

Cultivating Global Scholars: The Case for Geography in California's Schools

by Kelly León



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For the past three years, I have made the short journey from the high school where I work south of San Diego to the feeder middle school with two of my colleagues. We spend our day attempting to convince eighth-graders to join the next cohort of Global Scholars as high school freshmen. Now in its third year, the program is an attempt to address the ongoing challenge and possibility of convincing diverse learners that school can be a worthwhile endeavor. It is also an attempt to push back on the notion that schools' main purpose is to make children into workers (Mitchell, 2018), increase the nation's economic advantage, or in the words of Mike Rose (2014) turn our students into "economic indicators" (p. x). Each year, a heterogeneous group of students from all academic pasts and diverse ethnic and socio-

economic backgrounds self-selects into the 130-student cohort. They proceed to take ninth-grade English, Environmental Biology, and Human Geography with the same three Global Scholars teachers who meet regularly to discuss curriculum, pedagogy, and perhaps most critically, ways in which we can support and enrich our students' education. An underlying assumption of Global Scholars is that learners should be provided the chance to interrogate the world in all its obstacles and opportunities. Global Scholar students seek to understand their own positionality (how they see the world and how the world sees them), their local community, and how their local reality connects to the global context. The global for Global Scholars is not just that which is over there, but something immediately significant to the students' lives

in southern California. Utilizing the California Global Education Project's Global Competence Framework (2020) and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (2015) as umbrella frameworks for all three courses, students capitalize on the disciplinary perspectives of each content area in service of these larger educational objectives.

Global Competence and a Global Mindset in California Schools

Like the Global Scholars program, this issue of the *Social Studies Review* is concerned with the idea that schools and specifically social studies can contribute to the formation of globally competent citizens. While there are some who advocate for global competence and a global mindset in schools based on economic imperatives or preparing learners for the knowledge-based economy (Tichnor-Wagner, Parkhouse, Glazier, & Cain, 2019; United States Department of Education, 2018), others argue that schools should teach global competence and citizenship in order for students to help solve the world's most pressing problems (Burbules & Torres, 2000; Harshaman, 2016). Most compelling to many educators is the call to think about school as a mechanism to prepare students to be thinking, engaged citizens (Westheimer, 2015), who ultimately act in ways that will yield a more just and sustainable planet. Schools can also be places of obstinacy (Biesta, 2019), resisting aspects of our globalized society that perhaps need to be re-imagined or even eradicated.

Certainly, part of being a global citizen means understanding the injustices of our

time. It seems the Black Lives Matter movement has successfully woken up some educators to the realities our Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities face. It is heartening to see colleagues seek out historical and anti-racist texts to make sense of what is occurring and for them to advocate for trauma-sensitive practices (Jennings, 2018), culturally relevant teaching (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2014). All to say that school systems should balance the cognitive needs of students with their personal and social development so that they may evolve into citizens that can face not only challenges in their own lives but broader societal ones as well.

If we are to prepare such citizens, Tichnor-Wagner, et al. (2019) make the case for globally competent teachers in all disciplines. They are clear to articulate that global competence is not a discipline itself, but a way of teaching subject knowledge in disciplinary and interdisciplinary ways so that students gain an "understanding of the cultures, systems, structures, and events around the world and how they are interconnected with one another and with our own lives" (Tichnor-Wagner, et al., 2019, p. 10). To support teachers in becoming globally competent, California is fortunate to have the California Global Education Project (CGEP), which provides professional development and support for K-12 educators "to develop the knowledge, skills, resources, and leadership needed to foster global competence in all students" (CGEP, 2020). In addition to calls by global education advocates and authors, the state of California has established their com-

mitment to educating for global competency via the publication of their findings and corresponding recommendations from the California Global Education Summit (California Department of Education, 2016) and via Chapter 10 of the California Department of Education English Language Arts (2015) framework. While few educators would argue the importance of students having a global mindset and the dispositions, skills, and knowledge needed for their futures, this does not take away from their long list of competing priorities. If the State of California is serious about a more globally informed populace, why is geography, perhaps the most perfectly positioned discipline for this aim, not a required course for all students?

The Rationale for Geography in California

History and social science (HISTORY-SOCIAL SCIENCE) represent a core discipline, yet it is consistently overlooked, especially when we consider the money that follows Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) subjects and the testing that drives English Language Arts and Mathematics (Fitchett, Heafner, & Lambert, 2014). Given the increasingly crowded curriculum space in schools, history-social science must constantly justify its relevance and this is particularly true for geography (Jones & Luna, 2019; Lambert & Solem, 2017). In California, geography's survival as a stand-alone discipline for all students seems grim. This, despite the fact that the number of students taking Advanced

Placement (AP) Human Geography has grown (Lanegran & Zeigler, 2016; Kaplan, 2019). This growth, while positive, also generates concerns about unequal access to a school discipline that arguably holds prime relevance for preparing students to understand the world and their place in it. It is precisely this unequal access that validates the need to better understand the rationales for a stand-alone geography course; a course for all students, regardless of their access to or preparedness for Advanced Placement. Furthermore, it is of interest to center California's diverse learners -- defined as a group consisting of individuals whose identities are complex and significantly varied in terms of ability, race, economics, language, and a host of other factors—as being well-positioned to interact with geography in ways that both recognize and reaffirm their unique and complex intersectional identities (Crenshaw, 1990; Gorski, 2016).

Early data analysis suggests that the percent of ninth-graders enrolled in a geography course varies greatly across counties and districts. While the ninth grade is the most common year to take a stand-alone geography course, statewide, less than 10% of students at this grade level are enrolled in geography (California Department of Education, 2019-a). AP Human Geography course participation is also quite varied with the greatest rates tending toward more metropolitan counties (California Department of Education, 2019-b). If geography can help students better understand our world, why is there such an inadequate provision of geography instruction? While geography standards are

in fact embedded in California's social science courses, the extent to which teachers have enough geographical understanding to embed geographic thinking into their courses is of concern. There is no doubt this relates to a lack of resources (in teacher education, professional development, etc.) and policy commitments, perhaps most clearly expressed by the fact that geography is not a required "A-G" course for University of California/California State University admissions. A decrease in geography course offerings is inevitable without a resurgence of systemic support and professional development resources. This challenge is noted in the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) (2015) report an insufficient capacity for teaching geographic knowledge to students. Despite the fact that geography has much to offer K-12 students, its potential value is unrealized. Perhaps the way geography has been traditionally conceptualized and taught is the problem. The GAO (2015) identified access to "high quality, engaging geography textbooks and lessons" as a reported challenge in providing K-12 geography instruction (p. 17).

Re-conceptualizing what a ninth-grade geography course could look like in California would benefit all learners, but social justice-minded educators might consider how expanding access to geography could positively contribute to affirming our most marginalized students' place in the world and helping them form their identity (Huckle, 2002). Taught well, geography can help students decolonize their worldview (Harshman, 2015) and help them better understand complex global challenges like unequal access to

resources, opportunities, and even jobs. Young, Lambert, Roberts, & Roberts (2014) argue that any strategy for promoting social justice aims must begin with the question of knowledge. A well-constructed geography curriculum contextualizes knowledge about the world at different scales, helping students understand the challenges of our time while providing opportunities to envision "new stories" for our communities and the world (Hicks, 2016, p. 73).

Certainly, the most pressing challenges we face are ones we share with people and places across the globe. Beyond the biophysical, the interconnected nature of our world plays out in substantive ways from the global financial system to the globalized supply chains and food systems that culminate with our every-day purchases. There are cultural interconnections too, as social media, video games, and genres of media and film transcend borders. Of course, a globalized world affects our students in ways they probably don't think about either and in fact, geography can serve to help them conceptualize how the systems of global interconnectedness put them into relationships with people and places around the globe; aspects of the global understanding that go beyond their everyday experience (Lambert, 2014, Chapter 7). Massey (2014) summarizes nicely that globalism "is part of popular consciousness, to which students need to be introduced. And geography is one of the few disciplines that have the potential to bring together some of this complexity, to address this dynamic interdependent world and, indeed, to address the very question of what we mean by global" (p. 36).

One of our greatest challenges is no doubt anthropogenic climate change, which has global implications but also localized effects. Geography helps students grapple with causes of climate change that might normally go unchallenged (e.g., overconsumption and consumerism) and also contributes to their ability to understand the various ways governments and policymakers are responding to its effects. In California, this means thinking about land use and the effects of wildfires, cities' decisions regarding coastal development as they relate to sea-level rise, and the role climate change has played in the forced migration of Central Americans to the California/Mexico border.

The extent to which the majority of history/social science educators grasp the importance of environmental literacy and are willing to set aside the space to incorporate it into their history-heavy courses is a valid disquietude. Geography, again, seems to be the social science discipline best positioned to deal with the complexities of this problem. In a recent article, the Chief Education Officer at National Geographic Society, Vicki Phillips (2020), rightfully asserted "To prepare our young people, we owe them a high-quality geography education" (para. 5). Unfortunately, Ms. Phillips followed those remarks with the claim that "We don't have to hire more geography teachers or add more geography classes" (para. 7). Respectfully, more geographically-trained teachers and geography classes are precisely what we need. Whether these disciplinary-trained teachers go on to teach history and geography courses in California or stand-alone geography courses, their

disciplinary knowledge is the difference between students ultimately gaining access to geographic knowledge and skills or not. It might also be the difference between students gaining the geographical insights needed to make better individual decisions about our current and future environmental challenges. Murphy (2018) asks us to "consider what is lost if geography is not part of the educational mix. Students may never be encouraged to develop even a basic understanding of how the world is organized environmentally, politically, and culturally" (p. 111).

Returning to this journal's theme, it seems important to think about the way in which geography might contribute to a student's notion of global citizenship. Lambert and Morgan (2010) argue geography is not for making citizens, however, the discipline can contribute to students' ability to think critically about our interconnected world. While dispositions, values, and skills might be a needed part of a student's holistic education, they warn us about a curriculum that is too focused on these goals at the expense of knowledge and understanding (Lambert & Morgan, 2010). In other words, geography is not just a vehicle to notions of citizenship, global or otherwise; it offers much more.

Geography Education Needs

Having provided a rationale, albeit broad, for expanding access to geography for California's diverse learners, the hope is to identify the most urgent needs specific to geography education in California. The first is for us to re-imagine what our current (and

hopefully future) geography courses should look like in terms of curriculum and instruction. This inevitably involves curriculum departments at district offices, but ideally centers the work of teachers within their professional learning communities. If we can transform the geography classrooms that currently exist, we produce models that ultimately help advocate for increasing California students' access to geography. As the GAO (2015) reported, education stakeholders simply do not understand how geography is relevant and important, nor is geography education supported by external stakeholders. In helping educational policymakers, teachers, and parents better understand why geography is a necessary discipline for students, our energies should be centered on what geography should look like for the diverse students who make up California's schools. The second need involves recognizing that to teach geography better, educators will need to build more disciplinary expertise. The GAO (2015) report confirms this ongoing challenge for geography education in that teachers lack academic preparation and training in geography. Finally, California urgently needs a coalition of geography advocates who will contribute to making the case for the discipline as a stand-alone course and as part of every student's K-12 education.

Moving Geography Education Forward

The much-needed coalition of advocates will likely involve two state-wide organizations who have traditionally played important roles in supporting geography education and teacher leadership in the state.

The California Global Education Project (CGEP) has built a network of teacher leaders focused on global competence and instilling a global mindset in California's students. CGEP recognizes the role geography can play in a student's education and is not only supportive of the discipline in K-12 schools, but a strong partner in the work of the California Geographic Alliance (CGA). In fact, the CGA is perhaps best positioned to lead not only the advocacy group called for above but also the professional development of geography educators.

Recently, the CGA participated in an informal study group with teachers from my district to explore and implement aspects of the international GeoCapabilities project, which researches the purpose behind and the values of a geography education via a "capabilities approach" (Bustin, 2019). The idea is for teachers to link school geography to the enablement of human capabilities (Sen, 2005) via a geography curriculum centered on "powerful knowledge" (Young, et al., 2014). Without sufficient space here to explain powerful knowledge with any real justice, suffice to say it is useful for teachers to consider the ways their subject area and the specific aspects they choose to teach could prove enabling for their students. In other words, educators should consider the power afforded to students when they possess certain types of geographical knowledge (Maude, 2016). Bustin (2019) identifies expressions of powerful knowledge in geography, originating from Lambert and Morgan (2010) as "1) the acquisition of deep descriptive and explanatory world knowledge; 2) the development of the relational thinking

that underpins geographical thought, and 3) a propensity to apply the analysis of alternative social, economic, and environmental futures to particular place contexts” (p. 122). Simplistically, we can think of capabilities as an alternative to looking at students’ grades or test scores as a functioning of the school and instead focus on how school contributes to “what people are capable of doing, thinking or achieving and what freedoms this affords them to live life in the way that they choose” (Bustin, 2019, p. 100). Holistically then, the notion of GeoCapabilities helps establish the reason we teach powerful geographic knowledge and helps teachers understand the contribution geographic knowledge makes to an educated person (Lambert, 2019).

One of the main tenets of this project is the central role the teacher must play in “curriculum making.” Bustin (2019) makes the case that teachers’ ability to articulate why geography matters can help them determine what to teach. This could prove a particularly helpful approach to developing geography teachers in California given their limited training in the discipline. Having explored the project at length it is my belief (and that of the CGA) that this project should serve as an inspiration/guide for figuring out how to re-conceptualize geography in California. Teachers need tools to help identify the type of geographic knowledge that would ultimately yield power for California’s young people as they make decisions about their own lives and contribute to their communities.

To be afforded the space for this work to happen, teachers would benefit from

adopting a leadership stance (Smulyan, 2016). If there ever was a time for advocates of geography to come together, it is now. I echo Bednarz’ (2016) calls for geographers to speak to geography teachers and concur with her assessment that moving geography education forward will require a collaborative partnership and professional development model that links academic geographers and educators. Lambert (2018) argues that teachers should engage professionally with debates about geography, be able to articulate why it should be part of a learner’s school curriculum, and articulate the connection between geography and the larger aims of the school. It would seem that those of us serious about saving geography in California schools should organize via CGEP and the CGA and ultimately articulate (loudly) the significance of geographical learning for California students.

Interdisciplinary programs like Global Scholars described at the beginning of this article can be instrumental in encouraging students to adopt a global mindset and practice the dispositions and skills they will need in our interconnected world. Our schools do need globally competent teachers and frameworks for global competence like those offered up by CGEP. However, if students are going to thrive as individuals and ultimately contribute to more just communities, they are going to need the knowledge afforded to them through the disciplinary and interdisciplinary insights of school subjects. Of course, teachers have a critical role to play in the way in which they design and enact a curriculum that is of value to students and their communities and in their abilities to compre-

hend and teach such complexities like our interconnected world and the corresponding challenges and opportunities for California's students. If social studies educators are serious about the importance of a global mindset, global citizenship, and perhaps most critical-

ly global knowledge and understanding, a stand-alone geography course should be one of the subjects to which all California students have access.

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