

## **Geography for Students with a Social Difference**

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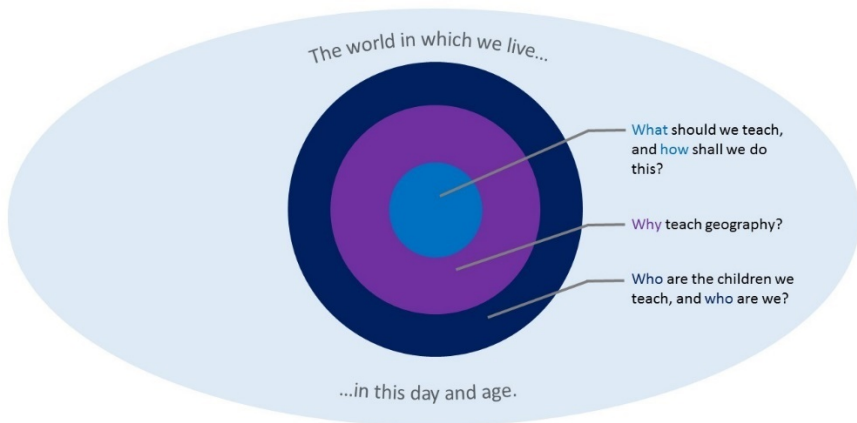
### **Abstract**

This article examines how the GeoCapabilities approach to teaching geography can be applied to Additional Support Needs education in Scotland, in particular for students with Asperger syndrome (AS). GeoCapabilities is outlined and considered in the wider context of current educational curricular reforms. The educational challenges and opportunities of students with Asperger syndrome are briefly described and results from small scale research conducted with a group of students with AS who were taught using GeoCapabilities is presented. Finally, the wider implications of using this approach are discussed.

**Keywords:** Geography education, GeoCapabilities, Asperger syndrome, Additional Support Needs, Curriculum for Excellence

### **Introduction**

This article will discuss how the GeoCapabilities approach (Lambert, Solem & Tani, 2015) to teaching geography can be applied to Additional Support Needs (ASN) education in Scotland (known as Special Educational Needs (SEN) in England & Wales), specifically for students with Asperger syndrome (AS). I am a teacher in Glasgow and encountered the GeoCapabilities approach during its development (2014-17). The article will outline the GeoCapabilities approach, discuss the particular profile of students with AS, and then describe small scale research for a Masters dissertation which looked at a case study of one group of students with AS who were taught using this approach.



**Figure 1.** A capabilities approach (according to [www.geocapabilities.org](http://www.geocapabilities.org)). The context is ‘this day and age’. We begin with questions about who the students are we teach, and then why teach them geography. Only then do we select what to teach and how to teach it.

## GeoCapabilities

The GeoCapabilities approach (Lambert, Solem & Tani 2015) emphasises knowledge and values in the teaching of geography. Taking its cue from the Capabilities approach of the welfare economist Amartya Sen and the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (Gaspar 1997), GeoCapabilities prompts us to ask *why* anyone should be taught geography: is it inherently valuable? Can it provide people with tools that *empower* them, providing an aid to navigate life?

Young people in general, and people with AS in particular, are expected to find their way in a changing world often perceived to be in crisis (Sperber 2013, Médecins Sans Frontières 1996). These crises – economic, environmental, demographic – have formed some of the context which has prompted governments the world over to institute national curriculum reform, including Scotland’s *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) (Priestley 2002, Bramall & White 2000). With economic competitiveness frequently dominating government strategy curriculum reform has often appeared to stress outcomes in terms of ‘21<sup>st</sup> century skills’ at the expense of subjects as David Lambert (2013) outlined in the case of England. Whilst in England there has been a turn back to a knowledge led curriculum since 2010, in Scotland the principles of CfE continue, the educational emphasis being on developing skills based upon the experience of young people.

The risk is that young people are not exposed to specialist knowledge, including geographical knowledge, that can take them beyond that experience. The sociologist Michael Young (2017, 4) has related how state influence on changes to school curricula began in the 1970s at least in part due to "the collapse of the youth labour market and the expansion of those staying on at school at minimum cost." Various attempts to accommodate young people who in earlier times would have left school early led to a stark 'academic' and 'vocational' divide, with subjects like geography arguably being reserved for the more academic student and the rest being provided with skills and competences deemed suitable for the world of work (e.g. Leisure and Tourism). Michael Young and others (e.g. Young and Lambert 2014) now consider this divide to be unacceptable on social justice grounds. If geographical knowledge is believed to be an essential ('powerful') component of the curriculum for high achievers, then why was it thought to be acceptable for lower achievers to have at best only a watered-down version of this<sup>1</sup>? Young argues for 'powerful knowledge' for all because of its enabling 'power'- usefully discussed by Alaric Maude (Maude, 2016).

The GeoCapabilities approach offers the prospect of a geography curriculum for all. Following Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach to welfare economics, which argued that poverty is a problem because people are prevented from fully developing their human potential (and therefore should be abolished), GeoCapabilities boldly claims that young people are in a similar manner impaired from fully developing their potential if they are deprived (for whatever reason, or even unintentionally) of 'powerful disciplinary knowledge' (PDK). Real development comes through "human *empowerment*" (Lambert et al 201, 724, emphasis in original), and access to PDK derived from specialist disciplines, including geography, contributes directly to cognitive development - and the power to think - upon which intellectual empowerment depends.

Geography provides both subject knowledge and a holistic view of the world that stresses the interconnectedness of people and the planet, enabling "a unique view of the world", providing students with the tools to make sense of "complex problems" while considering connections "at a variety of scales" (Jackson 2006). Lambert (2004) points out that geography has both a *vocabulary* (e.g., rivers, seas, oceans) and a *grammar* (e.g., scale, place, space) that provides meaning to the vocabulary. The anarchist geographer Kropotkin (1978) saw geography as having three important functions: to open the student's eyes to the importance of the "natural sciences"; to show that humans are all one people; and to fight the prejudices people have of the "Other" (in the terms of his day, "the so-called 'lower races'"). It is making these kinds of claims about geography's unique attributes as a discipline that enables us to link the teaching of the subject in schools with capabilities development. We are able to say that geography offers something particular and special enough to assert that its absence in the curriculum could be seen a capabilities deprivation which gives purchase to what

Basil Bernstein (2000, 30) called the "pedagogic right" of students to specialised knowledge. As Young argued "as a matter of social equity, all young people have the right to be introduced to powerful knowledge" (Lambert et al 2015, 730).

It perhaps goes without saying that implicit in all the above is that we are assuming that the geography taught in school is of high epistemic quality. Precisely how we might define this may be the theme of another article, for it is an important question. But for now, we might simply agree that teacher agency is at the forefront of GeoCapabilities: high quality geography requires high quality teaching. Thus, returning to Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence (CfE), which stresses the wider goals of education, teachers should take into account the "role of education in affording people with intellectual, moral and existential capabilities for lifelong learning, economic and social agency in citizenship and the pursuit of personal well-being." (Lambert et al 2015). In the GeoCapabilities project teachers express their agency by carrying out a process of "curriculum making": they take a lead in developing a curriculum with the goal of human empowerment. In order to encourage this, the GeoCapabilities website ([www.geocapabilities.org](http://www.geocapabilities.org)) provides practical support and advice. In my work with students with Asperger's syndrome I have found the capabilities approach to be very supportive.

### **Methodology**

My research consisted of a case study of one group of students on the Transitions course (12 students out of a cohort of roughly 40). Using triangulation, I employed the use of questionnaires, video observation and semi-structured interviews about their experiences of education, what they thought of studying geography, and how they viewed the future. I analysed this using an integrated approach as described by J. Floersch, J.L. Longhofer, D. Kranke, and L. Townsend (2010). This paper will draw specifically on the interviews. The names of students have been anonymised. Students were fully informed of the aims of the project; their participation was voluntary and based on informed consent. This was overseen by the research tutor and was compliant with data protection legislation.

#### ***Asperger syndrome***

Firstly, what is Asperger Syndrome? (Note 1) Coined in 1981 by the psychiatrist Lorna Wing, Asperger Syndrome (AS) was a category designed to explain to parents and teachers how people of average to above-average intelligence may exhibit "autistic features", and yet "speak grammatically" and not be "socially aloof" (Wing 1981). In the 1970s Wing and her colleague Judith Gould had identified the common traits of autism: the "triad of impairments" (Wing & Gould 1997) (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** The Triad of Impairments

<b>Social interaction</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Imagination*</b>
The individual can appear rude, withdrawn or odd, and become anxious in social situations.	The individual speaks in monologues and can often focus only on their area of interest	The individual engages in repetitive behaviours and may see things in an extremely black and white, right or wrong manner

\*Claire Sainsbury (2009, 33) who has AS prefers the term “flexible thinking”

People with AS are analytical thinkers (Bryson 2005). Therefore, social interaction, which is unpredictable, is challenging to understand as it is context-dependant: you would not speak to your teacher as you would to your friends or family. People with AS can also experience sensory issues differently to "neurotypical" people. Fluorescent lighting, echoey rooms, the texture of plastic chairs, school bells – all can contribute to creating an overwhelming and distracting environment for these pupils.

However, people with AS also have particular strengths due to their analytical thinking and their sensory perception. They can be highly focussed on areas of interest, and indeed many autism researchers today believe that important figures from the past may have had AS: Einstein, Wittgenstein and Lenin (Gillberg 2002, Fitzgerald 2000a, 2000b, 2000c). The Austrian doctor Hans Asperger (after whom the condition is named) noted that with the social disability came "perceptual and super-ability" (Landeweerd 2001, 209):

“In the best cases, this ability [. . .], offers the potential for a career perspective, determines the special achievements of these people, which others do not have. The ability to abstract thought is of course an advantage for scientific achievements. And indeed, under important scientists, there are many autistic personalities”.

Humphrey & Lewis (2008) estimate that there are “93,400 children and young people in the United Kingdom” with AS, therefore it is highly likely that most teachers (perhaps unwittingly) will have had experience of this particular way of perceiving the world. People often go undiagnosed, and students may be unaware of their AS, although it is likely that they are aware they are "different" to their peers.

Teachers who can develop relationships of trust have the opportunity to harness these talents, for the benefit of the student, their peers and society in general.

### *The student voice*

My main role on the ‘Transitions’ course at City of Glasgow College is to provide guidance and support to students with AS (aged 16-19) who have not been successful in mainstream education. These students are often school-phobic and need to re-engage with education, and ideally move on to a mainstream course or work. The course is rooted in the idea that the students need to create their own strategies to deal with actual situations, therefore classes are used a vehicle for embedding social skills training, as well as a means for lecturers to assess the students' academic abilities.

Geography developed from my work with the students using urban gardening, which came about as a means to teach citizenship in a more practical way (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2.** Transitions students working at a community garden space

Our work in the garden encouraged discussions about how the city functions and for whom – why was the neighbourhood we worked in (the Gorbals, a working-class area of multiple deprivation) strewn with litter? Whose responsibility was it to clear it up? Could urban gardening transform the area, and how was it perceived by residents? Is the city for developers or citizens, and do citizens have a “right to the city”? This led, perhaps inevitably, to the introduction

of more formal 'geography' lessons that are now an integral part of the course (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** The Transitions course

<b>Basic information</b>	Course established in 1999. The result of work done by the National Autistic Society, the Scottish Society for Autism, parents, carers and academics. The course is designed to serve a group of young people who are often overlooked and aims to encourage them to develop their own independence in order to move on to mainstream education or work.
<b>Student group</b>	Aged 16 to 19, with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome. Students must be independent travellers and need to be able to cope with class sizes of 10 to 12. Total student cohort of 40.
<b>Classes</b>	Full time college course (17.5 hours per week). Classes are three hours and can include geography, film & media, horticulture and core skills. Guidance is timetabled and is integral to the success of the course. Social skills training is embedded within all classes.
<b>Progression</b>	The course is successful in aiding students to make their next move. Students have gone on to study Social Science, Computing, and Arts based subjects.

These students have a unique way of looking at the world, possibly informed by a feeling of being an outsider looking in, that allows them to view the conventional with fresh eyes – something of enormous value to a world in flux. As marginalised people, it should not be surprising that many of them suffer from pervasive self-doubt and at times they could struggle to articulate themselves. They often approach problems in a dialectical way, seeing the positive in the negative. But many found geography an enlightening subject that helped them understand the world they lived in. Most importantly, it inspired them to consider new and productive ways of thinking about today's problems and possibilities for change.

***The value of geography***

The Transitions students described how understanding geography helped them to understand other people and the world they live in. These students sometimes appear disadvantaged by their different approach to life, and their different priorities. As the clinical psychologist Tony Attwood has said, they are "truth-seekers" (Gray & Attwood 1999), something which isn't always appreciated in social situations.



Having the ability to tap into a knowledge-based subject provides the students with the means to make more informed judgements about their world. Jack (MacKeen 2017, 73) stated:

If you don't know stuff about where people live, why they live there and like...the way things are built up like you don't really understand why different people are in different situations...It's hard to understand why there's lots of crime and violence in ... places like outside the city but if you think about it there's not really a way to do anything if you're outside the city so everybody's just bored they're just gonna commit crime cos there's nothing else to do really.

He went on to describe further how geography had prompted him to think more about Glasgow:

You- when you live somewhere you don't think well why - why is Glasgow here? You don't really think about that, you're just like oh this is Glasgow, it's always been here. Because you know it always has been here to you, you don't know why it's here or who built it or the reasons they built it here. But in geography you can take a step back a bit, it's next to a river, and it's on a hill and it's easy for fishing and stuff but you don't really think about that because stuff like that doesn't matter anymore. (MacKeen 2017, 72)

Through his emerging understanding of geographical concepts, Jack was able to make more sense of the problems of his neighborhood in Glasgow. Instead of a series of random, unpleasant events, he began to see patterns and gain some insight into the negative actions of others, and empathy for their condition. He has considered the “meanings” of Glasgow for himself and others and reflected upon the “quality of life” in his city (Morgan 2002, 26).

Attwood (1997, undated) has noted that there is a strong concern for social justice among people with AS and this came through in many discussions. Riley saw geography as a useful means of coming to terms with issues that confront all of us, but particularly young people:

I think when we were talking about climate change and stuff like that and like talking about how we could like help out with that. And talking about what we could do as people rather than you know as a society because I think that's the one thing we tend to think about. We tend to think singular rather than plural because we're all stuck in our own wee world and getting us to realize that it's not just us that need to do things. We need to do things as a collective. It certainly broadened horizons that way. I always knew - well not always but for quite a while I've known that we need to things as a



collective rather than as singular because otherwise nothing's gonna get done. Cos one person can't change the fate of 7 billion people. (MacKeen 2017, 67-8)

For Max, "cooperation is entirely necessary to the survival of the humanity, of the human race" (MacKeen 2017, 64) and he identified the divisions between people as a source of conflict:

I know that - well this should be obvious, but I know that there are obviously people who - who are either better off or worse than me, to people starving in poorer places like Africa, Somalia - other places like that. Or people who live in rich places like maybe uh here in Glasgow or America, anywhere else. To be honest - in all honesty I feel like, you know the whole 1% of people who are much better off than others, I feel like that's total bullshit to be honest. (MacKeen 2017, 64)

The concern for social justice is often coupled with a lack of acceptance of the idea of hierarchy. Asperger himself noted how "they treat everyone as an equal as a matter of course" (Sainsbury 2009, 56). This can be an obvious difficulty in mainstream education, and a geographical understanding can allow these students a more nuanced view of how things actually function in society and more realistic ideas of how to change it.

### **GeoCapabilities: A Different Approach to Education**

Teachers often find students with AS challenging to have in mainstream settings, as these are people who will continually ask "why?" and are not satisfied with stock answers. Furthermore, people with AS often have difficulties processing information, and this can lead teachers and peers to question their abilities or motivation. Riley described how her interest in the sciences waned because "as time went on and we were taking more and more notes, I realized that I couldn't really like keep track of it and some of it was just a bit disorienting". (MacKeen 2017, 62). While many people with AS are talented analytical thinkers, in the way that Asperger described above, they can also have difficulties taking in and understanding information, and therefore teachers should be aware of this potential "gap" between talents and abilities, which can be a source or cause of anxiety for the student.

Riley felt uncomfortable discussing controversial subjects as she "didn't feel aware of the world" and stated:

I really wanted to speak out but then I found out that sometimes what I could say could be a bit – offhand I suppose...Like it could've just caused a whole debate and just dragged everything off track.

It was important for me to be aware of trigger points for each student, as well as drawing on their talents for innovative thinking. The timetabled guidance was valuable in this respect. Creating an informal atmosphere that accepted the general lack of acceptance for hierarchy also allowed for a relaxed atmosphere in which the students could think more clearly.

For Riley, geography was not one of her favorite subjects in high school:

I didn't really have a love of it in high school cos I think it was just one of those, cos it felt necessary instead of you know you can do this for the fun of it. And this time around it still feels necessary but it's there for the fun of it as well because it's not just geography it's helping us understand the world through geography.

For Riley, geography became more engaging as a subject with clear goals, that she could see as relevant to her life, as opposed to geography as an end in itself. Thus, I wanted to move beyond the way that the subject is presented in Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) materials to allow the students to think more critically about the subject and how they could use and develop this knowledge. Classroom discussions could move from exploring the Highest Value Export of each country to looking at the geography of drug prohibition and then consider arguments for and against drug legalization, subjects that are of great interest to young people.

We also drew upon the work of the late Hans Rosling, ([www.gapminder.org](http://www.gapminder.org)) particularly when looking at the concept of development and considering whether the developed/developing country dichotomy is outdated. Through our discussion the students began to look more closely at not just the subject matter but debates within geography itself:

Doug: I've heard about the suggestion that how we view, how we view countries as developed or developing may be...either wrong or at least outdated and that...there are different levels of how countries developed in the...like development and under-development cos like...even countries we may see as under-developed do have advantages like Brazil...or Mexico and some parts of Europe...and certain parts of Africa. (MacKeen 2017, 69)

## Understanding Ourselves – Imagining the Future

GeoCapabilities offers the possibility for students to learn not just about the world, but about themselves, and this fits in well with the aims of not just CfE but the Transitions course specifically.

Like many young people with AS, the Transitions students have struggled with the mainstream school system. AS is a different way of thinking and being and this difference is usually seen as a deficit, or "disability". As Gleeson (1999, 25) argues in *Geographies of Disability*, capitalism "[structures] the social understanding and experience of impairment", making disability a form of "oppression". The view of disability as a deficit "continues to dominate policies and... classroom practice" (Allan 2008).

This has meant that despite their often-remarkable intellectual gifts and unique way of viewing the world, such students are people who are frequently put in a marginalized place in society. If Attwood (undated) is correct that AS is an important part of our evolutionary heritage as humans, then this marginalization is a loss not just to the affected individuals but society as a whole.

Many of the students described feeling like "outcasts" (MacKeen 2017, 59), with secondary school being particularly trying. Jack (MacKeen 2017, 61) described his experiences:

The first years that I went to school, well like the first year that I went to school, I was ok with it, but I hated it. And then the second year of school I just refused to go in and after that like I'd go to see a tutor like every week I think it was and then when I was about 13 I had to go to this thing called the support center which was just for people who for whatever reason didn't go to school but who didn't have behavioral problems if that makes sense.

The approach of the Transitions course, in contrast, is to recognize these students' particular talents, and develop them so that they are ready to move on to mainstream education or work. Geography allows us to do something other than the standard social skills training, which some students see as the "same old stuff" (Barnhill 2014, 10). It also taps into the unique way of viewing the world that is a hallmark of AS. Riley saw how the positives of AS were a "gift":

I think it's- it's -it's a gift really. It makes me see the world in a unique way that a lot of people wouldn't. It kind of, it does - it widens your perspective, when you realize that other people think differently from you and it, it kind of broadens your opinions of the world. Cos obviously there's the - obviously there's more neurotypical people out there than there are with autism and Asperger's. And you do feel like a sort of - I don't know...I don't know, it's like this sort of ...like a broadened sense of compassion.

When asked about how they view the future, the students' responses ranged from apprehensive to optimistic, but many saw how geography could help people understand the present and imagine alternatives. Max (MacKeen 2017, 69) felt that geography could help people create solutions:

I believe something like geography could help this out yes because with the lay of the land sure someone like a foreign - maybe a Native American to Spain could be learning the place around - that person if he learned or he or she learned the lay of the land, got to know the locals, all that, sure one person may not really like they could do much but that one person could change the future forever.

Jack (MacKeen 2017, 73) explained how geography could help people gain a more realistic view of the world:

If you don't know stuff about where people live, why they live there and like eh the way things are built up like you don't really understand why different people are in different situations.

He felt positive about the possibilities for people to create change (MacKeen 2017, 74):

I don't know if I can make lots of things better, like I don't know if I can change the way - I can't really change the way other people think except from by telling them the truth. But I feel like if I'm a good person and try and help other people to be good people then eventually they can do it, it's just like a chain reaction but not everyone is gonna be a good person cos it's just not in their nature. But I feel like everyone can make a change.

## **Conclusion**

This article has addressed how the GeoCapabilities approach can be used to support students with a social difference in terms of gaining knowledge and a better understanding of themselves in the world. I have argued that focusing on the PDK of geography through the GeoCapabilities approach creates possibilities for human empowerment, something which many students with AS appeared to appreciate.

The students related through their experiences, a developing grasp of geographical thinking and were able to use this growing knowledge to analyse the world and make (often inventive) judgements and pose intriguing questions. They recognised their social difference as a positive and unique way of thinking and being and were able to make connections between themselves and the wider world.

If teachers use their agency, as the GeoCapabilities approach encourages, they have in my judgement the opportunity to move beyond the standard picture of disability and recognise that the unique talents and perceptions of students with social differences can become resources for the classroom, helping their peers to see the world in a different way. The value of geography as a subject can then become clear, as a means to achieve Kropotkin's vision of a more human and just society by, as Riley puts it, "broadening horizons".

### **Acknowledgement**

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### **NOTES**

1. The term Asperger syndrome has become contentious, owing to its removal from the Diagnostic & Statistical Manual, Fifth Edition in 2013 and its replacement with the term "Autistic Spectrum Disorder". Furthermore, research by Herwig Czech (2018) argued that Hans Asperger was complicit in Nazi atrocities. This has been challenged by Dean Falk (2019) who states that "aspersions that have been cast on Hans Asperger's reputation are selective, biased, and often inaccurate". The term remains in use in Scotland at present.

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