

'Powerful Knowledge': an illustration

Are young people without knowledge and intellectual capacity deprived or diminished of their capability as global citizens?

Consider the case of Jeanne described touchingly in Sebastian Faulks' 2012 novel *A Possible Life*. Set in post revolutionary France, she is introduced to us as 'the most ignorant person in the Limousin village where she had lived most of her life' (Faulks, 2013: 170). She is honest, warm hearted and hard working, but nevertheless the butt of jokes and unkindnesses partly as a result of her lack of learning; born into poverty and an orphan she had never been to school. Faulks depicts the deficiencies by describing Jeanne's limited capacity to understand anything beyond her daily routine and encounters: 'She made no judgement on what she had seen in her life, but each experience affected her idea of what the world was' (ibid: 192). Jeanne could neither read nor write, but also we learn that she

'... lived her life from one minute to the next, with no plan for the future and no sense that she would one day grow old or weak ... Her time at the orphanage had given her a fierce sense of the supernatural ... She understood so little of the material world – how water boiled, why a walnut fell from a tree – that she had had to take almost everything on trust'. (ibid p175-6)

In 21st century economically prosperous and technologically advanced societies where education is virtually universal, and information about the how the material world works is freely available to anyone with electricity and access to a computer, we might argue that the conditions of ignorance that condemned Jeanne to such a closed existence – and to prey to those who would exploit her over-dependence on the supernatural to explain her world - no longer exist.

However, the capable citizen is not simply a person armed with information and a marketable skill-set. After all, we could argue that even Jeanne possessed such basic attributes as these. What Faulks pointed to was Jeanne's lack of knowledge beyond her everyday life – what the British sociologist Michael Young calls 'powerful knowledge' (Young 2008¹). This is knowledge that is derived in the disciplines. It is specialized knowledge and exists beyond the everyday experience of people: it is often abstract, being theoretical or conceptual, and it is enabling.

GeoCapabilities argues that a sacred purpose of schooling is to provide access to powerful knowledge for all young people – precisely because like Jeanne, without it we are condemned to ignorance. In the 21st century, we argue that a crucial aspect of powerful knowledge is to enable young people to think geographically. This includes acquiring 'a sense of the global'.

A capabilities approach to education encourages us to understand and deliberate on the curriculum goals we have for our subject.

¹ The term is coined by Michael Young (2008) *Bringing Knowledge Back In*.