

SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHERS' BACKGROUND AND PERCEPTIONS OF
GEOGRAPHY AS A DISCIPLINE

A Master's Research Project Presented to
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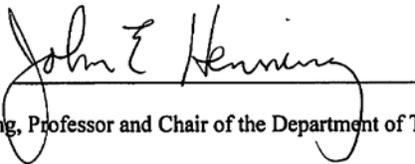
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This Master's Research Project has been approved
for the Department of Teacher Education

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As an academic discipline, Geography has struggled to gain formal recognition at all levels of education over the years, resulting in poor pedagogy and a lack of teacher training. Many public schools lack independent geography classes, particularly at the lower grade levels. Many universities, most notably Harvard University, do not have a geography department. In part, this absence of recognition has stemmed from a lack of clarity in what the definition of geography is as a field of study. In addition, questions as to what geographers *do* have persisted. For example, if one thinks of geography as the “study of world regions,” one would think that this could easily be covered in a history class. If one thinks of geography as the study of the “physical world,” one could easily accomplish this by studying geology.

Geographers do study the physical world (beyond microbes) and study world regions. However, geography goes beyond these boundaries. Geography is the “the study of phenomena by looking at their aerial distribution and interaction” (Fernald, 2002). To be stated in an alternative way, geography is the study of most phenomena within a spatial context beyond the microbe level and within the boundaries of Earth. Thus, geography is in large part defined by “how (spatially)” something is studied as opposed to “what.” In order to accomplish this inquiry, geographers borrow from fields including but not limited to history, geology, sociology, international studies, political science, demography, and economics.

Recently, geography has been gaining recognition as a legitimate academic discipline both at the university level as well as in the K-12 setting. The result of this has

been new and dynamic research on varying teaching, mentoring, and learning strategies. Despite this growing research, challenges still remain with regards to teachers effectively being able to teach geography to students. Firstly, many social studies educators have limited knowledge of geography as a subject of inquiry. Geography is one of many subjects within the social studies (including i.e. history, economics, government, sociology, anthropology, and geography) and often gets the least attention. Individuals who are training to be social studies teachers are required to take predominantly history classes. This paradigm exists because most social studies classes in K-12 focus on history courses. Although changing curriculum standards have altered what subject matters get taught when, currently nearly all high school students receive the equivalent of one semester of U.S. Government and one semester of Economics. Sociology is sometimes taught as a stand-alone course. Geography is rarely taught as a separate class unless it is delivered as an elective.

A second challenge that the field of geography faces in being effectively taught has to do with teachers' perceptions of geography as a discipline. If teachers do not understand geography, they may not understand the utility in teaching such a subject. If a teacher believes geography is not worth teaching then little effort will be made to incorporate geography into social studies classes. Furthermore, teachers will make little effort to incorporate recent trends in geography pedagogy in their classrooms and not surprisingly, spend little to no time learning about the subject.

If teachers understood the benefits of teaching geography as well as increased their knowledge of the subject, students would benefit from this "renaissance" in geography.

Statement of Problem

In recent years, geography as a discipline has gained more prominence in the K-12 setting. Many social studies educators, within the K-12 arena, have had little or no formal training in geography and thus possess little or no knowledge about the methodology. This lack of knowledge and training has limited learning opportunities for students in the classroom.

Research Questions

1. What is the utility of studying geography?
2. What background in geography do social studies educators have and consequently, what are their attitudes and perceptions toward teaching geography?
3. What pedagogical methods does the current literature suggest should be utilized in teaching geography?

Purpose and Significance of Study

The purpose of this study is multi-faceted. Firstly, an analysis of Ohio 7th-12th grade social studies teachers' perceptions of geography, as well as their educational background in geography, will provide the educational community with a deeper understanding of the present state of the quality and depth of geography instruction. Secondly, a review of the literature will provide social studies educators with a comprehensive summary of current pedagogical methods that can be utilized in teaching geography.

Limitations

Several limitations for this masters' research project include the following:

1. The questionnaire was e-mailed to principals of middle and high schools in the state of Ohio. The list of schools was taken from the Ohio Department of Education's "interactive local report card home" website. Most vocational schools are not listed on the report card site and therefore were not included in this study.
2. Articles gathered and analyzed for the literature review were only utilized if they were available through the OhioLINK Network or Alden Library at Ohio University.

Methodology

This research project entails two methods of gathering data in order to address the research questions. To address the research question, "What background in geography do social studies educators have and consequently, what are their attitudes and perceptions toward teaching geography?" a questionnaire was created for 7th-12th grade social studies teachers from across the state of Ohio to complete. The questions in the survey addressed the teachers' subsequent background in geography. It was important to gauge how much time they spend incorporating geography into their lessons. They were asked the degree to which they feel that incorporating geography into their lessons would be beneficial to students.

The second part of this research project entailed composing a literature review. Articles were located using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) search engine. Key words that were entered in the search engine were “geography,” “teacher education,” and “social studies.” These terms were then combined from the search history to narrow the results to come up with relevant articles. Articles that were published prior to 1995 were not considered unless they provided historical context to this project.

Organization of Study

Chapter One of this research project defines geography as a discipline. The research questions are presented and well as the purpose of the study. As with any project, limitations exist and they are also presented. A brief synopsis of the methodology is presented which describes the research methods that were conducted to answer the research questions.

Chapter Two is a review of the current literature. The literature review is divided into several sections including an introduction, literature on teacher preparation, literature on current trends in geography pedagogy, and finally, a summary.

Chapter Three is the methodology section. This section includes information about the sample, instrumentation, and data analysis with regards to the survey. It also includes the method by which articles were gathered and analyzed for the literature review.

Chapter Four includes the findings of the survey. A written summary provides the results of the online questionnaire.

Chapter Five includes a discussion and conclusion section. Included in this chapter is a section addressing suggestions for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Background

In the last 20 years, policy makers, educators, and governmental officials have made efforts to revitalize geography education in the K-12 setting. In part, this effort has stemmed from reports highlighting the geographic illiteracy of American students (Helfenbein & Segall, 2008). Some of these reports including *A Nation at Risk* (1984), and results from the National Geographic Society (1988) were both comprehensive and indelible.

One of the first initiatives to address the sobering statistics found in these studies came in 1984 with the publication of *Guidelines for Geographic Education*. Central to this publication was the identification of five “themes” of geography (location, place, human interaction with the environment, movement, and regions). These themes were devised to provide the skills framework for K-12 education (Helfenbein & Segall, 2008). Other initiatives included President George H. Bush’s recommendation and insistence that geography be included in the National Education Goals five “core subject” (Helfenbein & Segall, 2008).

A more recent effort to address the geographic illiteracy and shape geographic education came from the National Council for Geographic Education (NCGE). The NCGE is a non-profit organization that has continuously worked to promote geographic teaching and learning at all grade levels (kindergarten through the university level). In 1994, the NCGE published 18 standards in the hopes of guiding geographic education in

the classroom. These 18 standards include the following: how to use maps and other geographic representations, tools, and technologies to acquire, process, and report information; how to use mental maps to organize information about people, places, and environments; how to analyze the spatial organization of people, places, and environments on Earth's surface; the physical and human characteristics of places; that people create regions to interpret Earth's complexity; how culture and experience influence people's perception of places and regions; the physical processes that shape the patterns of Earth's surface; the characteristics and spatial distribution of ecosystems on Earth's surface; the characteristics, distribution and migration of human populations on Earth's surface; the characteristics, distributions, and complexity of Earth's cultural mosaics; the patterns and networks of economic interdependence on Earth's surface; the process, patterns, and functions of human settlement; how forces of cooperation and conflict among people influence the division and control of Earth's surface; how human actions modify the physical environment; how physical systems affect human systems; the changes that occur in the meaning, use, distribution, and importance of resources; how to apply geography to interpret the past; to apply geography to interpret the present and plan for the future

(see <http://geography.about.com/od/teachgeography/a/18standards.htm> on 5/3/12).

In terms of implementing assessments, the United States Congress was one of the first bodies to act by authorizing the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to evaluate geographic knowledge. This assessment was to be conducted in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades (Helfenbein & Segall, 2008).

Though it is unclear as to which specific initiatives have shaped geographic teaching and learning, some aspects of geography have clearly been changed (Helfenbein & Segall). One of the most easily recognizable and measured changes has involved standards. As late as 1989, not one state standard for geography existed and only 13 states even tested geography on their state exams. Helfenbein & Segall (2008) note that by 2004 this picture improved with 48 states possessing geography standards. Only two states, Rhode Island and Iowa, had not yet implemented standards.

Teacher Preparation

While the literature on how to address teacher preparation and mentorship is rich, there has been a lack of studies assessing 7th-12th grade social studies teachers' preparation in the field of geography, particularly in the United States. Not surprisingly, the limited literature suggests that many public school teachers (K-12) have not had an adequate background in the field of geography. At the earliest grade levels, elementary school teachers are the least prepared, generally only having taken one or two courses in the social sciences (Helfenbein & Segall, 2008). The picture changes slightly with some secondary social studies teachers having majored in the social sciences. However, those that have majored in a social science typically concentrate in either history or political science (Helfenbein & Segall, 2008). This lack of preparation in the field of geography limits the ability of teachers to address the current calls by policy makers to revitalize geographic education.

One study that highlights many teachers' lack of basic geography preparation showed that out of a sample of 100 social studies teachers, the majority of them thought that Africa was a singular country (Brown, Osunde, & Tlou, 1996). Brown, Osunde, and

Tlou also found that those respondents viewed Africans as “wild natives” who were primarily engaged in hunting and gathering as a means of survival. Africa was the least understood region among the respondents as evident from their answers given.

Other studies have concluded that, in general, teachers exhibited a lack of geographic knowledge and furthermore, that their understanding of geographic education was limited to locations and place names (Klein, 1997; Rogers, 1997).

As previously mentioned, the literature on how to address teacher preparation and mentorship is rich. Part of this stems from a growing trend of inquiry in this topic pertaining to teachers of all subjects. In addition to this reason, there has been recognition that many social studies teachers lack a significant degree of geography content knowledge. The matter has been compounded as geography has gained in recognition and has occupied more space in the social studies curriculum. While originally few students had the opportunity to take Advanced Placement (AP) exams, the AP geography course and subsequent test have been offered in more and more schools. However, many social studies teachers have had a lack of college-level geography and therefore are inadequately prepared to teach the AP geography course (Lange & Trites, 2000).

To alleviate the challenge of social studies teachers not being fully prepared to teach AP geography, Lange & Trites (2000) advocate attending workshops in AP Human Geography, obtaining copies of the recommended textbooks for self-study, accessing the AP Human Geography web site to review content material, and purchasing the AP Human Geography Teacher’s Guide which contains course syllabi.

Beyond providing teachers resources in order to teach the AP Human Geography exam, some scholars have urged the geography community as a way to aid in preparing

teachers for K-12 geography instruction. To confront the challenges associated with geography teacher preparation, Bednarz, Bockenbauer, and Walk (2005) support mentoring strategies to be used specifically between a teacher's 2nd and 5th year of teaching. The focus is on the years between year two and five due to the emphasis on other mentoring programs restricted to the first year (Bednarz et al 2005).

Advocating for mentoring programs, Bednarz et al. (2005) summarize four models of mentoring: the Classic Greek Model, the Business/Professional Model, the Anderson and Shannon Model, and the Furlong and Maynard Model. In the Classic Greek Model, mentoring is characterized as role modeling. The Business/Professional Model is described as counseling, challenging, and sponsoring. The Anderson and Shannon Model advocate nurturing and befriending. The Furlong and Maynard Model, the model that the authors emulate in some aspects, backs mentoring stages (1-4). The mentor role in stages two through four forms the foundation of the "Geography Mentor Model." Here, the mentor role starts as a "coach," morphs into a "critical friend," and then finally becomes a "co-inquirer." This last stage is when mentoring strategies include partnership teaching. The authors do not empirically test their model but suggest its use, testing, and subject of academic debate.

Current Trends in Geography Pedagogy

In conducting a literature review on teaching models, learning theories, and mentoring programs within the field of geography, it is evident that a need to properly define and legitimize geography is key to improving geographic literacy among students of all ages.

To aid teachers in explaining geography as a subject and concept, Fernald (2002) provides an example asking reflective questions of his students. Looking at a map of population distribution in Florida, students can begin to think in terms of areal distribution. Density, pattern, diffusion, and dispersion, are all concepts that can be analyzed and discussed in class. Using a dot map of the population distribution, a teacher could bring up a discussion encompassing the uneven spatial clustering of populations. Secondly, a teacher could talk about such concepts as questions of state infrastructure, and how population densities impact the local environment. Fernald (2002) then advocates for teachers to ask students what spatial arrangement the population clusters form. Is there a pattern? If there is a pattern, is the pattern coincidental or not? How did the state's history impact the development of the population pattern present? Asking these questions of students allows for active participation and solidifies the students' concept of geography as an academic discipline worthy of study.

This method of defining geography using higher-order thinking teaching methods is a departure from the concept of geographic place-name memorization that for the longest time has characterized our geography curriculum in the public schools. Legitimizing geography as a discipline will assist teachers in creating meaningful learning environments. The importance of providing meaningful learning environments to students has long been advocated, regardless of discipline, and in the case of this literature review, has been given much credence.

In order to create more enriching learning environments, aspects of the current literature on geographic pedagogy advocate a focus on local issues for the students. Surprisingly, this effort to use local focus for geographic inquiry is nothing new. Stanley

Hall, the founding president of Clark University, believed that memorizing capitals, boundaries, and names of rivers did little to capture the imagination of children (Koelsch, 2002). In Germany and Switzerland, the concept of *Heimatkunde* embraces active learning and embracement of the environment. Hall believed that this German/Swiss method was the correct method, and was an early advocate for this pedagogical approach as early as the late 19th century (Koelsch, 2002).

Meaningful learning based on local issues may also take the form of service-learning projects. Service learning projects are one pedagogical method geography teachers, as a whole, have at their disposal (Wade & Yarbrough, 2007). In general, students are asked to choose a current issue/problem facing their community. The history of the community and the historical context of the issue are researched to gain a better understanding of the processes that led to its rise. Students then design and implement a service-learning activity to address the issue at hand. This form of civic education and civic participation can provide student-oriented learning that is meaningful (Wade & Yarbrough, 2007).

Integrating technology into the classroom is an important aspect of current geographic pedagogy. The call to intertwine technology into the social studies classroom has long been advocated. However, the literature on how to apply technology to social studies education (geography in particular) has been underdeveloped (Doolittle & Hicks, 2003). One theoretical framework that addresses this is constructivism. Doolittle and Hicks (2003) define constructivism as a theory that “employs a more flexible, culturally relativistic, and contemplative perspective, where knowledge is constructed based on personal and social experience (p. 76). Doolittle and Hicks (2003) outline six strategies

teachers should use for integrating technology: (1) teachers and students should be prepared to implement technology as a tool for inquiry; (2) teachers should use technology to create authenticity, which facilitates the process of student inquiry and action; (3) teachers should use technology to foster local and global social interaction such that students attain multiple perspectives on people, issues, and events; (4) teachers should facilitate students knowledge construction by using technology to build on students' prior knowledge and interest; (5) teachers should enhance the viability of student knowledge by using technology to provide timely and meaningful feedback; (6) teachers should cultivate students' academic independence by using technology to foster autonomous, creative, and intellectual thinking (p. 103).

Various scholars have incorporated past theories and applied them to the geography classroom. One of the most recognized theories in pedagogy, "Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory," has been around since the mid 1980s (Healey & Jenkins, 2000). The fundamental core of the theory states that each and every student responds best to one of four main learning styles: accommodator, diverger, converger, and assimilator. Accommodators are students that carry out plans, adapt to changing circumstances, set objectives and work off a schedule. Divergers are imaginative and open to new experiences. Convergents do well at practical applications. Assimilators create theoretical models and formulate hypotheses. According to Kolb, certain subjects lend themselves better to certain learning styles. For instance, accommodators who learn best when there is hands-on experience *tend* to be students of political science, geography, demography, environmental studies, and education. Kolb stresses that these are generalizations. As Healey and Jenkins point out, there is great variation within the

field of geography. For those specializing in human geography, accommodators might predominate. Students of physical geography might have more assimilators in their ranks.

Healey & Jenkins (2000) give two examples of incorporating Kolb's theory. One example looks at teaching how theories of gender explain aspects of suburbia. The final example is a basic pedagogic way of teaching a field course. In both examples, Healey and Jenkins stress that the basics of Kolb's theory, having the learner actively experiencing an activity, reflecting back on that experience, trying to conceptualize a model or theory of what should be observed, and planning how to test the model or theory, are to be used in teaching. Healey and Jenkins recognize that there are other pedagogic methods, and that some teachers may not have the time or ability to implement all the cycles for every activity. They readily point out that Kolb's theory has been critiqued and several recommendations have been brought forth over the past 25 years. However, Kolb's theory is a well-developed theory that has useful applications to teaching geography.

Some advocates have suggested multiple ways of achieving meaningful learning in a geography classroom including integrating the process of academic writing. One such scholar is Rich Heyman, who refers to himself as an advocate of critical geographic pedagogy. Heyman (2004) argues that traditional teaching methods are "predicated on the notion that knowledge is an object to be unproblematically transmitted from knowing teacher to unknown student" (p. 39). The model that Heyman refers to has been called the "banking concept of education" by Paulo Freire. Students serve as empty vessels that are expected to take in knowledge from the teacher and later withdraw the information on a

test. According to critical pedagogy theory, this objectification of students leads to knowledge being an instrument of power.

To get around this, Heyman (2004) offers an example of an exercise he used in a geography class incorporating social justice pedagogy. The students in his class were responding to an article by Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins that looked at the way National Geographic magazine captured images of non-Western cultures from 1950-1986. Lutz and Collins argued that most of the pictures were taken in primitive contexts, thus reinforcing stereotypes. Heyman took excerpts from the students' essays and critiqued them. Heyman found that most of the students agreed with Lutz and Collins. However, their writing style reflected a style similar to taking an exam. There was little evidence that the students were writing in an academic style. As a follow-up, Heyman first had the students critique each other's works during a peer review session. After this initial grading stage, Heyman provided useful feedback on how to write in a more disciplinarian manner.

Summary

Based on the current literature, it suffices to conclude that there have been numerous attempts at addressing the geographic illiteracy amongst American youth. More states have adopted standards as compared to 20 years ago. More stringent assessments have been implemented that have consistently measured students' performance on their geographical knowledge across various grade levels.

The literature also suggests that teacher preparation needs to be a focus. Historically, social studies educators have had inadequate preparation in the field of

geography. This lack of education in the field of geography is especially magnified amongst teachers at the elementary school level. Educators not only emphasize the need for pre-service teachers to be adequately prepared in the field of geography, but to also be provided with pedagogical methods to enhance geography instruction and student learning in the classroom.

Many of the pedagogical strategies put forth recently involve utilizing higher-order thinking activities, personalizing learning through service-learning projects, and integrating technology. These recommendations mirror the same pedagogical methods stressed in other areas of teaching. The literature also suggests that teachers need to legitimize the field of geography both in their own minds as well as in those of students. Geography needs to be properly defined to students in order to get them to think it is a subject worthy of study.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In addressing the three research questions, two methods were utilized. First of all, in order to understand what utility there is in studying geography as well as what pedagogical methods are currently suggested, an extensive literature review was conducted. Articles were located using the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) search engine. Key words that were entered in the search engine were “geography,” “teacher education,” and “social studies.” Using the “search history” key words were combined to provide the most pertinent articles that addressed the research topic. In order to address the “current” aspect of trends in geography pedagogy, articles that were published prior to 1995 were not considered for the project. Exceptions were made if it added to the historical framework of the project.

Secondly, in order to address the research question of “what background in geography do social studies educators have and consequently, what are their attitudes and perceptions toward teaching geography?” a questionnaire was created for 7th-12th grade social studies teachers. The questions addressed the teachers’ subsequent backgrounds in geography as well as what grade level they primarily taught. It was important to gauge how much time they spent incorporating geography into their lessons as well as how they incorporated geography into their classrooms. They were further asked as to how they assess their students’ knowledge of geography. Lastly, teachers were asked the degree to which they felt that incorporating geography into their lessons would be beneficial to students.

Participants

In order to limit sampling error and achieve a more holistic sample of participants that would make for a more credible study, participants were not chosen randomly. Rather, all principals of each middle school and high school listed in the Ohio Department of Education school directory (see <http://ilrc.ode.state.oh.us/schools/Colist.asp>) were contacted with the survey attached (see <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?formkey=dGRVeklKdnEtck1QLTg5b29jSHNmNmc6MQ>). These principals were then instructed to forward the survey to their social studies teachers. In this manner, geographical, and urban/suburban/rural bias of answers were not factors in this study.

It should be noted, however, that the list of schools utilized from the Ohio Department of Education's website is not completely comprehensive. Currently, the Ohio Department of Education does not assign "report cards" to all vocational schools. Consequently, some vocational schools were not sent the survey because they were not listed on the ODE site. Typically, vocational schools enroll 11th and 12th graders and not surprisingly, teach social studies subjects that are for 11th and 12th graders (more often U.S. Government and Economics). Sometimes, teachers at vocational schools have discretion as to what social studies subjects are taught, but for simplicity, often adhere to the standard U.S. Government/Economics curriculum.

Data Collection

Data for this research project was collected through a 17-question form utilizing Google Documents. The survey included 5 closed-ended questions and 12 open-ended

questions (See Appendix A). The closed-ended questions asked the participants to indicate what grade level they primarily teach, how long they have taught, and if they are currently teaching a geography course. They also had to indicate what background in geography they have. Have they only had high school classes in geography? Have they only taken 1-3 college courses in geography? Have they had at least four college courses in geography? Did they earn a bachelor's degree in geography? Did they earn a graduate degree in geography? The last closed-ended question asked them how beneficial they believe geography instruction is for their students. They were given five answers to choose from ranging from extremely important to not at all important.

The remaining questions were open-ended. The first set of open-ended questions asked them to indicate what their students learn about the five themes of geography (location, place, human interaction with the environment, movement, and regions). Each of the themes was separated into separate questions and it wasn't indicated in the questions that these were the "five themes of geography."

Too often, what gets taught in classrooms is a different paradigm than what gets learned. Assessments provide a measurement of what students take away from the classroom. Therefore, five questions were included in the survey that asked how the students were being assessed for each of the five themes of geography. Participants were further queried as to what teaching methods should and should not be used when teaching geography as well as their reasonings for choosing or not choosing certain methods.

Some middle schools in Ohio include 5th and 6th grade. In order to avoid social studies teachers of these grades taking the survey, it was noted that only 7th-12th grade social studies teachers were eligible. A consent form notifying participants of the

voluntary nature of the project was included as an attachment in the e-mails sent to principals. It was indicated both to the principal and participating teachers that the consent form did not have to be filled out and returned. When I sent the survey it was stressed that if anyone had any questions they could send me an e-mail. No one participating in the survey did e-mail me with questions. I did inform principals that the goal of this project was to look for patterns in teacher preparation and attitudes toward the field of geography.

One hundred and seven teachers responded to the survey questions. The results of the survey will be explained in greater detail in chapter four but some general patterns are worth mentioning. The vast majority of the respondents (71 out of 107) had a geography background that included 1-3 college courses in geography. This is not surprising, given that social studies teachers are required to take a minimal amount of geography courses toward working on their degree. Only two respondents held a bachelor's degree in geography and zero respondents had a graduate degree in geography. There was a wide range of teachers of different grades with the exception of 12th grade teachers. Out of 107 teachers that completed the survey, only four were 12th grade teachers. A wide range of experience (number of years taught) was a characteristic of the sample. Nearly half the respondents had never taught a stand-alone geography course. The majority of the respondents (88 out of 107) indicated that they believed geography instruction was either very important or extremely important.

Data Analysis

The data collected from the completed surveys was analyzed along with the articles from the literature review to answer the research questions. Did the surveys

corroborate what the literature suggests? Were there discrepancies that indicate a paradigm shift regarding the state of geography education amongst American students? It has already been indicated that the majority of respondents have had at least 1-3 college-level geography classes. It was also noted that teachers who responded to the survey indicated a belief that geography instruction is either extremely or very important.

Given that the survey collected quantitative and qualitative data, a mixed data analysis was used. Qualitative data included the open-ended questions that participants responded to. These answers were categorized based on similarities and differences. When a correlation existed regarding participant characteristics and responses, that association was reported. The details of the findings are presented in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Summary of Closed-Ended Questions

In total, 107 teachers completed the survey. Teaching experience ranged from 24 participants indicating they had 0-5 years of teaching experience to 19 participants indicating they had more than 20 years of teaching experience. Sixteen participants were 7th grade teachers; 23 were 8th grade teachers; 27 were 9th grade teachers; 24 primarily taught 10th grade; 14 were 11th grade teachers. Only four out of 107 participants labeled themselves as primarily 12th grade social studies teachers. While it is not evident why this was the case but several factors may have contributed to this phenomenon. Firstly, some schools only require three full years of social studies education. Traditionally, if a school only requires three years, students typically will fulfill this requirement within the first three years of high school. With the introduction of the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT), which has a social studies component, students do not have the option during their 9th and 10th grade year to postpone social studies classes.

Not surprisingly, 71 out of 107 teachers who participated in this study indicated they had taken one to three college level geography courses. Twenty-six respondents indicated that they had taken at least four college courses in geography. Only eight respondents indicated that the highest level of geography education they received was at the high school level. Only two teachers possessed a bachelors degree in geography and no participant had a masters or doctorate degree in geography. The assumption that those

whose highest level of geography education took place in high school were those teachers who had taught for more than 20 years proved wrong. However, not one participant who had more than 20 years of teaching experience indicated that their highest level of geography education was in high school. The two participants who indicated high school geography was the highest level of education in that field had taught no more than five years. Four of the eight respondents who indicated high school geography classes as their highest level of geography education had taught for 11-15 years. The remaining two who answered likewise had taught for 6-10 years.

The fourth question in the survey asked teachers whether they ever or currently taught a geography course. Slightly more than half of the respondents indicated they have done neither. This should not be surprising due to the fact that traditionally there has been a lack of stand-alone geography classes offered in middle and high schools. Four participants indicated they were presently teaching a geography course and 38 had taught a geography course in the past year. Seven teachers responded that they have taught a geography course in the past year and are currently teaching a geography course.

The last closed-ended question asked teachers to rate on a Likert scale how important they believed geography instruction is for their students. More than four out of five teachers (82%) thought it was either very or extremely important. Seventeen teachers (16%) specified geography as somewhat important while two participants (nearly 2%) felt that geography instruction was not too important. None of the participants believed geography instruction to be not important at all.

An analysis of the 18 teachers who believed geography instruction was not very important showed that they were predominantly (72%) 9th and 10th grade teachers. I had

initially suspected that these teachers might primarily be 11th and 12th grade instructors who teach U.S. Government. Geography does serve many useful purposes in a Government class. When analyzing the Electoral College and voting behavior across different regions, map analysis becomes vital in understanding why certain groups in certain regions of the United States vote a certain way. Oftentimes government institutions are studied and compared on a global scale in U.S. Government classes. Therefore, it becomes imperative for geography instruction to be incorporated into the curriculum. However, those with little background in geography might find it hard to weave geography instruction in with other topics in a U.S. Government class. One might argue that 4 out of 107 survey participants might not be a statistically significant representation of that teacher demographic and thus not contribute valid observation. On the other hand, since all four of four 12th grade teachers (100%) responded similarly, there is some measure of agreement worth noting. Originally, I hypothesized that teachers responsible for instructing U.S Government would consider basic Geography classes irrelevant to their focus. My survey indicated the contrary. Most were 10th grade teachers and some indicated that their primary focus was the OGT. When asked, “what do your students learn about location?” one teacher responded:

“Not much from me, except as in how geography pertains to the OGT. My class is primarily OGT preparation.”

Other teachers indicated that they had little time to spend on geography due to their belief that the present framework of Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies does not require geography. One teacher noted:

“Considering Geography is not a requirement in terms of content standards, they learn geography relative to the areas in history we are talking about, mostly in WWI, WWII, for how Europe changes.”

It should be noted that the Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies *does* require teachers to cover Geography in the form of “People, Places, and Environment.”

Summary of Open-Ended Questions

The responses to the open-ended questions revealed a lot of the challenges that geography instruction continues to face in the school environment but also conveyed some positive trends. Firstly, when asked, “What teaching methods do you believe should be used when teaching geography?” very few responded by saying just one method. Even if it was indicated there might be a “best” method, teachers followed up by stating that one method should not be used all the time. One teacher responded:

“I use many teaching methods. Direct instruction, group work, jigsaw, etc. Some of the literacy strategies I have used are ‘diagramming the text.’ ‘Reading with a Question in mind,’ ‘fishbowl’ and ‘White Around.’ Sometimes I have the students do map activities. One of my favorites for learning maps is using online quizzes.”

Another teacher responded in a similar manner:

“I use a variety of methods. I find hands-on working with maps works. Google Earth is an excellent tool. I will give direct instruction when needed especially when going over key terms. I use collaborative work when developing a travel poster or pamphlet on an area.”

The fact that the majority of teachers responded with the idea that different teaching methods can be interpreted as a positive attribute of the quality of our teachers. When asked “What methods do you believe would be the least effective?” participants responded in a similar manner. They argued that only using one method of instruction would be the least effective. Thirty-four responded that direct instruction/lecture does not effectively motivate students to learn the material.

However, 31 teachers noted that direct instruction oftentimes is an ineffective in terms of motivating students to learn and does not promote higher-order thinking. One teacher’s answer corroborates this point:

“Direct instruction is sometimes dull and rote. Students are not always effectively engaged as they would be in a hands-on activity where they can demonstrate their skills in an authentic manner.”

A lot of the challenges that teachers face with both understanding and teaching geography as well as their misconceptions and attitudes were revealed in the open-ended questions pertaining to the five themes of geography. When asked what their students learn about location, place, human interaction with the environment, regions, and movement, 22 out of 107 teachers either indicated their students were learning very little about the five themes of geography or didn’t even understand the question. While 22 out of 107 teachers do not represent a majority, the fact that any participant would admit that they are not teaching their students about location, place, human interaction with the environment, movement, and regions suggests a need for the continued need to legitimize Geography as a field of study.

Twelve participants argued that they simply did not have the time to incorporate the five themes of geography, oftentimes because the focus was on OGT preparation or state standards. It could be gleaned from the responses that teachers felt they did not have time to teach the five themes as “individual lessons.” Did any of the data sets correlate with each other? For example, were those teachers with less of a geography background more likely to give simpler assessments than those whose geography background was at least a bachelor’s degree? Did the number of years of teaching experience cause a teacher to view geography instruction as either very important or not too important? How did the number of years of teaching experience correlate with what students learn about the five themes of geography? The assumption that those who had 0-5 years of teaching experience would view geography instruction as more important than those who have taught longer proved unsubstantiated. Furthermore, it was hypothesized that teachers who have less than five years of teaching experience to evaluate their students on the five themes of geography utilizing higher-order thinking assessments that went beyond simple recall of factual information. It was hypothesized that the reverse trend to be a characteristic of those who have taught for more than 20 years. According to the data collected, years taught, attitude toward the importance of teaching geography, and methods of assessment were not predictors of each other.

There was also no correlation between level of geography background and whether the participants believed geography instruction to be very important or not too important. I expected that those respondents who indicated they possessed a bachelor’s degree in Geography would use higher-order thinking lessons and assessments that challenged students to integrate geography themes into lessons. When asked, “How do

you assess what your students have learned about location, human interaction with the environment, etc, one of the teachers who possessed a B.S. in Geography responded with “map quizzes” for how his/her students are assessed for each of the five themes of Geography. Those whose highest geography education consisted of high school classes indicated that students are assessed through multiple-choice tests, map quizzes, and test questions based on OGT preparation.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary

Social Studies teachers' backgrounds and perceptions of geography have and will continue to influence the quality and quantity of geography education in the classroom. However, this phenomenon does not operate within a vacuum. Outside influences, most notably in the form of public policy shifts will continue to shape the future of geography as an academic discipline. According to the literature review, in the last 20 years, many efforts at the federal level to revitalize geography education in the K-12 setting have occurred. These have not only included implementing geography standards in order to guide the teaching and learning process but also assessments at the national and state level in order to measure learning outcomes.

Coinciding with this "renaissance" in Geography, there has been an increase in pedagogical strategies specific to Geography instruction put forth by educational theorists over the past 20 years. These strategies have included focusing on local issues that may involve service-learning projects, integrating technology for the purpose of facilitating the process of student inquiry, and integrating the process of academic writing. The literature also suggests utilizing Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. Kolb's theory recognizes that learners respond differently to four main learning styles and that teachers should provide differentiated instruction to accommodate this phenomenon. While the respondents of the survey did not specifically mention the use of Kolb's theory, they were adamant about utilizing pedagogical strategies that went beyond direct

instruction/lecture including differentiated instruction, the use of technology, and engaging students in service learning projects.

The literature on teacher preparation in the field of geography evinces that many educators do not have an adequate background in the field of geography. Teachers of the earliest grade levels are the least prepared. Those who teach in the 7th-12th grade setting are required to only take a certain amount of classes within each of the fields of Social Studies. Too often, this translates into fewer Geography classes being required as compared with History or Political Science. The data from the survey corroborates this fact. Only two of the 107 respondents had a bachelor's degree in geography. Over two-thirds of the participants had taken less than four courses in geography during college.

According to the data, there was no correlation between a social studies educator's background in geography and his or her attitudes and perceptions toward teaching geography. As discussed in chapter four, those whose background in geography included less than 1-3 courses in college-level geography compared with those who had at least four college courses in geography did not have a more negative attitude toward teaching geography. Furthermore, those whose background was at least a bachelor's degree in geography did not place a greater value on the subject or had any more innovative ways of assessing or teaching the subject in comparison with the other respondents. Furthermore, the survey data indicated that 12 participants responded that they simply did not have the time to incorporate the five themes of Geography, due to the focus on OGT preparation and state standards. Although 12 out of 107 respondents does not represent a majority, for any Social Studies teacher to argue that they "do not have time" to teach Geography indicates a need for greater teacher preparation as well as a

need to legitimize Geography as an academic discipline. Obviously if they weaved the five themes into their lessons in order to enhance the understanding of a particular time period, event, or political system, students would likely garner more from the lesson.

Recommendations

Improving geographic literacy amongst American youth has and will continue to be a multi-faceted endeavor. Based on the current literature and data collected from the survey, many factors need to work in harmony to improve Geography education.

First, better geography instruction in the classroom will partly come from an increased acceptance of Geography as an academic discipline in society and the classroom. It is not enough to view Geography as “very important” or “extremely important.” If teachers believe Geography to be “important,” yet argue they do not have time to teach the subject, they are already doing a disservice to their students and the field of Geography. The National Council for Social Studies (NCSS) needs to play a pivotal and active role in legitimizing Geography in the minds of Social Studies teachers.

Strategies need to be disseminated to teachers as to how to weave the five themes of Geography into their lesson plans. Value needs to be placed on the benefit of including the five themes. This may come from either the NCSS or the Association of American Geographers (AAG).

Secondly, teachers must improve their content knowledge of Geography if they seek to be successful teachers. This improvement needs to come from mentoring programs and/or peer support. Specifically, faculty from Geography departments at the university level should provide this peer support. This could manifest itself in providing 7th-12th grade Social Studies teachers with new and innovative teaching strategies, as well

as informing 7th-12th grade teachers of the latest trends in Geography. University faculty should also provide 7th-12th grade Social Studies teachers with information regarding scholarly journals that address the field of Geography. However, as evident from the data collected, improving teachers' content knowledge of Geography is only one factor in providing better Geography education, and a limited one at best.

A third important recommendation is the notion of moving away from Geography instruction limited to naming place names. Incorporating higher-order thinking activities, technology (including simulation exercises), academic writing, and collaboration is key to creating enriching learning environments that will help build interest and content knowledge about Geography.

Organizations such as the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for the Social Studies, and the National Council for Geographic Education, as well as those in the academic community should continue to advocate for a greater emphasis on geography education at the federal policy level, in the university setting, and in particular, in the K-12 setting. Lastly, it is incumbent upon Social Studies teachers to recognize they have an obligation to properly define, legitimize, and continue learning about geography. Only when all these factors work in accordance with each other, will students' geographic literacy improve.

APPENDIX A
Teacher Questionnaire

1. What grade level do you primarily teach?
 - a. 7th grade
 - b. 8th grade
 - c. 9th grade
 - d. 10th grade
 - e. 11th grade
 - f. 12th grade

2. How long have you been a social studies teacher?
 - a. 0-5 years
 - b. 6-10 years
 - c. 11-15 years
 - d. 16-20 years
 - e. More than 20 years

3. What is your background in geography?
 - a. High school classes in geography
 - b. 1-3 college courses in geography
 - c. At least four college courses in geography
 - d. Bachelors degree in geography
 - e. Graduate degree in geography

4. Have you ever or are you currently teaching a geography course?
 - a. I am currently teaching a geography course
 - b. I have taught a geography course in the past
 - c. Both a & b
 - d. Neither a & b

5. How beneficial do you believe geography instruction is for your students?
 - a. Extremely important
 - b. Very important
 - c. Somewhat important
 - d. Not too important
 - e. Not at all important

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