
EDITORIAL

Focus on Primary Geography

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Primary Geography is crucial for our subject in so many ways. Material and imagined spaces and places shape young children's realities from an early age onwards and engage them with structures and processes in and of their natural, built, and human environment. It is these early years that can spark curiosity and motivation to understand how our world works in spatial and environmental terms and, most importantly, how each human being both individually and as a member of a community, can engage with it.

Within the community of Geography educators, only a handful of scholars have dedicated their careers to engage with how the young ones learn Geography. Consequently, several facets of Primary Geography remain unexplored to date. The aim of this special issue is to place Primary Geography and young learners into the spotlight with the intention of intensifying research in the field.

Geography education for young children varies around the world. In some nations Geography is a required curriculum subject, even in pre-school where it may not be termed Geography. In the large majority, in many nations, Geography is identified as one of the Social Studies or Sciences subjects; it may be one of several connected subjects with History, Economics, Citizenship and others, and its position among these may be weak. In a few countries Geography is pretty much non-existent. Time for teaching Geography with young children, in primary and elementary schools, is limited cross-nationally, hardly surprising given the breadth of the primary curriculum and nations' emphasis on learning one or more national languages and Mathematics. Geography's curriculum content varies from balanced senses of Geography about places, Human and Physical Geography, environmental concerns, and skills including mapwork, fieldwork and investigative enquiries and debates. While there has been very limited research into what is taught, there has been less into how Geography is taught with young children (CATLING & WILLY 2018). Yet there is evidence that primary school age children informally and formally build up their knowledge about their local and other places, the wider world and its peoples, aspects of the natural world, landscapes and settlements, as well about the diversity of places and environmental issues. They make use of geographical concepts, such as place, scale, uses of space and interconnections frequently in their daily lives, perhaps in school. They are influenced by the perspectives and attitudes of those around them. This is not to say they develop detailed or deep geographical knowledge, nor that they may not hold uninformed, biased and stereotyped views. Yet, young children often express views and belongings which value their places and the environment broadly and wish to see it cared for, as well as that concerns, such as about litter and the climate crisis, are tackled to improve the world for them and future generations.

Within the German context, Primary Geography has lost its status of an independent school subject quite some time ago. However, the geographical perspective remained one of the key components of integrative subjects, such as *Sachunterricht* or *Heimat- und Sachkunde*. Both subjects aim at introducing young learners to the natural and

social world (SCHMEINCK 2017), and, in doing so, they lay the foundation for a range of Science (Biology, Chemistry, Physics) and Social Science (Geography, History, Civics) subjects. Yet, despite their tremendous importance, Geography educators have dedicated little attention to the early years and young learners.

Concerning Primary Geography, the results of a meta-study (BAGOLY-SIMÓ & HEMMER 2017, 2018) of work published in *Zeitschrift für Geographiedidaktik | Journal of Geography Education (ZGD)* between 1973-2016 uncovered some trends worthy of further consideration. This reflects publications in similar Geography education journals.

In this timeframe, interest in Primary Geography seems to have declined with the turn of the millennium and, concurrently, the shift has been towards a more empirical approach in Educational Science, in general, and Subject Education, in particular. During the 1990s, several Geography educators explored, among others, challenges young learners faced when learning Geography, habitual teaching methods used in the Geography classroom, and educational media used during teaching and learning. A lively debate has focused on the nature of geographical knowledge required in these early years and how such knowledge related to academic Geography and normative frameworks, such as educational policies and curricula. Overall, these studies preferred a conceptual and, in few cases, theoretical approach. With the empirical turn in (German) Geography education, most of the authors traditionally focusing on Geography in the early and primary years reoriented themselves. Primary Geography grew quiet, though in the UK one voice worked hard at promoting primary Geography: the journal *Primary Geographer*, published by the Geographical Association.

Unlike studies on secondary Geography, the few empirical results published in the new millennium, such as also in *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education*, opted for other operationalizations based in qualitative studies rather than the restrictive and highly standardized tests prescribed by Educational Psychology. Overall, methodological and theoretical progress remained modest.

Lastly, only a few scholars interested in Primary Geography and the early years have a background in primary education. Scholars engaging with Primary Geography who have a secondary education or other background often prefer to focus on such aspects of learning Geography in the earlier years that are closer to their training and, to an extent, remain detached from the reality of primary education. Nonetheless, a few primary background

Geography specialists argue strongly for the subject (such as PIKE 2016; SCOFFHAM 2017; BARLOW & WHITEHEAD 2019). The lack of primary-background Geography scholars and researchers has repercussions on scholarship in Primary Geography (KIDMAN & SCHMEINCK 2022), which remains limited and undeveloped in areas, such as teachers' subject understanding, curriculum organization, progression in learning, teaching impact, assessment, resource use and effect, and subject leadership in schools.

In light of these developments, ZGD's editors decided to call for a special issue on Primary Geography under the guest editorship of Professor Simon Catling. The present issue constitutes the first part of a total of two issues exploring various aspects of teaching and learning Geography in the early and primary years.

In his introductory paper, Simon Catling addresses the numerous challenges Geography posits to young learners and their teachers. He derives a list of urgent and relevant research fields in need of further consideration to strengthen Primary Geography.

Marian Blankman's contribution showcases why the dialogue between Primary Geography and Children's Geographies is a fruitful and necessary endeavor. Looking at children's voices from two Dutch schools from quite heterogeneous urban areas, Blankman reflects on the meaning of the everyday environment for the children. In doing so, the paper leaves the realm of cognition and delves into emotion, place attachment, and *insideness*.

Paula Juliasz reflects, in a more conceptual manner, on the role of drawing for spatial thinking. Including the Brazilian perspective, the author offers alternatives to how map-based approaches across the world shape Primary Geography.

Finally, Bagoly-Simó and Binimelis analyze Catalan and German primary textbooks to explore cartographic content and map-skill progression in the early years. In doing so, they focus on the interconnectedness between content, subject-specific knowledge, and map skill acquisition. The results illustrate alternative ways of introducing maps and map skills in Primary Geography.

The second part of ZGD's thematic focus on Primary Geography will be published in late 2022.

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