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## Geography matters: Teacher beliefs about geography in today's schools



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### ABSTRACT

This article describes findings from a survey of 173 preschool through 12th grade teachers in which they express their thoughts about what children should learn about geography. Results indicate that despite geography's lack of attention in the curriculum, teachers are unhappy with the state of geography in schools. Their reflections reveal a strong sense of need, even urgency, for students to learn geography. Four trends were identified in their thoughts about geography education: expanding horizons paradigm of curriculum; connections that geography allows for in the curriculum; maps, continents, countries, and states; and Americans' appalling lack of geographic knowledge. Framing their thoughts in the context of the current state of geography, the article also describes the importance of geography in creating effective citizens, the ambiguity of the discipline itself, its unique role in the curriculum, and insights about integrating geography across the curriculum. The article concludes with hope for reviving geography in schools.

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If you're a teacher who shows passion and makes learning fun, I believe children can really get into geography.  
*Preschool Teacher with five years of experience*

### Introduction

Americans are notorious for their lack of geographic knowledge (Kaplan, 2012), and for good reason. The 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicates that fewer than 30% of American students were proficient in geography, and that more than 70% of 4th, 8th, and 12th graders were unable to perform at grade level in geography (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). Furthermore, in the 20 years that the NAEP Geography has been administered, there has been very little improvement in students' geographical knowledge.

Although Americans' lack of knowledge has been a subject of many jokes and criticisms, the problems that arise from their geographic knowledge deficiencies are becoming matters of increasing importance. Geographic knowledge is essential for a range of decisions including personal decisions, such as where to live, to matters of global importance, like where and how to dispose of toxic waste, for instance. As noted in the *Roadmap for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Geography Education*, the dismal state of K-12 geography education in America is "a threat to our country's well-being, and by extension, the well-being of the global community" (Edelson, Shavelson, & Wertheim, 2013, p. 17). With the proliferation of information systems and growing

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global interdependence, the ability to think geographically and perform geographic skills are becoming an increasingly important aspect of effective citizenship in a democratic society and interdependent world.

There is hope for geography education, though. In a short questionnaire administered to over 170 Preschool-12th grade teachers (described later), respondents acknowledged Americans' lack of geographic knowledge, but they also expressed a strong sense of need, even urgency, for their students to learn geography. Many of the teachers noted, sometimes fervently, that although they lack geographic knowledge themselves, geography is important. The overwhelming message from the teachers was their belief that geography matters – there is something about geography that citizens need, and we are missing it in schools.

This article discusses the state of geography in today's schools, and then describes beliefs of K-12 teachers about geography education as expressed in the questionnaire. The question that this study sought to answer is, what do teachers think children should know about geography? Their insights revealed their beliefs about geography, and offer a glimpse into the realities of teaching in PreKindergarten through 12th grade classrooms. Even though geography does not have the curricular status as subjects that are included in state mandated assessments (Heafner, Lipscomb, & Fitchett, 2014), the importance of geography was noted and expressed by teachers. Despite its importance, though, clearly defining geography for K-12 educators has proven to be a challenge, as described below.

### **Ambiguity and importance of geography**

One possible explanation for the lack of geography instruction in the schools is that there exists an ambiguous understanding of the subject itself. de Blij (2005) notes that there is no “single, snappy answer” (p. 5) to the question of what is geography. In a crowded curriculum where competing notions of curricular importance clamor for time, subjects and skills that are easily defined and have salient connections to the world of work outside of school dominate the curriculum. As a result, reading, mathematics, and writing occupy the most time in a typical American elementary school day. The rest of the subjects, including geography, must justify their places in the curriculum – or be neglected.

Although, as de Blij states, there is no simple answer to the question of what is geography, the Royal Geographic Society sums up the varying descriptions by succinctly stating, “Geography is the study of Earth's landscapes, peoples, places and environments. It is, quite simply, about the world in which we live” (Royal Geographic Society, 2014). Geography is about the whole world, which makes for a very broad subject.

K-12 geography education involves coming to understand the world from a spatial perspective. A spatial perspective provides learners with a distinct advantage that is found in no other curricular source and is vital to the development of effective citizens (Heffron & Downs, 2012). As Hanson (2004) describes, this “geographic advantage” (p. 720) provides an understanding of

- the relationships between people and the environment. Geography is the only field that focuses on the interactions between the social and physical sciences;
- the importance of spatial variability. That is, only in geography can one learn the unique methodologies and practices for gaining an understanding of the ways phenomena vary according to place;
- processes operating at multiple and interlocking geographic scales. Geography is the only mechanism by which one learns techniques that help gain an understanding of phenomena at multiple scales and
- the integration of spatial and temporal analysis. Geography's spatial perspective adds another vital dimension to temporal variability (how things change over time). Geography offers techniques for analyzing variations over time and space. How places change over time is a significant aspect of understanding the world, and falls squarely in the domain of geography.

The unique advantages that geography offers allow people to intelligently address issues that range from such far-reaching matters as the global effects of immigration policies, to local decisions about where to build a fertilizer factory, and even personal decisions about how to dispose of old computers. These examples are issues of current life, although they have implications for the future and involve place as well. As Kaplan (2012) points out, “[t]he more we remain preoccupied with current events, the more that individuals and their choices matter: but the more we look out over the span of the centuries, the more that geography plays a role” (p. xx).

The importance of geography in helping prepare citizens for life in a global society is clear. Where it fits in an overcrowded curriculum by teachers who are overburdened is a different problem, though. Integrating geographic knowledge and skills throughout the curriculum is a sound method for teaching geography that is often proposed. Although, as the next section describes, integrating the curriculum is as difficult as it is effective.

### **Integrating geography**

Although geography encompasses considerable information and skills, it is most effectively learned when students understand the clear connection between geography and the rest of the curriculum, as well as its application to their own lives outside of school. That is, although teaching geography as a separate subject is necessary, integrating geographic skills

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