

## **Social studies in Scotland's school curriculum: a case for a more integrated approach**

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**Abstract:** The fragmented approach to teaching geography, history and modern studies currently employed in Scottish secondary schools prevents links being made between these disciplines and limits quality learning time. Through exploration of the concept of curriculum integration and examination of its history in secondary school education in the United Kingdom, this article argues that there are no compelling reasons for subject separation. Indeed, the vitality of constituent subjects of social studies both in secondary school and higher education can be regarded as indicative of the success of an integrated approach. The article concludes with suggestions for progress in this area.

**Keywords:** geography education; history education; integrated curriculum; modern studies education; secondary school curriculum

### **Introduction**

Scotland's new Curriculum for Excellence has re-ignited an old debate about the status of the social subjects in the curriculum (Geography, Modern Studies and History). Put broadly, this concerns the issue of whether these subjects should be taught as discrete entities within the junior secondary school curriculum (S1-3, aged 12-14 years) or as part of a more integrated approach. The balance in this debate seems to have shifted with the recent publication of the Social Studies Outcomes and Experiences (LTS 2008); while using the umbrella category social studies, they have firmly identified Geography and History as separate strands, although interestingly Modern Studies has been amalgamated with Economics and Business Studies.

These debates are important. It is my view that the fragmented approach to teaching these subjects in S1-3, so commonplace in Scotland's secondary schools, is highly damaging. Such an approach does not allow links to be made easily between the subjects, nor does it easily allow for quality learning time. Typically a school student will experience less than an hour per week in each subject, with different teachers for each. This can encourage a limited approach to teaching, and the experience of many students is teacher talk and workbooks focused on content. In contrast, approaches to active learning based on fieldwork or dialogue, for example co-operative learning, which research (see, for example: Watkins, Carnell and Lodge 2007; Muijs and Reynolds 2001) suggests can be highly effective in engaging learners, are problematic given time constraints. I firmly believe that this situation impacts negatively on the motivation of young people to study the other social subjects and fails to make such study relevant to young people, as well as failing to provide a firm foundation for the study of these subjects further up the school.

This short article outlines some of the key issues concerned with the study of social studies, particularly focusing on the issue of integration, which I believe is both widely misunderstood and opposed by many teachers of the social subjects. The first section explores the concept of integration. The second gives an overview of the history of this concept in the United Kingdom (UK). It is worth emphasising at this stage that the UK is one of the few places in the world where the separate social subjects are taught as discrete and disconnected disciplines in the early years of secondary schooling. The basis for this seems to be tradition; I have seen no other compelling arguments for this separation at such an early stage, and do not accept the argument that students at this stage need subject specialists (having successfully taught across the range of subjects myself). Moreover, it is clear that in many countries where social studies is the norm, the constituent subjects are thriving disciplines in the senior secondary school and in Higher Education (e.g. the case of history in New Zealand). Finally, I conclude by suggesting some ways forward.

### ***Integration***

A particular difficulty in conceptualising integrated provision lies in the question of what to call it. Much of the terminology is contested, or misleading, or simply misunderstood and misused by those seeking to enact or oppose such provision. This links with the attitude towards such provision of teachers, who see it as a threat to the integrity of constituent subjects such as History and Geography (Benavot 2006). This section will explore some of these issues, seeking to provide a conceptual clarity to inform and illuminate any discussion of the issue.

The term integration is widely used to refer to provision that brings the social subjects or the sciences together. According to Beane (1997) this is a widespread misapplication of the term integration. For example, Beane states that social studies is not an example of integrated curriculum, but merely a less fragmented approach to defining disciplines; in effect the boundaries that separate different domains of the curriculum have been redrawn, albeit encompassing a greater breadth of content. Beane employs the term multi-disciplinary to describe this type of provision, although I believe that this is also problematic; it simply does not capture the diversity of approaches that exist within the social subjects in Scotland. As this discussion does not concern integration in the whole-school sense that Beane describes, I do not propose to use the term to refer to the provision or organisational arrangements that have been put into place for the teaching of the social subjects in Scotland's secondary schools. Instead, I propose the following typology, which provides a continuum of practice within the social subjects in terms of organisation.

1. *Separate subjects teaching.* The constituent subjects are taught in isolation by subject specialists. The subjects may be taught concurrently or in rotational blocks. The current practice of rotations, commonplace in many local education authorities, does notionally allocate more time for study, although it must be borne in mind that

the short nature of rotations creates its own problems in terms of continuity and progression, as well as rendering link-making between subjects problematic.

2. *Multi-disciplinary teaching*. The constituent subjects are taught by a single teacher, but remain as recognisably separate entities or modules. This approach may allow such links to be made, although this remains problematic due to the modular, discrete subject teaching engendered by the model, particularly as many teachers will be non-specialists delivering curricular materials devised by other teachers. Under such circumstances, ownership of the materials and topics is difficult. Research data collected in 2003 (Priestley 2008); together with more recent anecdotal evidence, suggests that this is the predominant approach in Scottish social subjects faculties, where some measure of integration between subjects is sought.
3. *Inter-disciplinary teaching*. Totally thematic approaches to social studies which completely blur the distinction between the constituent subjects would fall into this category, as would approaches that provide a mix and match approach (some thematic and some modular). Inter-disciplinary provision differs from multi-disciplinary provision in that there is at least some attempt to blur the boundaries between the constituent subjects, for example teaching using organising themes (e.g. a module on the United States that brings Geography, History and Modern Studies together). It requires sound planning and a collaborative approach to planning to work properly. This approach is not common in Scotland, although one school in the north east has successfully adopted it for a number of years, and with the advent of Curriculum for Excellence, anecdotal evidence suggests that a small number of schools are moving in this direction.

I shall, however, utilise the term integration to refer to the degree to which links are made between the constituent subjects in terms of content and skills. This is, therefore, a pedagogical rather than an organisational usage of the term. The above typology conceptualises provision in an organisational sense, and while it is likely that the degree of integration of content will increase as one moves along this continuum, this is not a given. Indeed, there may be developed degrees of integration between subjects that are taught separately. Fogarty (1991) provides a useful model to enhance our understanding of how integration may occur in pedagogical terms, including the following categories.

- *Fragmented* – traditional separate disciplines, taught independently of one another.
- *Connected* - teaching that focuses on making connections within a discipline.
- *Nested* – placing a topic in its wider theoretical context (e.g. linking study of the water cycle to the wider concept of systems).
- *Sequenced* – arranging teaching so that related topics are taught concurrently within different subjects (e.g. allowing the study of the

First World War in History to coincide with the study of war poetry in English).

- *Shared* – joint planning of related disciplines (e.g. identifying commonalities between History and Geography).
- *Webbed* – the use of thematic approaches to bring content from different disciplines together (e.g. an Africa week when all curriculum areas focus on this single theme).
- *Threaded* – a cross curricular approach where big ideas (e.g. thinking skills) are coherently planned across the curriculum.
- *Integrated* – this is largely an interdisciplinary organisational approach, but could be a more ad hoc arrangement (e.g. a variation on the Africa week where teachers come together rather than focusing separately on the theme).

While there is clearly some overlap between the organisational and pedagogical dimensions of integration within this model, I propose to draw upon it to establish a two level schema for understanding integration as it occurs in Scottish secondary schools.

1. *As an organisational approach*, involving timetabling and the allocation of teachers to subjects. The typology of separate, multi-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary approaches captures the complexity of provision in Scotland.
2. *As a pedagogical approach*, involving the cross-curricular and interdisciplinary planning of content and skills. Fogarty's (1991) categories may be used to describe the range of approaches that may occur within the three types of organisation listed above.

Thus, separate subject or multi-disciplinary organisational models may involve the application of shared or threaded approaches to teaching of content and skills, exhibiting a high degree of integration; or they may remain fragmented – even putting one teacher in charge of three subjects does not guarantee that links will be made between them. Interdisciplinary organisational models are likely by their very nature to incorporate high levels of integration, unless of course they are blighted by poor planning.

### ***Integration and the social studies curriculum in Scotland***

The integration/subject debate has long been a source of controversy in Scotland, despite the supremacy of subjects within the secondary school curriculum. This can be construed as a battle of paradigms. On the one hand, primary education has a tradition of thematic teaching, with its roots in the 1965 *Primary Education in Scotland Memorandum* (SED 1965). On the other hand, secondary education is firmly rooted in the teaching of traditional subjects. According to one writer, commenting on the submissions to 1977 *Munn Report* (SED 1977),

it would appear that subjects had become so deeply institutionalised in secondary schools, such firmly established features of the educational

landscape, that the case for this mode of curriculum organisation was thought to be self evident (Kirk 1982: 21).

A second dimension of the debate is specific to the social subjects. The emergence of social studies (Wesley & Wronski 1973; Gleeson & Whitty 1976; Barr *et al* 1977; Hill 1994) – a combination of existing smaller disciplines such as History and Geography – as the predominant approach to teaching the humanities and social sciences in the early secondary school is a worldwide trend (Wong 1991; Benavot 2006), with which Scotland and the rest of the UK are largely out of step. There was considerable interest in such approaches in the UK during the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Hargreaves 1982; King 1986; Phillips 1986; Whitty 1992), but these often tended to be associated with low ability pupils (Whitty 1992), and largely dissipated in the face of pressures from HMIE and national curricular developments (Ross 1995). Nevertheless, despite the weak nature in Britain of these ideas about social studies, they existed as an alternative to the separate social subjects, and as a result the idea of interdisciplinary provision in this area tended to resurface periodically when national debates about curriculum were taking place.

The *Munn Report* (SED 1977) clearly identified the problems inherent in a traditional subjects curriculum, namely fragmentation and poor coverage of cross curricular issues. The report eventually fell into line with the predominant view in secondary schools, reaffirming the 'Hirstian subject-based curriculum with a nod in the direction of cross-curricular courses, but only for the less able' (Boyd 1997: 60). However, according to Kirk (1982) the report did not abandon the notion of inter-disciplinarity, but gave strong tacit support to thematic teaching, and was strongly critical of traditional subjects-based teaching. As such it left the door open to future engagement with the notion of inter-disciplinary provision.

These debates were to re-emerge in the late 1980s and early 1990s when the 5-14 Curriculum was developed. According to Macdonald (1994), the publication of the *Environmental Studies 5-14* document (SOED 1993) was delayed by a behind-the-scenes row over whether the social subjects should be taught in an inter-disciplinary fashion. Once published, these guidelines served to keep this debate open. Although some writers (e.g. Adams 1994; Macdonald 1994) believed that the guidelines were implicitly critical of inter-disciplinary teaching, an alternative interpretation is that they gave a steer to such an approach. The use of terminology such as *People and Place*, *People in the Past* and *People in Society* to replace the traditional subject names Geography, History and Modern Studies may be seen as giving an explicit message to schools about provision, reinforced by their framing as a coherent set of strands, the *Social Subjects*, with common enquiry skills descriptors. This message was reinforced in the 2000 guidelines (LTS 2000) by the extension of an additional set of generic skills (*Developing Informed Attitudes*) from *People in Society* to the other strands. Simultaneously, schools were coming under pressure from HMIE (e.g. 1992; 1999; 2000) to reduce the amount of contact that young people had with different teachers, albeit through a different mechanism, that of rotations, which would serve to

preserve subject integrity. An HMIE report identified that 'it is not unusual for S1 pupils to be taught by between 13 and 16 different teachers each week' (HMIE 2000: 3). Such fragmentation is largely a consequence of the subject culture that is widely seen as being endemic in Scottish secondary schools (Bryce and Humes 1999). Thus, while HMIE remained largely opposed to inter-disciplinary teaching of the social subjects, its continued identification of the problem of fragmentation, and the persistence of ideas about social studies ensured that inter-disciplinarity remained as a cultural alternative to secondary schools.

## **Conclusions**

Before reiterating arguments for a more integrated, inter-disciplinary approach to teaching the social subjects and making suggestions for future policy, I wish to emphasise the following. *The prevailing tradition is for the teaching of separate subjects at the early stages of secondary schooling. Changes should not be imposed through policy; there is a plethora of research that indicates that any such moves would engender opposition, superficial engagement and ultimately no change. Policy should instead enable change, through providing cultural alternatives to existing practices and through providing resources to enable engagement with such alternatives. Such engagement can only come about through dialogue within the profession.*

That said, there are powerful reasons for changing current practices:

- To enable links to be made across the curriculum.
- To root the study of History, in particular, within its wider societal context, thus making it more relevant to potentially disengaged young people.
- To reduce the problem of fragmentation and lack of study time, thus enabling the application of more meaningful approaches to learning. This may include fieldwork, which is highly impractical given current curricular provision in many schools.
- To provide a more solid foundation for the future study of the social subjects, including History.

Curriculum for Excellence provides an opportunity for many departments to reconfigure their approaches to teaching the social subjects. This comes in tandem with other initiatives (e.g. Assessment is for Learning) which promote more dialogical forms of learning in schools. The danger lies in schools taking the easy option of mapping the new Outcomes and Experiences onto existing practice – and informal evidence suggests that this is occurring in the vast majority of secondary schools as a response to the new curriculum. I suggest that the following strategies could be employed to promote more integrated approaches to the teaching of the social subjects, and to help schools engage with alternatives to existing practice at this crucial time:

- The highlighting of successful examples of this form of provision.
- The production of schemes of work and materials to help departments interested in restructuring to do so. I know from dialogue with

departments, that many teachers would welcome this approach but are put off by the amount of work involved.

- The facilitation of generative dialogue (Boreham and Morgan 2004) between teachers – the formation of spaces where genuine exploration of cultural alternatives to existing practice may occur. A funded programme of professional development would be very useful in this respect.
- The highlighting of the positive aspects of a more integrated approach. These range from the pragmatic (fewer reports to write) to the pedagogical (creating space for more meaningful and interesting learning activities).
- A clear message that inter-disciplinary approaches do not undermine the teaching of constituent subjects, as has been widely claimed. It is my view, supported by the experiences of other countries, that carefully planned programmes of social studies will enhance the study of the constituent subjects by providing a firmer foundation in terms of skills and understanding, than that provided by more fragmented approaches. Research is needed to provide an empirical basis for such claims, within the social studies faculties that are currently innovating in the direction of more integrated approaches.

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