

THE TEACHING OF GEOGRAPHY IN THE HIGH SCHOOL

V. I. BROWN, PRINCIPAL, WATSEKA COMMUNITY HIGH SCHOOL

When I first received from your chairman an invitation to present before this meeting a ten-minute paper, I felt that there had been some mistake. I have had that feeling several times since and find no small amount of the same existing at this moment. Perhaps when I shall have finished you will have a similar feeling. If you do I shall not question your judgment. With this attitude of mind I wrote to a friend who is interested in the teaching of Geography and received the following suggestion. "You may know the character of the meetings to have changed, but at the meetings of the Academy of Science which I have attended all the papers have been on original investigations along scientific lines." I then wrote your chairman and suggested that there might have been an error and that any paper which I might present would, of necessity, be pedagogical rather than scientific. Having his assurance that such a paper would be acceptable and in place, I have made bold to discuss before this meeting "The Teaching of Geography in the High School." I am not a scientist. I have made no original investigation along scientific lines. However, if this Academy is interested in the decline of a subject which should retain a place in our high school Course of Study, a subject which should be a science, but is not as now taught, then this paper may have some slight claim to a place on your program.

An examination of the "Report of the High School Visitor of the University of Illinois for the year 1920-21" shows that of the 530 accredited high schools in the state of Illinois, 413 offer courses in Physiography, and 367 offer courses in Commercial Geography. This means that approximately 70-80% of our accredited high schools offer courses in geography. At the first glance this seems not such a bad showing for the subject; but when we consider that the courses are almost entirely

elective, that 334 of the schools offering Commercial Geography and 381 of the schools offering Physiography offer but $\frac{1}{2}$ unit, that of the 31 schools offering 1 unit almost 50% are in the city of Chicago, and that the courses are found every where from the freshman to the senior year inclusive, the showing is much less favorable.

To determine the qualifications of the teachers handling the subject and the methods used in teaching would be an interesting investigation. The reports of the attendance of teachers in the Geography Section of the High School Conference for the year 1916-21 inclusive and the report of the Secretary of the Committee on the Appointment of Teachers of the University of Illinois, 1920-21, may serve to indicate something of the conditions. The number of teachers registered in the Geography section of the High School Conference for the various years was as follows:

1916	1917	1918	1919	1920	1921
16	19	8	13	26	25

In every case this is the lowest registration in any section of the Conference and is less than the number of schools offering unit courses.

From September 1st, 1920, to September 1st, 1921, the Committee on the Appointment of Teachers at the University of Illinois received 2079 requests for teachers, of which 1328 were from Illinois. Of these requests only twenty-one included Geography. One was for Geography alone, four for Geography as a major subject, and sixteen for Geography as a minor subject. Of the 220 candidates enrolled with this committee and graduating in 1921, one woman was registered in the Department of Geography and she was placed in either a college or Normal School. The Secretary of this committee reports a total of only two Geography positions filled last year. While this data is not conclusive, it certainly indicates that Geography in the high schools of Illinois is being taught by a group of teachers who are ignorant of both subject matter and method, and who have little or no interest in the subject. Geography in our accredited high schools is a "fill in" subject wished upon

the unfortunate teacher who happens to be available at the time and place best suited to the daily program. Under such conditions "The Sick Man of the Curriculum" shows no improvement, and we may as well prepare ourselves for the worst.

It is not the purpose in this discussion to defend either the right of Geography to a place in our high schools or the proposition that it should be taught as a science. Both of these things have been assumed. Neither has it been thought necessary to distinguish between Physiography and Commercial Geography. It is believed that the suggestions submitted may be applied equally well in either subject. If, then, Geography is to be taught as a Science, what shall be the method of attack? Psychologically as well as scientifically the pupil should be introduced to the subject matter of Geography through the study of pertinent problems.

These problems may be simple and limited in their scope or they may be as broad as the ability of the class and the nature of the subject matter will permit. Their solutions may come through the examination of subject matter, through laboratory work, or through field trips. The essential thing is that the pupil solve the problem for himself under the guidance of the teacher. Facts, details, definitions, and principles are subordinate to the solution of the problem.

But the lessons will develop certain facts, definitions, and geographical principles which need to become the permanent possession of the pupil in order that they may serve as a part of his working equipment in the solution of further problems. These definitions and principles are a minimum requirement which each pupil should master.

The more enthusiastic advocates of the problem method would have us believe, that the necessity of memorizing and drill cease with the introduction of this method of teaching. But until the Law of Recall shall change, the necessity of drill, like the poor, "ye have always with you." Since these facts, definitions, and principles are to be a part of the child's working equipment they should be, first, scientifically accurate; and second, within the

realm of the child's experience and vocabulary. Half truths are always dangerous. It is not true that temperature decreases as latitude increases. It is true the temperature tends to decrease as latitude increases. It is a good science to leave a principle in such form that it is subject to enlargement. It should not be left in such form that it becomes subject to correction.

One of the worst faults of our science teaching has been the assumption that Science, to be science, must be abstract and expressed in abstract terms. The following definition occurs in Mill's *International Geography*, "Geography is the exact and organized knowledge of the distribution of the phenomena on the surface of the earth, culminating in the explanation of the interaction between man and his terrestrial environment." Such a definition may be in place in such a book, but we have carried too much of such so called "scientific language" over from our colleges and universities into our high schools. Geography deals with common place things and phenomena. It should be expressed in common place language. If the solution of problems has developed the necessary facts, definitions, and principles and these have become a part of the pupil's possessions, he now has the tools for attacking larger and more complex problems, each of which may in turn develop new principles.

In order that Geography may be taught in this way, it would be necessary that we have, first of all, a group of trained teachers. This would mean teachers not only familiar with their subject matter but also trained in scientific methods of presentation. The possession of Geographical knowledge is no more assurance of the ability to teach than the mere possession of capital is assurance that the holder is a financier. Second, there needs to be within the State an organized body of teachers who will accept the responsibility of guiding and developing the teaching of Geography. Whether or not such a work is within the province of the Illinois Academy of Science, I am not prepared to say. But unless some organized group shall attempt this work, Geography will never play any vital part in the education of High School pupils.