

The Excitement of Geography

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I am honored to write a foreword to this geography themed edition of *SOCIAL STUDIES AND THE YOUNG LEARNER*. Indeed, there is no subject dearer to my heart than geography, and I have long made promoting increased and improved geographic teaching the hallmark of the National Geographic Society. I am excited to tell you about five simple principles that guide our approach to geography education that may be helpful to you as you prepare to read and make use of the excellent materials in this issue.

It is true that our young learners are innate geographers. They ask about the connections between things and places and revel in exploring the natural environment. Kids begin their own personal education enthralled by the world around them. Sadly, students too often spend the time we call formal education cut off from their natural interests in places, cultures, and the environment. We must build on the excitement of our world to engage kids in learning. Geography asks essential and fascinating questions about the world around us.

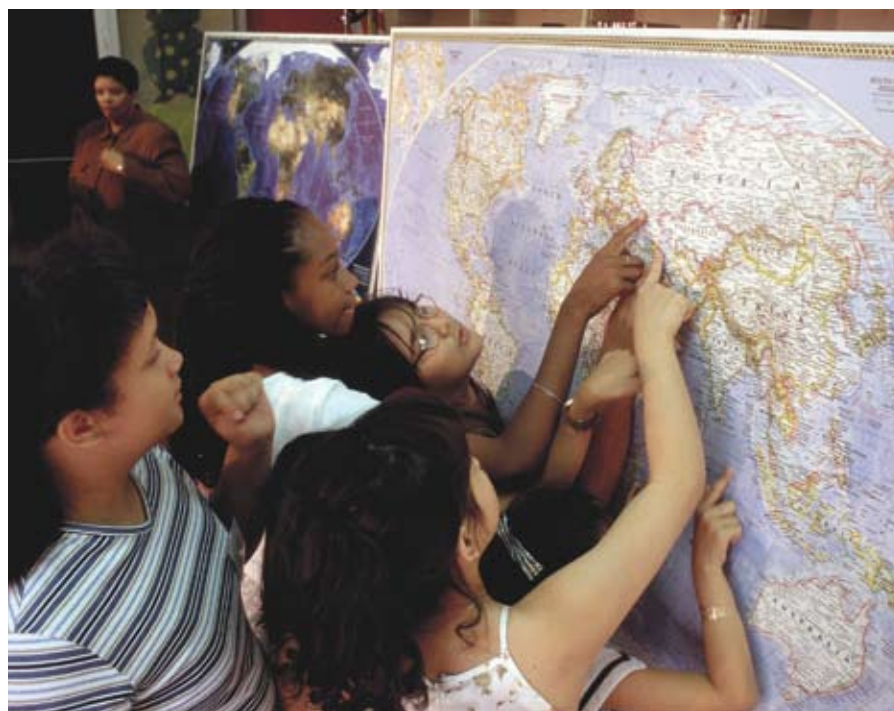
Geography is Necessary

Today's young learners will absolutely need geographic knowledge and skills to succeed in the future. It was Alexander Graham Bell who first defined geography as "the world and all that's in it." Academics define modern geography education as having six essential elements, addressing topics from adopting a "spatial perspective" to using maps and other geographic tools; from the study of peoples and cultures and Earth's physical systems to analyzing human/environmental interactions—the interrelationship between humans and the flora and fauna of Planet Earth (see the sidebar).

In a world increasingly defined by a global economy, cultural migration, and mounting environmental challenges, geography is an ever more important prerequisite to citizenship and success in the future.

Geography is Being Left Behind

Sadly, many of our young learners are not getting started on the pathway to the



O. Louis Mazzatenta, National Geographic Society

Geography is Engaging, Exciting and Fun

Young learners will find geography engaging. I have seen it with my own children. I have seen it with thousands of schoolchildren in the classrooms I have visited for more than 20 years promoting the discipline across the country. You will see it with your own students. Taught well,

geography... "the world and all that's in it" ... should be the most popular subject in school.

A young woman who used to work with me in National Geographic's Education Foundation began her speeches at educational events by saying, "We are all born geographers. Think about it: every child fights for the window seat."

GEOGRAPHY EDUCATION STANDARDS:

An Overview for Teachers

Christopher Shearer

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Today, Geography education is defined by 18 standards that have been grouped handily into 6 “essential elements,” each addressing a core set of geographic perspectives, skills, and experiences. Below is an informal executive summary of the standards for social studies teachers of young learners. For the full text of the 18 national, voluntary standards please visit: www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/standards. For a brief instructional scope and sequence, please visit: www.geo.txstate.edu/grosvenor/scope_sequence/brochurepage.html.

Understanding the World in Spatial Terms

Geography’s most defining characteristic is its use of the spatial perspective. Much as historians look at events chronologically, geographers use maps and other tools to ask questions, acquire and organize information, and find answers by looking at how things are organized spatially on Earth’s surface.

Studying Places and Regions

Hard on the heels of geography’s spatial perspective is the powerful concept of place and regions. Geographers look at the physical and human characteristics that make up a defined place and study how people create regions to interpret the planet’s complexity. Imagine a world without the useful notions of neighborhoods, states, nations, or regions—say, the Middle East—and you are imagining a world without geography.

Understanding Physical Systems

Ours is a physical planet, shaped and patterned by powerful physical processes and made beautiful and bountiful by a range of ecosystems that have varied characteristics and locations. From rainfall to earthquakes, from rainforests to deserts, geography sheds light on the natural systems that affect and sustain Earth.


Human Systems

But the planet is a human one, too. Geographers pay close attention to the location and movement of human populations. The amazing cultural mosaics of our species are endlessly fascinating, and people are connected by economic interdependence. The forces of cooperation and, sadly, conflict shape our settlement patterns and human control of the planet.

Environment and Society

Before former Vice President Al Gore won an Oscar for the film *An Inconvenient Truth* and made global warming a household name, geography was concerned with the study of how human actions affect the physical environment and vice versa. Moreover, geographers are concerned with the changes that constantly occur in the use, distribution, and importance of natural resources.

The Uses of Geography

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, geography is a living discipline. It is used to interpret the past, to understand the present, and to plan for the future. This commitment to usefulness has led in the past to ubiquitous inventions, such as the map and the globe, and more recently to new and growing tools, such as Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and Global Positioning Systems (GPS), which are rapidly becoming a part of everything from personal computers to your cell phone. (Many of these functionalities also travel under popular brand names like MapQuest and Google Earth.) 

geographic education they need. And, as a result, America is falling behind most other countries in global knowledge. In 2002, National Geographic hired the Roper polling agency to conduct a study of basic geographic literacy among 18- to 24-year olds internationally. U.S. students scored second to last on overall geographic knowledge (trailing Canada, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, and Sweden).¹

Last year, in a U.S.-only poll, six in 10 young Americans could not find Iraq on a map of the Middle East, despite the barrage of news coverage about the Iraq war, which began in 2003.² One-third could not find Louisiana on a U.S. map after hurricane Katrina and almost half could not even locate the state of Mississippi. Seventy-four percent believe English is the primary language spoken by the most people in the world; it is Mandarin Chinese by a landslide. And the list goes on and on. To compete globally, we must think and act globally.

Geography, one of the “core academic disciplines” required by the No Child Left Behind Act, is the only subject that receives no specific federal funding under that law.³ Our nation is raising a generation without the skills they need to survive and thrive. We must restore world geography to achieve a world-class education.⁴ Learning geography starts in *your* classrooms.

Geography Works

Geography education for young learners and their teachers has been shown to improve overall achievement, even in interdisciplinary instruction. Let me share three examples:

A new program called GeoLiteracy offers curriculum resources to integrate teaching and learning of standards-based reading, writing and geography. Randomized, controlled testing that follows U.S. Department of Education guidelines has shown that students in grades 3-7 who were instructed using GeoLiteracy lessons had significant gains in reading comprehension. Moreover, teachers responded that the interdisciplinary lessons helped them teach both subjects and

that their students enjoyed the integration of relevant subject matter.⁵


An innovative project entitled GeoMath has generated lesson materials for grades K-8 that integrate geography and mathematics by simultaneously incorporating both subjects into applied instructional tasks. Student tests administered one month after instruction showed that students demonstrated strong geographic achievement and that they had statistically significant improvement in retention of math learning.⁶

A nationwide study conducted by an independent research center recently compared the scores of two groups of students on test items taken from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the “Nation’s Report Card.” The first group represented kids whose teachers were teaching geography with normal teacher preparation; the second group of students had teachers who participated in focused professional development in geography education. Not surprisingly, the second group of students posted significantly higher mean scores.⁷ We can make a difference by supporting teachers as the professionals they are by offering both content and pedagogical training.

You Can’t Teach What You Don’t Know

As a teacher of young learners you know that the old saw is true: you can’t teach what you don’t know. That is why it is so vitally important that teachers receive the professional development they need for content knowledge and for new strategies to make subject matter come alive. At National Geographic, we have invested in teachers like you in many ways, from producing classroom maps to publishing many series of leveled content area readers for young learners, and by funding a national network of “Geography Alliances” specifically for you. These Alliances (www.ngsednet.org/profdev.cfm) are statewide partnerships between academic professors and K-12 teachers to provide professional development, networking, and more. Please join your alliance, and tell them I sent you.

You are the kind of teacher America needs. By taking advantage of this issue of *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, you are already reaching out for new ideas and best practices to improve the classroom experience for your students. I urge you take the next step by joining your state’s Geographic Alliance and joining me in bringing kids the world and all that is in it through geography education.

Thank you for all you do as a teacher to set young learners off on a journey of lifelong learning and exploration. You are one of America’s greatest treasures. I hope that this issue will be a great resource to you and that you will find many opportunities to make geography education a part of your calling—and a part of your classroom. I will look forward to seeing the impact you have on the next generation of young learners. 

Notes

1. National Geographic-Roper 2002 Global Geographic Literacy Survey: 16. Full report available at www.nationalgeographic.com/geosurvey2002/; Tina L. Heafner, Katherine A. O’Connor, Eric C. Groce, Sandra Byrd, Amy J. Good, Sandra Oldendorf, Jeff Passe, and Tracy Rock, “Advocating for Social Studies: Becoming AGENTS for Change,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 20, no. 1 (September/October 2007): 26-29.
2. National Geographic-Roper Survey of Geographic Literacy (2006): 6, www.nationalgeographic.com/roper2006/.
3. Ryan Daley, “No Geographer Left Behind: A Policy Guide to Geography Education and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,” Geography Education National Implementation Project: 4. Full report available at www.nationalgeographic.com/foundation/news_resources.html#reports.
4. Tina L. Heafner, *et al.*
5. David Rutherford, “What Works in Geography Education: Evidence for Improving Geographic Literacy and Teacher Quality,” National Geographic Society: 16. www.nationalgeographic.com/foundation/news_resources.html#reports.
6. David Rutherford, “What Works in Geography Education: Evidence for Improving Geographic Literacy and Teacher Quality,” National Geographic Society: 9, www.nationalgeographic.com/foundation/news_resources.html#reports.
7. Kerry Englert, Zoe Barley, “National Geographic Society Alliance Study,” Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning: 1, www.nationalgeographic.com/foundation/news_resources.html#reports.

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