world personal and community decision making, emotions and values development are a crucial consideration for the changes in behaviour that are needed in our time of environmental emergency. The school's role is the constitution of the human being in its entirety and on which the more-than-human world depends entirely.

In this process, from the perspective of human genericity, the decoding of power relations is articulated. Power relations are not only inscribed in the classic form of political geography. On the contrary, it is from the classical annulment of power that we can understand more about it and not naturalise it. Decoding power relations implies looking at the content critically in order to understand the context in which they are produced and how they propagate a process of ontological positivity and ontonegativity (Souza, 2023). In other words, decoding power implies looking at the content in its multi-referentiality, i.e. its positions of elaboration, and simultaneously its intersectionality. Power relations are not established in an abstract sphere of politics or the political, but are established through dimensions of race, gender and class.

This perspective of decoding implies a political education that reverberates through the structuring content, such as the various prohibitions on debating gender issues, which leads us to the impediment of problematisation, multi-referentiality and intersectionality and, of course, hegemonic and oppressive power relations. This reveals how much the curriculum depends on political education.

We understand political education to mean making it possible to understand the contradictions and class perspectives that are at stake in society's problems - the contradiction of societal projects and processes. This is not about institutional expressions of the political, such as voting, or education for citizenship, or when the idea of citizenship is based on the right to consumption, or the supposed possibility of public demonstration, which can consider the act of 'participation' as superior to understanding political issues. According to Connolly (1983), the political contradicts the interests, desires or values of part of a society in a polemical way, in that the 'political' is 'the object of dispute (that arises) between groups with different points of view, but also from different positions in the form of production and appropriation of value.

In political education, therefore, there is the idea of referring to social groups and classes with different rationalities and interests. It is therefore essential to identify them, to understand the logics, objectives and values they embody, their contradiction and their potential for complementarity or conflict in a given situation. The learner is then in a position to adopt - with full knowledge of the multi-referentiality present in this political education process - a potentially mobilising reflexive stance. Political education should be characterised by a series of criteria that can guide its development in any educational situation .

Political education could initially be discussed in terms of the way curricular proposals are realised. When they should be guidelines, they are presented as closed and imposed models. The curriculum with political education presupposes a capacity for subject development in an interwoven relationship of content: conceptual (scientific), procedural and attitudinal content. The dimension of the curriculum is established from its relationship with the category of mediation, and measurement indicates freedom of thought, since the intellectual work of teachers and learners is the central axis in the development of these contents (SOUZA, JULIAZ, 2020).

The need to recognise what is at stake, on the one hand, and the political significance, on the other, helps to counteract the apolitical way in which the BNCC proposal has been ‘presented’. This denotes an inability to comprehend the problems associated with organising a shared world (Rosanvallon, 2006). This apolitical approach corresponds to an indifferenciation of orders of knowledge or values, anomie or a failure to make dialectical relationships and their societal structures explicit. In fact, looking at the reality of social relations between the different subjects who decide whether or not to develop curricula makes it possible to recognise the challenges of social issues beyond prescriptive political injunctions or the equally prescriptive technical injunctions of certain didactics. We are all aware of how some curricula are imposed and how certain contents are neglected. Political education requires a scientific approach that recognises the reality of multiple social relations in the face of commonly accepted normative political injunctions, the history of its own discipline and content, for example (SOUZA, 2020), with a methodological approach that inserts new modes of mediation between social subjects and concrete reality, as well as a perspective of transforming reality, leading to a change in the behaviour of social subjects in the face of that same reality.

‘Reimagining Our Futures Together: A new social contract for Education’ report from UNESCO explores the transformations that are required in the political sphere and states that:

‘A new social contract for education must remain firmly rooted in a commitment to human rights.’ (UNESCO, 2021, p18), recognising that political repression is harmful, undermining human dignity and potentially destroying lives. The report acknowledges that democracy seems increasingly fragile, with a rise in populist leaders, growth in nativism and increased polarisation leading to a breakdown in civic discourse and growing infringements on the freedom of expression all have great consequences for education. How might a scientific, methodological, approach to political education, rather than a politicised education, help us make the much needed transformation in education?

Let's explore how these elements are interconnected with the reflections of Margaret Roberts, this outstanding geography teacher educator, renowned for her kindness, creativity, generosity and insight, is also a former Geographical Association (GA) President, and recipient of an MBE in the 2021 New Years Honors. High praise recognition of her services to education. She has shaped a

generation of geography teachers across the UK and beyond, with her publication 'Learning through enquiry' (2003) having a profound impact, enriching geography classrooms around the world.

What moments, resources, and works do you consider the most important in your professional career? And why?

Travel: Visiting Ghana for my undergraduate dissertation, visits to South Africa during the Apartheid years

Why? Going to Ghana as an undergraduate, meeting French African students on the journey there and my interviews there, challenged my preconceptions and enabled me to begin to see the world from a totally different perspective. During the Apartheid years, I visited South Africa with my husband who had moved to Britain after his degree. Although for most of the time we experienced white South Africa, we visited townships, were shown round Soweto by a women's group, and stayed with black families in the former homelands of Transkei and Bophuthatswana. The grotesque inequality and poverty made a huge impact on me. I have continued to be interested in social justice and the values dimension of geography ever since.

My first three jobs where I was working with inspirational colleagues.

My first job and the people I worked with. My first teaching job, was in North London, where I taught geography and general studies for six years.

Why? The head of English, Douglas Barnes, (who later wrote Language, Learner, and the School) got me interest in classroom talk. He involved me in the London Association of English conferences where I was introduced to Vygotsky's work and become interested in the connection between everyday and school knowledge. From my six years at Minchenden led to a career long interest in classroom dialogue and processes and how students learn through talk and writing.

My second job, for two years, was at the Nuffield Foundation Resources for Learning project in which we produced resources and activities to be used in three London Comprehensive Schools and then three Oxfordshire schools.

Why? I worked with Michael Armstrong who later wrote Closely Observed Children. He was also interested in the learning process and what we were asking students to do with the resources. I became interested in how students could learn from studying resources and discussing them as well as learning from the teacher. We encouraged students to work collaboratively in groups, supported by the resources and their class teachers. My husband and I, together with four other members of the Resources for Learning team moved to a brand-new upper school, for 14–18-year-olds) to encourage students to be actively engaged in their courses.

My work in the School of Education, University of Sheffield with responsibility for PGCE geography.

Why? Liaising with a wide variety of schools in South Yorkshire, many of whom were actively involved in the Schools Council's GYSL and 16-19 projects³. Working with new geography graduates who introduced me to new geographical ideas. I also was external examiner for several PGCE⁴ and MA⁵ courses and always learned from the way other courses were set up and from the students I watched. The Schools Council Projects introduced me to frameworks for introducing enquiry-based-learning in the classroom as well as in the field. The Schools Council 16-19 Project's Route for Enquiry was particularly influential with its two sides – a more objective enquiry and a values enquiry.

Professional organisations, GA⁶ and The International Geographical Union (IGU) conferences

Why? Going to conferences gave me the opportunity to meet many geographers, to share ideas and to benefit from the projects they were working in. These included: Eleanor Rawling, David Lambert, Ashley Kent, David Leat, Rex Walford, John Lidstone, Jeana Kriewald.

When it comes to the process of designing a geography curriculum, what do you think are the key elements to be taken into account?

Purposes of education generally:

A rationale that encourages students' curiosity and creativity and their active engagement in learning and constructive knowledge

What we know about how children learn (but drawing on Dewey, Vygotsky, Bruner and Alexander's dialogic teaching)

How geography can contribute to these aims

Knowledge, understanding, skills, values, key questions, key concepts, theoretical ideas

Which aspects of geographical knowledge should be selected for each age group, what illustrative examples and why

What approach to learning and why (I would advocate an enquiry-based approach.

³ The 'Geography for the Young School Leaver' (GYSL) project was funded by the Schools Council, a government body established to fund National Curriculum development across a wide range of subjects (and the first official step taken by any government to exert some influence on the school curriculum).

⁴ A postgraduate certificate in education (PGCE) is an academic qualification.

⁵ The Master of Arts (MA) degree is a graduate degree focused on the humanities, social sciences, and fine arts.

⁶ The Geographical Association (GA) is the leading subject association for teachers of geography.

How do you find the right balance between a national curriculum and the specificities of the regions of a country? For example, is it possible to have a single curriculum for the UK, given the regional diversity of Scotland and Wales?

National curriculum might define key concepts, processes and focus e.g. sustainable cities, and theoretical underpinning which can be applied to local area, region.

How can we ensure that a national curriculum is not imposed from above?

By involving people from different regions and who have different roles in the educational process (teachers, academics with expertise in the subject, academics with expertise in education, employers) in the consultation process

By making guidelines more general as in previous answer, giving scope for regions and individual schools to make decisions about detail

By giving some choice as in the current English A level which has compulsory core content and options within the non-core content.

Equally, what are the stages and requirements of educational policy for the implementation of a curriculum?

There needs to be a widespread initial period of consultation with stakeholders; academics in the subject, academics specialising in education; teachers; and employers.

In recent years we have seen critical and important debates in British society, such as the issue of colonialism, imperialism, and the decolonial debate. How are these issues reflected in the curriculum? Are there restrictions from more conservative sectors? For example, in Brazil, the national curriculum does not include the concept of deforestation because of pressure from conservative sectors. Do these pressures and constraints exist in the UK when formulating a curriculum?

All the current documents guiding the curriculum in England were published in 2013 and 2014, before the issues related to decolonisation were prominent. None of the current documents encourage study of the impact of colonialism or imperialism on what is studied in geography

Yes, the government has influenced the curriculum because of the viewpoints of ministers and their advisors. When the government guidelines for GCSE⁷ content were devised in 2014, Michael Gove who was secretary of state for Education, did not want climate change included. He was not

⁷ General Certificate of Secondary Education.

persuaded by the arguments of the geography expert group, but eventually, because of lobbying from the Minister of Energy, Ed Davy, was persuaded to include it. But he still did not want too much attention to human causes of climate change. So, what is included in the guidelines of content is very limited. There is reference to extreme weather, but not related to climate change. And there is only this sentence: “the characteristics of climate change and evidence for different causes, including human activity, from the beginning of the Quaternary period (2.6 million years ago) to the present day.” There is nothing on the impacts of climate change or what should be done to deal with it. Some of the awarding bodies, however, have included mitigation and adaptation in their specifications. Examination questions are often focused on physical causes of climate change rather than current issues.

At Key Stage 3 (for 11–14-year-olds) there is similar wording in relation to climate change: “physical geography relating to: geological timescales and plate tectonics; rocks, weathering and soils; weather and climate, including the change in climate from the Ice Age to the present...”

Whilst on conservative issues: In the population geography debate, is there a discussion about intersectionality and LGBTQIA+ communities? Is there a debate about the inclusion of these issues in geography education?

There is discussion about LGBTQIA issues among interested sections of the educational community, but whether they influence what is studied in school geography depends on individual teachers. There is nothing in the current curriculum to encourage their inclusion.

How are issues related to learning theory, for example, theoretical currents in behaviourist (Skinner and Watson), constructivist (Piaget), and cultural-historical (Vygotsky) learning psychology included in the curriculum?

I think that Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner were included in many teacher education courses in the past. I am not sure how much attention they are given now – they are not referenced in the core curriculum for teacher education and they are not referred to by OFSTED⁸. My own thinking has been influenced by Vygotsky and Bruner and I have included references to them in Geography through Enquiry.

What impact do you think embedding the ‘new science of learning’ in the Initial Teacher Education Core Content Framework (ITE CCF) (The government curriculum for teacher

⁸ OFSTED - office for Standards in Education (A non-ministerial department).

education) has had on the delivery of the geography curriculum in the UK? E.g., spaced practice/retrieval practice/dual-coding.

I think they have been very influential and detrimental. The section in ITE CCF on How children learn ignores the work of Vygotsky, Bruner, Dewey, and others and the substantial body of research into the role of language and learning, based on over 5 decades of detailed classroom research in subjects across the curriculum. Rosenshine's principles of instructions, based on far less research in fewer subject areas, is given prominence. The emphasis seems to be on memorising and constant testing through retrieval practice. This is the opposite of what is happening in Singapore, which since 2011 has moved from a curriculum that prioritised memorisation to one that prioritises students' active involvement in the construction of knowledge to develop their understanding.

Thinking about a country like Brazil, with profound diversity and social inequality, what elements would you consider important in formulating curriculum proposals, given your experience around the world?

As I have no personal experience of Brazil, I hesitate to recommend. But I have experience of South Africa during the Apartheid years and the extreme inequalities. I visited schools in the former homeland of Bophuthatswana which had no electricity, few resources and large classes of 60 students. I tried to imagine how I would adapt my teaching which has relied on looking at resources, to such a situation. I think I would want students to draw on their own knowledge of their own local areas, their own sense of place and environment and what is important to them and to be able to talk about it. I would also want them to study the area near the school. School geography should enable them to make sense of their own experiences of place and environment. I would include place, environment, climate, connections to other places and food on the curriculum, - all of which can be related to students' own lives.

What do you feel is the role of the geography educator (and perhaps educators more broadly) in our time of declared climate and ecological emergency Climate & Ecological Emergency (CEE)?

I think that the geography educator should present a firm stance on CEE, presenting the clear scientific evidence but see below. Education has an important role to play in informing students about what is happening to the planet, why action is needed and to provide them with examples of what can be done.

Which pedagogical approaches do you feel are most relevant in preparing pupils for our difficult environmental future?

I think the emphasis in teaching about CEE should be on collaborative responsibility, recognising that although individuals can take action, leaving action to individual consciences will not deal with the issues. So, I would not encourage investigations of individual carbon footprints (as devised by BP to deflect from the role of fossil fuel companies). Students should be given opportunities to investigate what organisations are doing or could be doing to reduce carbon emissions e.g. the school, local businesses, local government, national businesses, national government.

What do you think is the role of nature connectedness in the geography curriculum and classroom in our CEE?

I think it is important for students to connect with nature in the school and local environment, through projects and fieldwork.

What role do you think ‘hope’ should play in teaching at this time?

It is crucially important to consider ‘hope.’ Students can feel more hopeful if they can take some actions themselves, but this is not enough. I think that the geography curriculum should include a lot of examples from all over the world, including poor communities, indigenous cultures, schools, etc, which are working collaboratively to make a difference. Students need to know that a lot of people across the world are working together to make a difference.

Do you think it possible for the geography curriculum to be adapted to embed an intergenerational approach to environmental stewardship/sustainability? How might this be done? Which pedagogical approaches might best be harnessed for this purpose?

Yes, this can start with students’ own families and then their wider community. Schools can look for opportunities to involve parents: through presentations, by the school or by students; through investigative projects finding out about parents’ and communities experiences in the past and their concerns and viewpoints about the present and future.

Margaret Roberts

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