



Reflections on Geography Education in Europe

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1. Introduction

My engagements with activities of the Association of European Geographical Societies EUGEO over the last months were often related to Geography's place and role in education. They give rise to thoughts about possible ways to reconsider the profile of Geography in schools as well as the institutional position of the subject in order to improve the contribution of the discipline to Europeans and the European society.

The EUGEO 2013 congress brought many hundreds of geographers and persons interested in Geography to Rome. With modest fees, a nice and convenient university venue and great social events, it was a pleasure to attend. It also was a major success for Italian Geography and geographers and a boost for the cooperation of the Italian Geographical Societies and Associations. Many sessions were initiated by Italian geographers and filled with presentations from all over Europe and beyond.

The conference program included many interesting keynotes and sessions, including sessions dealing with Geography Education. Representatives of AIIG, the Italian Association of Geography Teachers, EUROGEO, the European Association of Geographers, and the

IGU Commission on Geographical Education organized three sessions on current challenges of Geography Education in Europe. The lively sessions, with interesting papers on themes like competences and capabilities, (global) citizenship and teacher education, also led to discussions about the state of Geography education and resulted in the Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe.

A second confrontation with the state of Geography Education in Europe was my participation on behalf of EUGEO in a project of the Education Office of the European Space Agency ESA. The Italian company Bshape initiated and coordinates the project. The project concerned, "How to Teach Geography at School through Remote Sensing", aims at exploring the possibilities for introducing or strengthening the use of remote sensing data and methods when teaching themes of the Geography curriculum. In this project, relevant information on Geography curricula and the experiences, needs and wishes of geography teachers was gathered and analyzed (Bshape, et al., 2013)

2. Rome Declaration on Geographical Education in Europe

The Rome Declaration is a joint response of

the European Geography Community to recent threats to reduce or even abolish geography content from school curricula. In a number of European countries these threats are real. The Rome Declaration is a first step, a wake-up call to warn about the negative consequences for young persons and for society at large of this development. But Geographers also have the societal task of keeping the profile of Geography curricula and teaching methods up to date and to regularly and convincingly prove to the outside world the value of geographical knowledge, tools and skills for personal development and empowerment, for good and responsible (global) citizenship, for efficient business and for good and effective governance. Therefore, follow-up actions are necessary and have been scheduled by a committee in which IGU, EUROGEO and EUGEO are represented.

The Rome Declaration, addressing governments and educational institutions in the European countries, sets out the minimum requirements for the presence of Geography in schools. These are:

- formal recognition of Geography as an essential school subject;
- acknowledgement of the strategic role of Geography education for key societal issues like globalization and sustainable development;
- sufficient time for teaching Geography in schools;
- well qualified teachers to provide Geography education.

3. Diversity in Geography Curricula and Teacher Experiences in Europe

In the Remote Sensing for Geography Teaching project, the curricula and teacher experiences in nine European countries (Ireland, United Kingdom, Norway, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, and Italy) were analyzed. Primary and secondary education was covered, but the project does not claim to be able to give a representative picture for Europe of the state of Geography Education. The countries studied showed quite considerable variety in the way Geography is dealt with in schools. Besides, there are regional differences

within countries, especially in countries with a federal/regional governance structure for education. Furthermore, individual schools often have a certain level of autonomy in the way they position Geography in their programs. Finally, teams of geography teachers and of course individual teachers have quite a lot of influence on how the subject is tackled in daily practice.

Despite the national and regional differences, Geography is almost always considered a school subject that bridges knowledge about the earth as the natural resources base for human living and the world as the home of human societies. Common goals found in most geography curricula are:

- acquiring a basic knowledge and an understanding of man's living environments at relevant spatial scales (from local to global);
- becoming aware of Geography relevant issues, problems, and solutions at different time/space scales, in particular those related to sustainable development (with its environmental, social, economic, and political dimensions);
- ability to formulate and answer geographical questions (spatial thinking);
- acquiring, organizing, analyzing and presenting geographical information;
- preparing pupils for effectively using geographical knowledge and skills in daily social and professional life;
- contributing to solving geography relevant problems in society and the ability to assess the consequences of alternative actions.

The main obstacles teachers experience in reaching the often very ambitiously formulated goals for Geography education are: time available for geography teaching, the quantity and quality of initial training for teachers, and the lack of adequate refresher training. The introduction of computers, Internet and recently smart-boards in schools appears to change Geography teaching profoundly. This development is difficult to follow for many teachers as they are not always (also) science and technology trained and oriented, do not have

sufficient facilities and lack adequate dedicated ICT training and support.

4. Towards a Roadmap to follow up the Rome Declaration

For an effective follow-up of the Rome Declaration, it seems desirable to develop content, teaching time and teaching method standards for Geography. For Europe, these standards need to acknowledge the different contexts in which Geography is taught in European countries. Another aspect to consider is the cooperation with other school subjects or academic disciplines. This will often be both necessary and useful to attain the always relatively broad aims of Geography education.

Equally important will be the task of developing an action plan to carefully but also assertively pursue the aim to strengthen Geography and make it more relevant. Again, the historical and institutional diversity in Geography teaching will have to be taken into account. A European strategy will have to be complemented by at least national strategies.

IGU, EUROGEO and EUGEO do not need to start from scratch in this project. Many European countries and regions have developed elaborate standards, frameworks and methods. Also, very good examples exist outside Europe. The cooperation with IGU will make it possible to link the European project to the IGU initiative for a United Nations International Year of Global Understanding (IYGO). The IYGO will focus the world's attention on the connections between local actions and global consequences, on global sustainability of local actions, on social and cultural aspects of the transformation of nature and on the integration of natural and social sciences (IGU Brochure). Much can also be learned from the so far successful actions of IGU to have its initiative accepted.

Finally, I would like to mention two other resources for inspiration. In the United States, a very well considered and elaborated standard for the content of Geography Education has been developed over the last decades. The first version of the standards was published in 1994 (GENIP, 1994). The well-known and still useful Five

Themes of Geography (location, place, region, movement/spatial interaction, human-environment interaction). The standards were thoroughly updated and elaborated recently (NCGE, 2012). The new standards aim at specifying what it means to be geographically literate. The American standards distinguish perspectives, knowledge and skills. The 18 knowledge standards are grouped into 6 essential elements: the world in spatial terms, places and regions, physical systems, human systems, environment and society and uses of Geography. Five skills are described: asking Geographic questions, acquiring Geographic information, organizing Geographic information, analyzing Geographic information, and answering Geographic questions. All standards are clearly described and well disseminated and form an excellent example how to deal with this subject matter.

Another important phenomenon to keep an eye on is the rapid development of international education. International schools are established in many cities worldwide and the International Baccalaureate Standard (IB) is often used as a framework for designing curricula. The International Baccalaureate is a non-profit educational foundation that works with more than 3600 schools in 146 countries. Geography content is well included in broader defined subjects at primary and middle level, as can be expected in internationally oriented education. In the Diploma Programme, for students from 16 to 19 years preparing for a university education, Geography is a separate course. It is useful to analyze how geography is dealt with in this advanced and rapidly growing form of education.

5. Conclusion

The EUGEO congress in Rome was an important event for European Geography and geographers. We can look back on it with satisfaction. But the congress will become even more memorable when it turns out to have been also the start of some sort of revival for teaching Geography. Let's work together on that.

References

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Geographical education provides students with essential capabilities and competences needed to know and understand the world. Responsible and effective uses of geographical information are vital for the future of Europe. Therefore, all European citizens need to understand how to deal with it. Geographical education provides them with the knowledge and skills to do this. For example, an appropriate use of geospatial data and technologies is necessary to help analyse and address problems related to water, climate, energy, sustainable development, natural hazards, globalisation and urban growth. Most of these big issues also have a distinct European dimension. Geography also deals with the daily living environment of citizens where issues such as housing, employment, transportation, provision of services and green spaces are important. These must all be addressed but in an integrated way, which only the study of Geography provides. Geographical knowledge is indispensable for well informed citizens, successful businessmen and policy makers.

The representatives of the Italian Association of Geography Teachers (AIIG), the Association of Geographical Societies in Europe (EUGEO), the European Association of Geographers (EUROGEO) and the International Geographical Union (IGU), gathered for the congress session "Geography education's challenges in response to changing geographies". In this declaration, we underline clearly and strongly that the teaching of Geography in schools is fundamental for the future of Europe.

With this firm conviction, we are committed to take initiatives in the countries of Europe and with the relevant European institutions to provide standards and guidelines that will help authorities develop relevant syllabuses and school curricula, methods and approaches in Geography that:

- apply geographical knowledge, skills and understanding to the main issues linked with processes of change in society, nature and environment at local, national, European and global levels; and
- highlight the educational values and the role of geographical education in a changing world.

We urge those responsible in European governments and educational systems:

- to recognise the educational value afforded by the study of Geography as an essential school subject; and
- to acknowledge its strategic role for realising active citizenship and balanced social, economic and environmental development.

We therefore request that:

- sufficient time for the teaching of Geography is allocated in curricula for primary and secondary schools;
- the teaching of Geography is limited to teachers with a qualified training in Geography and Geography Education.

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Vladimir Kolossov, President of the International Geographic Union (IGU);

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