



Geographic gaffes of a lost generation

British schoolchildren are totally lost when it comes to geography, a Sunday Times investigation has revealed.

More than a quarter of 11 year-olds cannot find America or Russia on the globe; the same proportion make a faux pas over France. One in six have lost their bearings so madly that they cannot even identify the United Kingdom.

Almost half are unable to pinpoint the Pacific Ocean, the world's largest expanse of water which occupies a third of the planet's surface.

Fewer know where on earth South Africa or Italy are, while only one in three can locate West Germany or Sweden. Just one in five recognises Central America, and the same applies to Mexico and the same applies to Mexico and the Gulf.

By the time pupils reach 16, when more than half drop the subject, one in four have still not found Japan and South Africa; three in 10 remain adrift in their search for the Pacific.

While all but 2 per cent of fourthformers have discovered the whereabouts of the UK, the native countries of Mikhail Gorbachev and George Bush, with a combined population of more than 500m, remain a mystery for up to one in 12 of their classmates.

The same proportion would still fail to point you in the right direction for France and half are ignorant about the location of the Gulf.

The results are particularly disappointing because the survey was conducted last term when blasnost, the Channel tunnel and the aftermath of the Gulf War were regularly in the headlines.

The findings horrified Sheila Lawlor, deputy director of the Centre for Policy Studies, the

secretary under the new national curriculum in 1991.

Angela Rumbold, the education Minister, said: "This will not be a committee made up just of academics. It will have people who will bring practical applications to bear."

Experts were told to stress knowledge about the environment and the economic importance of geography. Pupils will also be required to learn how to use maps, statistics, satellite photographs and computer technology.

Rumbold wants to restore geography as a subject in its own right: "It has just lost under the general label of humanities in recent years," she said.

The survey was conducted for The Sunday Times by Rex Walford, a leading member of the new government committee and a lecturer in geography and education at Cambridge University. It covered a representative sample of 400 pupils in 10 schools.

Walford, chairman of the Council of British Geography, expressed concern about gaps in basic knowledge exposed by the survey, and called for a "national audit" of classroom standards. "If you don't deliver the fundamentals, you lose some of the basic building bricks. You can't make sense of the rest if you don't have these, whatever other ambitious goals schools may have," he said.

The standards to be set by the committee on the national curriculum can be gauged by the questions used in the Geographical Association's annual quiz competition for schools. Top performers over the years have been boys from Colchester Royal Grammar, a state school renowned for its cultivation of geography.

The school's head of geography, Graham Maslen, said it was possible to communicate basic facts as well as cultivating abstract skills: "We try to mix the two."

by Greg Hadfield

Conservative thinktank, who criticised progressive teachers for concentrating on sociological theories, at the expense of hard facts. "You would expect all children by the age of 15 to have a basic knowledge of major cities, towns and geographical features. They should know the countries of the EEC, their populations and characteristics, the sort of things that were taken for granted 20 years ago."

Many employers have given up expecting school-leavers to have even an elementary grasp of geography. "Their ignorance is appalling," said Keith Molineux, of the Association of British Travel Agents, 2,000 teenagers on YTS schemes.

He said: "Lake Windermere is often put in Northern Ireland, Sweden or Switzerland. They are quite knowledgeable about the crops of Fiji and the location of coalfields in North America, but when it comes to being able to put Rome on a map of Europe, forget it."

The findings reinforce government fears that children are missing out on vital knowledge. On Tuesday, by Kenneth Baker, the education secretary, will appoint an eight-member committee to help put geography back on the map in schools.

It was ordered to specify what all pupils should know at seven, 11, 14 and 16 when the subject becomes compulsory