



Geographical education I: fields, interactions and relationships

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Abstract

Complex global challenges, rapid shifts in the mediation and distribution of information, rising inequalities and a toxic milieu of low-quality public reasoning make geography education more important than ever. This first progress report explores the nexus of geography education research, geography education practice and scholarship and the geographies of education. Conceptualising the fields through expansive understandings positions this report in an optimistic space, highlighting significant opportunities for geography and its contribution to public reasoning through deepening collaborations and attending to tensions in education's 'shadow and shine': tensions between its complicity in maintaining unjust hierarchies against its potential for emancipatory transformation.

Keywords

geography, education, school subject, discipline, curriculum

I Introduction

This first report on geographical education is motivated by beliefs about the importance of geography education in this day and age and for the future. It is a call to get involved with geography education's vital contributions to 'the drama that is human existence on the planet' (Castree, 2014: xxiv). The drama that is human existence in educational spaces foregrounds many questions tied up with the wider drama: questions about inclusion and exclusion, knowledge, representation, power, inequality, class, race, gender, expertise and trust. These questions come back with sharpness through the COVID-19 pandemic and through the ways in which anthropogenic climate change 'poses foundational questions to knowledge-making practises', and to issues of 'translation and communication across different domains' (Mathur, 2017: 77). Where previous progress reports on geography and education

(Winter, 2012) have focused on the school subject in England, including its curricula and popularity, this report analyses three fields that are significant in the constitution of geography education and the interfaces and relationships between them: geography education research; geography education practice and scholarship; and geographies of education. These fields have often been imagined as separate and treated as unconnected, whereas in this first of my three reports I highlight exciting new connections that are being developed across them and argue for these kinds of interactions to be increasingly attended to.

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II Fields

I am conceptualising the broad idea of geography education through three fields: geography education learning and scholarship; geography education research; and geographies of education. This formulation differs from previous accounts by distinguishing between areas of the discipline and bringing geography education research more explicitly into the conversation. For example, discussion around the reformation of the RGS-IBG (Royal Geographical Society with Institute of British Geographers) Higher Education Research Group describe two inter-related fields of geography education and the geographies of education (West et al., 2020). Similarly, Kraftl et al., 2022 distinguish between geographies of education as a field of research on educational spaces and processes, and ‘scholarship, critical reflection and practice on geography education’ (p.1). I am adding a third field of geography education research as an area with its own distinctive traditions, aims and relations with the school subject of geography (Brooks et al., 2017). As a separate area to the descriptions in Kraftl et al., 2022 West et al., 2020, I begin with geography education research.

I Geography education research

Geography education research is the term used to describe the field developed by teacher educators and others working—previously in universities, and increasingly in schools—to educate and train geography teachers through Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and beyond. In England, the PGCE (Post Graduate Certificate of Education) is an example of a graduate programme that leads to Qualified Teacher Status and which occupies much of the teaching work of this group. There are also a small number of geography education Masters programmes (Brooks, 2018) and doctoral students, many of whom study for professional doctorates part-time alongside full-time school teaching, similar to patterns across the wider discipline of education (Stentiford et al., 2021). Working under twin threats of Higher Education accountability regimes (such as the Research Excellence Framework) and school-facing performativity measures (including Ofsted), and doing so amid charged public

debate around the role and purpose of teacher education presents challenges for geography education researchers working in these spaces. Political interventions over the last two decades, aiming to reduce the involvement of universities in teacher education, have attempted to ‘disrupt the market’ and increase the influence of quasi-market forces. These shifts are tied up with global neoliberal policy discourses that position education and teacher education in particular ways in relation to the economy, human capital, productivity, enterprise and innovation which are echoed across multiple international contexts (Ellis et al., 2022).

Geography education researchers have often imagined and constructed the field as separate from and unrelated to the geographies of education. For example, Butt’s (2020) review is deeply engaged with and captures well the identity of geography education research, but as a project disconnected from these wider areas. Patterns of publishing reflect a disconnect from the wider discipline of geography: geography education research is often published in its own journals (such as IRGEE: International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education), edited collections (Fargher et al., 2021; Butt, 2015) and special issues of generalist education journals (Morgan and Lambert, 2011), rather than in mainstream geography journals. However, the quantity of research in the field has grown significantly in a range of international contexts (Eikli, 2013), illustrated by a threefold increase in papers in *IRGEE* between 1992 and 2009 (Kidman and Papadimitriou, 2012). Introducing their special issue, Morgan and Lambert begin with a bleak picture of limited research funding, infrastructure and resources, and this assessment is echoed elsewhere (Butt, 2015; Cascante-Campos, 2021). Critiques of the field have also foregrounded parochial concerns with student numbers and the apparent popularity of geography. In contrast, Norcup’s (2015) historical and cultural analysis of the journal *Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education* sheds important light on ‘awkward geographies’ to present a very different account of geography education research across the period in comparison to narratives constructed through texts such as Butt’s (2020). Discussion of geography education as a field also needs

to include the hidden, unseen – certainly from the world of academic publishing – labour in schools, forging connections often in small, local but vital ways between the academic discipline and school subject of geography.

2 Geography education practice and scholarship

Centred on the teaching and learning of geography in Higher Education, the field of geography education practice and scholarship has a significant tradition of critical discussions about learning and teaching, ranging from more technical contributions around pedagogy (Revell and Wainwright, 2009), including responses to teaching amid COVID-19 (Bryson and Andres, 2020; Day et al., 2020), to questions about values and connections between teaching, learning and institutions (Williams and Love, 2021) and aims, purposes and representation (Dorling, 2019; Jordan et al., 2021). Highlighting how neoliberalism, marketisation and casualisation shape the context within which geography is practised, taught and learnt, geography education practice and scholarship foregrounds universities as sites of contestation: what is researched and taught in universities is important, not least to ‘young people’s ideas of their subjectivities and how this links to understandings of the role of a university degree’ (Baillie Smith et al., 2016: 191), and subsequently to the quality of public reasoning.

Work in geography education practice and scholarship has emphasised geographers’ distinctive and productive contribution to the scholarship of learning and teaching more broadly (Hill et al., 2018), their attributes and ‘inherent interest in learning spaces’ (p.558). There are important senses in which learning is a geographical process (Simandan, 2013), and as such ‘is a topic that can play the role of connective tissue for the discipline’ (p.364). The teaching and learning of geography has much to offer students and societies. However, there are also ‘shadow’ sides to the teaching and practice of geography that are vital to attend to, whether these abuses perpetuated by geographers are sexual (Cardwell and Hitchen, 2022) or racial (Esson et al., 2017), enabled by academia’s hierarchies,

marketisation, power asymmetries and endemic precarity. The promises of disciplinary knowledge are tied up with all too human problems: stubborn issues remain for geography and geographers to address, some of which are being explored through the geographies of education.

3 Geographies of education

The geographies of education—in comparison to geography education research, and geography education practice and scholarship—is more obviously a sub-discipline of geography: it is firstly a field of research rather than being a necessarily applied practice. Research attention on the geographies of education has expanded rapidly in quantity and scope (Waters, 2016). Part of this expansion includes generative synergies across multiple diverse areas of research, including: critical geographies of education, radical youth work and participatory research (Dickens, 2017); shifting infrastructures, financial capital and geographies of schooling (Cohen and Rosenman, 2020); cultural and affective geographies (Ang and Ho, 2019); critical race theory (Hunter, 2020); children’s and young people’s geographies (Baillie Smith et al., 2016); and educational landscapes, neoliberalism and the ‘social reproduction of enduring regimes of power’ (Holloway and Kirby, 2019: 164), often understanding ‘schools as key sites at which issues such as power, identity, citizenship and participation are illuminated’ (Pini et al., 2017: 14). Holloway et al., (2010) draw attention to the ways in which unruly neoliberal logics, government policy and market responses from individuals and companies might be productively explored through the geographies of education, offering an example of Thiem’s (2009) argument that education is not a ‘discrete topical speciality’ but instead is a resource for decentred and outward-looking research, ‘one in which education systems, institutions, and practices are positioned as useful sites for a variety of theory-building projects’ (p.154). In each of these examples there is a reshaping and expansion of how we might conceive of the geographies of education including of what counts as educational spaces (Holloway et al., 2010).

Internationally, attention to the geographies of education has grown through distinctive traditions in a range of settings (Bauer and Landolt, 2018; Eikli, 2013). Kučerová et al., (2020) discuss a range of international bodies of work and institutional patterns, each of which has attended to the distinction between formal and informal educational spaces (Gough et al., 2019), and in varying ways to movements across, between and within these spaces. Movement, mainly in terms of student mobilities and transnational spaces of education (Kleibert, 2022), illustrates the emphasis on education as a dynamic process that changes people and places (Caciagli, 2019). In Krishnan's (2019) ethnographic work with young women in Chennai, being a college-girl has multiple implications for how urban life is experienced, particularly through formal education's distinctive times and spaces, and its production of colonial and gendered middle-class subjectivities. At a different scale, research on school choice strategies and the socio-spatial arrangements of access and segregation highlights the ways in which these arrangements reproduce classed and racialised inequalities (Boterman, 2021): education as an active, dynamic process with potential for emancipatory transformation, and yet the same forces are also used to police and maintain deeply unjust and unequal hierarchies and distributions of multiple forms of capital 'where racism and unequal power relations persist, revealing an extraordinary web of encounters, negotiations and inter-dependencies that extend across multiple spaces' (Wilson, 2014: 112). Education is vital for geography to understand, engage with and change.

III Interactions and relationships

The three fields briefly described above—geography education research, geography education practice and scholarship and the geographies of education—have all grown significantly over the last decade. The shifts since Taylor's (2009) *Towards a geography of education* are considerable. These changes are partly internal as the size of the fields expands, and partly external as more expansive, generative interactions are forged between them. Discussing hopes for the relationships between the geographies of education and scholarship and practice in geography education,

Kraftl et al., (2022) use an image of light, arguing that these fields 'can act as two light beams on the same prism, refracting an entire spectrum of themes and theoretical approaches placing educational spaces and processes, as socio-spatial phenomena, at their centre' (p.6). As one example, the reformed GeogEd research group seeks to create spaces of exchange between communities of practice (Finn et al., 2022) based on a 'renewed understanding of the synergies between geography education (at all levels) and the geographies of education' (West et al., 2020: 1). Professional associations have continued to play an active role in facilitating these synergies (Kinder and Brace, 2022), including (in the UK) Geographical Association conferences and local branch meetings, and RGS-IBG conferences, projects and grants.

Geography's role in helping to understand and address complex global challenges and improve the quality of public reasoning demands greater interactions across all fields associated with geography education. The most obvious and scalable site is through school geography. How best might the millions of young people studying geography globally be equipped and empowered? What kind of geography education is fit for purpose in this day and age? How might knowledge produced in the discipline be communicated to young people? The concept of 'recontextualisation' has been used to describe and analyse the movement of knowledge into school subjects, focussing attention on questions about the kinds of knowledge that young people are given access to. What geographical knowledge is most important for young people to learn in this day and age? Who decides? In what ways are epistemic power relations configured and how do they function? How can knowledge move across technological, pedagogical, epistemic, ideological and curricular spaces while still giving students access to authentic understandings and experiences of geography? In Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic device, recontextualising processes, fields and actors are situated between knowledge producers and acquirers, and divided between *official* and *pedagogic* aspects (Puttick, 2015). There is an explicit hierarchy positioning disciplinary knowledge and everyday knowledge as dichotomous, and this arrangement has been enthusiastically taken up in discussions of

‘powerful knowledge’ (Young et al., 2015). Critiques of Bernstein’s pedagogic device—in particular, Finn’s (2021)—focus on the limitations of conceptualising these relationships in linear and hierarchical ways, which ‘may be more blurred than implied by Bernstein’s model, and increasingly so with actors taking on hybrid, boundary-crossing roles’ (p.52). Part of this ‘increasingly so’ is through the contribution that a vibrant geography education community has to offer in recontextualising geographical knowledge for and with a diverse range of publics to more deeply contribute to public reasoning. As such, this argument joins other calls to bring together diverse bodies of scholarship and praxis, such as House-Peters et al.’s (2019) efforts to ‘make space for radical sites of encounter, dialogue and inquiry that empower students and teachers...’ (p.96) and Murrey’s (2019) pedagogies of disobedience. Recent and emerging examples illustrate productive synergies possible across the fields of geography education research, the geographies of education and geography education practice and scholarship. The examples mentioned below are building an exciting moment for geography education, addressing long-standing critiques of ‘chasms’ and ‘divides’ between the academic discipline and school subject (Sidaway and Hall, 2018; Alam, 2010) and opening possibilities for greater geographical contributions to public reasoning. Following Gregson et al. (2012), these connections offer ‘a means not just to constitute schools as an audience for university research but a way of making research public; a way of making schools’ pedagogical work public; a means to demonstrate the potency of school-university partnerships as critical nodes for engaging local publics...’ (p.359).

The launch of the *Routes* journal¹ is an important intervention in school /discipline relations, creating space for ‘new generations of geographers to re-write and re-build the discipline once more’ (Rose, 2020: 140). It illustrates the potential for geography education researchers to facilitate interactions at the interface between these fields, drawing together students, teachers, geography teacher educators and academic geographies: collaborations with similarities to Hawkins et al.’s (2011) production of organic public geographies. Organic growth has characterised the collective Decolonising Geography,

organised largely through WhatsApp and a growing web presence², raising vital critical questions about school geography and, in part, fostering dialogue between school geography teachers and others working in a wide range of institutions (Anderson et al., 2022). One example of the generative interactions between geography teachers and geography academics is illustrated by Whittall’s teaching resources³ recontextualising Murrey’s research on the Chad-Cameroon oil pipeline (Murrey and Jackson, 2020). Similarly, Hope and Healy’s exploration of geographies of sustainable development in Bolivia⁴ recontextualises Hope’s (2020) research in Bolivia. These interventions are partly curricular, giving young people access to recent developments in the discipline. They also echo Yarwood and Tyrrell’s (2012) calls for informing teaching and research, and Hammond (2021a) arguments about the importance of relationships between children’s everyday lives and geographical education to encourage ‘dialogic conversation’ (Hammond, 2021b: 13) across pedagogy, curriculum and research. In sharp contrast to previous characterisations of the field of geography education research as unfunded, there has been an increase in funded research in the field across RCUK (Research Councils United Kingdom), GCRF (Global Challenges Research Fund), EU (European Union) and beyond, for example, fostering collaborations between geography education researchers and artists (Walshe et al., 2020) and geography teacher educators internationally (Uhlenwinkel et al., 2016). Noxolo’s CARICUK (Creative Approaches to Race and In/security in the Caribbean and the UK) project⁵ is an important example of work being fostered through relationships across geography education, making significant contributions to discussions in the discipline while also nurturing a dialogic engagement with public geographies and the school subject.

IV Conclusions

This is an exciting moment for geography education, and I have presented an optimistic account of generative collaborations across inter-related fields. There has been substantial growth across geography education, and there is great potential to think

through the challenge of enabling more people to understand, benefit from, and critically engage with geography. However, there are tensions between the promise of geography education, and its role in reproducing inequalities. Just as ‘traditional spatial hierarchies are simultaneously powerful and alterable’ (McKittrick, 2006: 122), so too geography education is unresolved and is being conceptualised, practised and brought into being in new ways with the potential to work towards more sustainable and just tomorrows. I have described shifts in the ways in which the fields constituting geographical education are oriented and defined, particularly emphasising the importance of geography education research in facilitating meaningful, generative interactions with young people studying geography: this is not just educational research that happens to be about those training to teach geography, but instead is increasingly enriched and inspired by – and contributing to – disciplinary conversations. These calls are part of a vision for a decentred geography education that is not focused on the creation of sub-disciplinary edifices, but on the project of situating education in relation to vibrant discussion across the discipline that is deeply and authentically connected to public reasoning. This is not simple, and in addition to the multiple practical challenges of workload, performativity and accountability, I have also sketched geography education’s challenge of navigating contradictory imperatives shaping public education: education as forces that reduce and oppress, but which also carry immense emancipatory potential. The image of Noxolo (2021) and colleagues in the RGS’s map room at Kensington Gore confronts this tension powerfully. Sitting on the floor under paintings of white male colonial cartographers, they defy the gaze to collaborate and create the artist Sonia Barrett’s *Dreading the map*.⁶ Reworking the map, they plait, braid and dreadlock. They confront the shadow of the discipline by weaving new geographies, re-claiming spaces and educating: inviting others in to reimagine and participate.

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Notes

1. <https://routesjournal.org>
2. <https://decolonisesegeography.com/>
3. <https://geographyeducationonline.org/a-level/human-geography/chad-cameroon-oil-pipeline-a-case-study-of-energy-resource-issues-in-a-regional-setting>
4. <https://www.rgs.org/schools/teaching-resources/dr-jess-hope-and-grace-healy-on-sustainable-develo/>
5. <https://caricuk.co.uk/https://caricuk.co.uk>
6. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wnfd4HRMn3M>

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