

RIGEO
REVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL GEOGRAPHICAL
EDUCATION ONLINE

Review of International Geographical Education Online | RIGEO - 2015

RIGEO 

ISSN: 2146 - 0353

Review of International
GEOGRAPHICAL EDUCATION ONLINE
Volume 5, Number 2, Summer 2015

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*** All responsibility of statements and opinions expressed in the articles is upon their authors.

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Guest Editorial: A Focus on Geography in Primary Schooling

Simon Catling /School of Education, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford, UK

Introduction

Dear readers of RIGEO,

Welcome to the thirteenth issue (Volume 5, Number 2) of the Review of International Geographical Education Online-RIGEO. This issue of RIGEO focuses on geography in primary schooling, that is, in the education of children from 5 and 6 years old to 11 and 12 years of age. While geography appears as a separately named subject in primary school curricula in a number of nations, such in England and Australia, it more often appears as an element in social studies curricula, for instance in the USA. This is not a new feature (Meyer, Kamens & Benavot, 1992). There are indications of some positive changes occurring in primary geography, in both the single subject and the social studies contexts. For example, the production of content requirements and standards for geography since the early 1990s in the UK (DES, 1991; DfE, 2013) and the USA (Geography Education Standards Project, 1994; Heffron & Downs, 2012), to name but two, has led to developments in curriculum thinking and in classroom practices.

Knowledge of geography's situation in primary education in nations and schools around the world is limited, as is the understanding of its teaching and learning (Bednarz, Heffron & Tu Huynh, 2013). It remains rare to find descriptive and analytic research about primary geography curricula and teaching which is readily and widely accessible. A recent editorial called for increased research into the nature of and what happens in primary geography (Catling, 2013), taking forward an earlier call for a greater focus on research in the UK (Catling, 1999).

This issue of RIGEO provides an initial contribution to address the lack of knowledge and understanding in the global geography education research literature about the subject's curricula, teaching, learning and resources. It contains research reports on the situation for geography in primary schooling in six nations across five continents. To wet interest, a number of informative matters and themes are drawn below from each of this issue's articles – but there is more to consider in each article.

The articles

Xiaowei Xuan, Yushan Duan and Yue Sun provide an account of the state of geography in primary schooling in China. They note that geography is important for younger children, but that it is a weakly researched aspect of China's primary education. Having outlined the national context for primary geography, they report on a research project with primary teachers which identifies a number of material findings. Among these, they raise questions about the geographical background and understanding of primary teachers, variability in primary schools' provision of an effective geography curriculum, the consistency with which geography is taught, teachers' accessibility to subject continuing professional development and resource availability. They note that there are aspects of good geography teaching, but argue that in education for the world today there needs to be an increased emphasis on global learning, the use of information and

communication technologies and closer connections made with younger children's development.

Di Wilmot and Pat Irwin outline the context of geography in primary schooling in South Africa through an exploratory investigation in schools in the Grahamstown area of the province of Eastern Cape. Highlighting the changes in South Africa's curriculum development and schooling, they identify the national content and skills of geography education, noting that it sits within the social sciences curriculum where it is not identified as a discrete subject until grade 4. Their research illustrates the circumstances and issues in primary schools which affect the nature and quality of geography curricula and teaching. Recognizing that very effective teaching occurs in some schools, they note for many primary schools concerns about teachers' geographical knowledge, their familiarity with the geography curriculum requirements, problems with teaching time, a reliance on textbooks and constraints in teaching approaches, as well as limited opportunities for professional development in geography following limited course inputs during pre-service teacher preparation.

Takashi Shimura sets out the situation of geography in Japan's primary school system and its social studies subject area. He outlines the geography curriculum, which has a concentric regional focus, building from the immediate environment outwards. Noting the limited previous research, he reports a study of social science teaching practices which indicates that while there are some concerns about the geographical understanding of primary teachers, many teachers seem confident teaching social studies, which may not always be the same as being knowledgeable. Teachers support fieldwork and enquiry-based teaching approaches, though in reality much teaching appears dependent on commercially provided textbooks and workbooks and there are issues with the time available to undertake fieldwork. A pertinent finding is that teachers whose pre-service specialism was in social studies appear more likely to develop their own teaching resources and approaches and be more effective in teaching geography; but these primary teachers form only about a quarter of class teachers. He notes, as others do, that there are concerns about limited social studies provision in pre-service teacher education for non-specialists and during career professional development.

Victor Salinas-Silva, Patricio Perez-Gallardo and Andoni Arenas-Martija report a study of geography teaching by rural primary educators in Chile. Following a summary of the national primary geography curriculum requirements, and noting the subject's close relationship with history, they consider primary teachers perspectives on geography. Particularly, they focus on primary teachers' geographical knowledge and understanding. From their research they note that primary teachers distinguish the terms 'geography' and 'environment', seeing the latter as emphasizing environmental concern, care and action. They found that their sample constructs a sense of geography as physical geography, landscape or human geography. Some teachers associate their professional identity with a science focused sense of physical geography or to a more history oriented and humanisticly focused human geography. They emphasize that

primary teachers' conceptions of geographical knowledge affect the focus and quality of their teaching. Teachers' geographical understanding may well be constrained by the limited geography in their science or social science pre-service teacher education course specialism, though there may be some support through in-service subject courses.

Susan Pike describes the situation in the Republic of Ireland, providing an historical outline of primary geography's curriculum evolution, which has been mixed. Noting the constrained level of research into primary geography, and the limited geography expertise available in pre-service primary teacher education for generalist class teachers, she summarizes the current requirements and explores several issues affecting primary geography. Some research indicates that geography has very positive impacts for children where it is taught well, but that funding constraints inhibit primary teachers' access to good quality resources and to in-service development. However, classroom practices appear generally to be improving as teachers recognize and acquire the resources to move beyond their uses of textbooks. Further curriculum change for geography is anticipated in Ireland, though it is not known which direction this will take, whether there will be continuity or not.

Rod Lane sets out the emergent situation in Australia, given the recent introduction of a national geography curriculum for adoption or adaption by its States and Territories. Aware that there are issues about primary class teachers' and pre-service teachers' geographical knowledge, he reports on a large-scale study of prospective primary teachers' understanding of weather and climate. He found that there exists an evident basis for concerns about future primary teachers' geographical knowledge which, given the need to teach weather and climate in the Australian primary curriculum through science and geography, seems likely to mean that younger children may be inaccurately or poorly informed about these key aspects of physical geographical. These findings reinforce concerns from around the world about the geographical understanding which prospective primary teachers bring into their classrooms.

Some Emergent Themes

A number of themes emerge from these articles. They recur in different contexts, though they have in common that primary children are taught all, or almost all, subjects by generalist class teachers.

One theme is the challenge which primary teachers face in becoming knowledgeable enough about geography to be able to teach it well. While there is evidence of some good practices in geography teaching across these nations, good quality geography appears to be in the minority in primary classrooms. It seems evident that this situation exists, alongside other reasons, because of constraints in pre-service primary teacher education, in which geography is rarely well represented except perhaps in a specialist subject context. It appears also to be exacerbated by the limited and inconsistent access to geography in-service courses. Additionally, it seems that teachers' geographical knowledge and understanding may be inhibited in several countries where the curriculum context for geography lies a social studies 'subject' area in which geography seems usually to play a minor rather than core role. Indeed, many future primary

teachers may have a limited secondary school education in geography. This indicates that there are multiple causes that constrain and inhibit generalist primary teachers' development of effective geographical knowledge to inform and enable high quality geography teaching.

This situation is not helped by limitations in access to good geography resources in schools. This arises because of funding limitations, but it can be the result of national approaches to resource provision, such as the use of a prescribed or a limited choice of variable quality social studies or geography textbooks. Given that many primary teachers lack confidence in their geographical understanding and teaching, it appears hardly surprising that there is an over-reliance on textbooks, in which the geography content may or may not be well articulated. Where primary teachers feel confident and it is possible for them to use their initiative, there is evidence of good classroom and outdoor geography teaching, with positive benefits for primary-age children. This provides encouragement for the future if it can become widely shared.

It is heartening that geography remains in the curriculum of these six countries, even if the subject is constrained in various ways. Geography education for primary children continues. It may usually be taught and learned within a social studies curriculum, and it seems that it may be influenced by teachers' particular notions of geography and their interest in or the limitations in their knowledge of the subject. However, it is important to recognize that there seems to be a view, including among policy makers at government and regional levels, that geography has an important role in education and that it is vital for younger children to be introduced to geography. This is a positive position on which to build.

Conclusion

A real benefit for the global community is that the situation of geography in primary education should be investigated in many more nations and reported widely. These six studies and a very few other accounts of the state of primary geography alone or within social studies elsewhere (eg Catling et al., 2007; Segall & Helfenbein, 2008; Brophy, Alleman & Knighton, 2009) provide a starting point. They reflect an interest by their researchers, but, as several of them state, they are constrained through the lack of research into primary geography in their own countries. It will be of great value if these articles help to generate further research which provides fuller information about and greater insight into geography in primary schooling around the world.

This issue of *RIGEO* concludes with a Book Review of Alaric Maude's (2014) recent publication *Understanding and Teaching the Australian Curriculum: Geography for Primary Schools*. This publication appeared as the new geography curriculum came into effect in Australia. Rod Lane provides an Australian perspective on this important text for Australian pre-service and serving primary teachers. Both the Australian primary geography curriculum and Maude's perspective should be of interest beyond Australia.

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