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EDITORIAL

Future geographies and geography education

A 2014 special issue of *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* (IRGEE) analysed the ways in which geography is expressed in national curricula, or standards, for primary and secondary schools in Australia, England, Finland, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and the United States to give an international perspective on the future of geography education (Butt & Lambert, 2014). The contributions show past influences and future prospects and challenges for school geography in response to changing needs of society. This special issue shares the theme of future geography education but the focus is wider than national curricula and standards. Future geography education is discussed from different perspectives: the discipline, the student and the teacher. The five contributions all deal with one or two of these perspectives to explore the landscape of futures education through geography. Before we give more information about the contributions, first a few words about the theme of this special issue: Future Geographies and Geography Education.

The main purpose of education is to help (young) people to be prepared for today and tomorrow. Nevertheless, not much attention in education is given to think about futures as it is difficult to teach about what is coming and not known yet. But more than ever relevant in fast changing societies. An often heard argument to avoid to teach about future developments is that young people first need a sound base of the existing knowledge and skills. Of course there is some truth in this argument but it is no reason not to look further. And without ideas and questions about how to go on in the near future, it is difficult to know what knowledge and skills should be acquired.

Thinking about futures – for there is many futures thinkable – requires specific skills, knowledge and conceptual thinking. More than other disciplines, geography offers the opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills to see clearer how things are running on planet earth and what we can do differently on a local as well as on a global scale in the time to come. Therefore, geography should be a compulsory element in education all over the world. In addition, communities of geography teachers should rethink what young people really need to learn to be better prepared for the near future. Young people should be able to use their geography education to help them become more autonomous decision-makers and more enquiring individuals (Butt, 2011, pp. 9–10). The question what geography education contributes to the near future is a vital and challenging question and should be raised more often. We even think that the future of geography education itself is dependent on whether we choose to focus more on learning and teaching about students' near futures or not.

Do geography educators write about the future? To try to find a quick answer to this question, one can analyse the keywords of the publications in IRGEE. During the last six years of the journal (2009–2014), only 5 of the approximately 500 keywords referred directly to a future orientation: future citizens (Robertson, 2009), visions of the future (Jonsson, Sarri & Alerby, 2012), future studies (Coelho Lastória & Papadimitriou, 2012), curriculum futures (Lambert & Hopkin, 2014) and future orientation (Torbjörnsson & Molin, 2014). Of course, the method of analysing keywords to say something about the future orientation of geography education can be easily criticised. Many contributions in

IRGEE and other journals focus on change and renewal in geography education without using the word future as a keyword. An analysis of full texts and more journals will give a better impression of this world of thinking in geography education. An analysis of what students and teachers do in classrooms all over the world would be even better. What are they talking about in geography lessons? And if they talk about the future how do they do that? Is it in a more traditional way covering the content? Following Young and Muller (2010), Lambert and Hopkin (2014) call this a Future 1 curriculum. Or is also attention given to the process of information retrieval, analysis and communication which is a characteristic of Future 2 curricula in which disciplinary knowledge and skills are seen as human constructions? Or are geography students real communities of learners engaged in investigating and evaluating the world of today and tomorrow? Lambert and Hopkin (2014, p. 75) state that a signifier of a Future 3 curriculum is that it helps “armed with new or richer conceptual understanding to see things differently”.

As there is always more than one future to think about, an important tool to analyse, discuss and debate the future is to work with scenarios. Futurists, planners and others use scenarios to think about how society best can be developed, but scenarios are not yet used very often in education as a tool to think about the future. “Scenarios can be used in the classroom to explore both probable and preferable futures” (Hicks, 2012). Scenarios are not science fiction stories, but realistic stories about possible futures based on thorough knowledge and understanding (Roberts, 2003, p. 195). In his book, “X-events. The Collapse of Everything”, Casti (2012) mentions different disasters that threaten planet earth and which need our full attention. In his list, we see topics that are or can be part of the geography curriculum like the growing fresh water shortage, the fast diffusion of new diseases and the impact of the use of nuclear energy on human life. The questions to discuss in geography classes are what possible and preferable ways we want to follow in the near future to avoid disasters and to make a liveable planet earth.

Not all future-oriented geography education is about disasters. In 2015, the Royal Dutch Geography Society organised a national contest for 13–15 year old students aiming at developing their views on the future of the Netherlands. This contest for lower secondary geography classes was organised with the help of a big group of volunteering geography teachers and in close co-operation with many organisations and groups that are active in the field of planning and environment. The assignment for the students was to make an atlas of the Netherlands in 2040 containing maps of the Netherlands for different scenarios and corresponding drawings of their local environment in 2040. After some instruction about what scenarios are and after indicating some remarkable trends in the society, groups of students developed a specific scenario. All together, 2561 pupils in 92 classes at 42 schools made 92 atlases. The results of the groups were the starting point for a whole class discussion about probable, possible and preferable scenarios. Figures 1 and 2 show future scenarios where economic growth and international competition are combined with a further concentration of activities in cities. This scenario is called “*the international metropole*”. The group of students that made Figure 1 shows how a group of obese people are obsessed with consumption. The people discuss things like “what shall we eat tonight?”, “where shall we go for shopping?”, “which recreational site shall we visit today?” Figure 2 has been made by another group of students working with the same scenario. It shows a place where buildings dominate, no green area is present, air pollution is a big problem and advertisement will dominate the streetscape. Robots take over part of the work and more people will be unemployed. Other drawings showed other consequences of this scenario for the living area of the students like boring places where shops are closed because of online shopping. Figures 3 and 4 show a different scenario



Figure 1. “International metropole” scenario drawn by students of the Aletta Jacobs College at Hoogezaand.



Figure 2. “International metropole” scenario drawn by students of Pontes het Goese Lyceum at Goes.



Figure 3. “Sustainable city” scenario drawn by students of Melanchthon at Schiebroek.



Figure 4. “Sustainable city” scenario drawn by students of Pontes het Goese Lyceum at Goes.

where a further concentration of activities in cities in 2040 is combined with a focus on sustainability and small-scale green initiatives, “*the sustainable city*” scenario. The drawing in Figure 3 shows a city with renewable energy: windmills, solar panels and charging points for electric cars. Food grows in the big “city greenhouse” and on the roofs of buildings. Figure 4 shows happy students in an environment where modern technology is combined with green meadows and flowers. Many drawings of this scenario are dominated by modern technology for energy and transport as well as urban farming. More important than the details of each separate drawing are the stories beyond the drawings and the discussion in classes about possible futures laying in front of us. Scenario-thinking exercises in geography classes can help students to get an idea about how the world has been managed so far but also that there are different options to go on. The participating geography teachers were very positive about the scenario-thinking activities. In their feedback, they mentioned several learning outcomes: the assignment let students think in a critical and creative way about the future of their country. A remark from many teachers is that students are not very “aware” of a future or futures and thinking in scenarios is a completely new challenge. Research among young people shows that there are big differences in their views on a personal future and the future of the world (Robertson & Tani, 2013). For example, Dutch and other European students see a relatively bright future for themselves but not for the world as a whole (Béneker & Wevers, 2013; Reynie, 2011). Discussions in geography classes about future perspectives might change students’ existing views. Hicks (2014) is writing about the geography of hope. We have a choice to do things in different ways. That choice requires different views. That is where geography can come in.

In this special issue, all five articles contribute in their own way to the central theme, Geography Education & Future Perspectives. Morgan gives a good overview of different debates about the future in this contribution “Making geographical futures”. An important distinction is between the bourgeois futurology and the environmental futurology. Both can be found in discussions about educational futures and elements of both can be seen in three themes where geographers are engaged in discussions about the future – the consumer society, the rise of virtual geographies and the future of capitalism. At the end of his contribution, Morgan states that geographical education is an important area for the study and understanding of probable futures.

That is where the second contribution written by Pauw starts. She explores the discourse on education for the future in different important international and national documents for education and for geography education. She concludes that most of the references to the future relate to more generic competences needed to survive in a complex society. Geography education documents refer to global challenges to make the subject relevant but lack information about studying futures. In her conclusion, she elaborates on how geography education can learn from the ideas of Futures Education. The contributions written by Morgan and Pauw try to give a disciplinary overview of what has been written about geography education and future orientation. Both authors conclude that except for the work of David Hicks, pioneer in this field, it is difficult to find explicit references to a vision on geography education and futures orientation.

After this broad subject-based literature exploration, the third and fourth contributions focus on what we know about student’s perception of future perspectives. The third article written by Robertson and Burston asks us to listen to what young people living in a fast changing society have to say about place, space and their future orientation. Their hopes and fears are important starting points when answering questions about the contribution of geography education to their understanding of the future. Torbjörnsson and Molin investigating the Swedish situation in their contribution report that there is no such thing

as a school subject that focuses on future scenarios. The future is a personal challenge and consists of individual choices. Students do not learn in school to think about alternative scenarios. The question is how this can be changed. The strange phenomenon is that teachers and policy makers may say that learning is future oriented but they have no specific plan to work it out and to make it work. In and outside school, students are confronted with the big problems of our time but not really facilitated in thinking how to do things in a different way.

Speaking about the crucial role of teachers in this process, the last contribution written by Béneker, Palings and Krause analyses geography teachers' thinking about the future in the context of a master course in teacher education. Teachers' essays about what geography education should look like at their school in five years' time, show that it is difficult for geography teachers to adopt a clear vision of geography and to make balanced proposals for geography education. The authors advise teachers and teacher educators to rethink what geography and geography education is necessary for the future. Next to education for the future and education of the future also education about the future or futures is necessary.

All five contributions show that a systematic research of futures in geography and geography education need more attention. Developing and researching Future Geographies and Geography Education, the three well-known aspects should be involved together – the discipline, the student and the teacher. Thinking about futures is not easy but challenging and last but not the least, it is necessary. Considering its core business, geography education has the potential to become one of the most important facilitators for futures orientation.

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