

‘Geography gives people a new understanding of the World, leading them to ask more questions and learn more’: Engaging with undergraduate students’ perspectives on the value of geography to a person’s education

Lauren Hammond and Grace Healy

Abstract

In this article, we explore perspectives on, and experiences of, geography education, by engaging with those looking at the field from a different vantage point than those working in it – those studying geography. The article begins by examining the importance of student voice in and to geography education, before drawing on a survey of 333 undergraduate geography students from across the British Isles conducted in late 2020. Through engaging with student perspectives, we contribute to discussions about the value of geography to a person’s education. We conclude by arguing both the importance of educators truly valuing student’s perspectives and experiences, and institutional mechanisms which support and empower geography educators in their practices in this regard.

Key words

Student voice, knowledge, geography education

Introduction: The importance of engaging with different perspectives on, and knowledges in, geography education

Education is embodied, affective and contested. Policy makers, academics, teachers, parents/carers, and children and young people all have views on what is taught/studied, how, why and by whom. These views are often shaped by a person's philosophies and values, and they may also be informed by a person's social and spatial experiences of education. They are both ontological and epistemological, and they are likely situated in, and may be shaped by, the place and time-space the person exists within, the communities of which an individual is part, and (inter and/or intra) national policies, practices and cultures.

In recent years, a significant strand of educational debate in the context in which we both live and work (England) has been framed by discussions about knowledge (Young, 2008; Young et al., 2014; DfE, 2022a). The 'knowledge turn' (Lambert, 2011; Chapman, 2021) has seen policy makers, teachers and researchers question the relationships between disciplines, knowledge, young people, society, and schooling; as they are, as they have been, and as (individuals and communities) envisage they might be in the future.

In the field of geography education, an important area of focus has been the examination of the contribution geography makes to a person's education (Lambert, 2016; Maude, 2016; Bustin, 2020). As part of these debates, amongst other things, literature has examined the importance of subjects (such as geography) framing the curriculum (Lambert, 2017), considered teacher-identities (Brooks, 2016), explored geography's 'place' in the contested and multi-layered space

of the curriculum (Rawling, 2020; 2022; Lambert and León, in press), and considered the complex and multi-scalar relationships between geography, education and injustice (Norcup, 2015; Brace and Souch, 2020; Puttick and Murrey, 2020; Hammond, 2022; Finn et al., 2022; Kasuji et al., 2022; Puttick, 2022). Literature has also examined the complex relationships between people (as individuals, communities, and societies) and the more-than-human world (Witt and Clarke, 2020; Walshe et al., 2022; Dunkley, in press), most recently in the context of the Anthropocene (Morgan, 2012; Nayeri, 2021).

Thus far, many of these debates have been philosophical in nature and/or written by those invested in geography education through their work or research. However, these conversations matter to teachers of geography, geography teacher educators, academics researching and teaching in geography, and students of geography. Considering who is supported and empowered to contribute to these debates is significant in exploring who shapes and creates knowledge, policies and practices in geography education, by which methods, and with and for whom. These considerations matter in thinking about whose voices are heard and whose interests are served in knowledge production, in teaching, and in the recontextualisation of knowledge for students and (beginning) teachers. As Rose (2020, n.p.) highlights in her editorial introduction for an issue of *Routes*¹, there are significant challenges posed by ‘who’ writes the discipline: ‘Last year, there were 21,000 professors in UK universities and only 140 of those 21,000 professors identified as black (and of those, only 25 identified as female)’.

¹ *Routes* journal is a publication that sixth form and undergraduate geography students can read and publish within.

Here, we contend that it is also important for those who teach geography to critically engage with ‘who’ has been part of the ‘knowledge teams’ that have contributed to the development of national curricula, examinations, specifications and textbooks (Winter, 2012, p. 278), when they engage in the recontextualisation of the discipline. Ultimately this can support teachers and educators in their roles as *policy actors* as opposed than *policy subjects* (Healy and Walshe, 2022), whereby they can be intentional with how they navigate and engage with policy, curricula and resources for geography education.

In this paper, we engage with the experiences and views of those looking at geography education from a different perspective than those working in it – those studying geography. We focus specifically on the experiences of undergraduate geography students and draw on a survey open to students across the British Isles which was conducted in late 2020 to shape this discussion. In doing so, we examine responses to the open-ended question ‘what (if any) contributions do you think geography makes to a person's education?’ In order to acknowledge the importance of this, in the next section of the paper, we explore the concept of student voice and examine why it is significant in and to geography education. We draw on literature from across educational phases to support and inform the discussion. Following this, we introduce the research and engage with student perspectives as to the value of geography to a person’s education. We conclude by arguing both the importance of educators truly valuing student’s perspectives and experiences, and institutional mechanisms which support and empower geography educators in their practices in this regard.

The importance of student voice in, and to, geography education

Educational institutions are always spaces of diversity; buildings and grounds vary, as do the identities and views of teachers, academics, estate and professional staff, students, and wider communities including parents/carers and those living near to institutions (Jerome and Starkey, 2021). Gender, 'race', religion, along with influences including 'political engagement, disability, languages spoken or understood, class, experience of internal or international migration, sexual orientation, having siblings, position in the family, family recomposition, interest in music, arts, sport' (Jerome and Starkey, 2021, p. 14) may all influence an individual's experiences of, and perspectives on, education. These experiences and perspectives matter to educators in making decisions about what and how to teach, and to educational leaders and policy makers in ensuring that institutions meet the needs of individuals and communities. For example, with regards to safeguarding processes and access to free school meals, but also in challenging injustices through the act of teaching.

The policies, practices and philosophies as to how a student is supported and empowered to contribute to discussions varies between students of different ages, between places, across time-space and between institutions. In the context of schools, the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) Article 12 'guarantees the child the right to express his or her views freely 'in all matters affecting the child' and for these views to be 'given due weight' in decision-making processes (Osler and Starkey, 2018, p. 37). Significantly, 'schools and other agencies serving children have an obligation to confirm to such standards and governments the responsibility to ensure them' (Osler and Starkey, 2018, p. 37).

In educational spaces - such as schools - students may wish to contribute to discussions about matters which interest or concern them in a geography lesson (e.g., urban change in their locality), and about wider issues in, and around, the institution, in their communities and around the world. For example, children and young people may wish to discuss safety around campus, a theme which may also relate to a person's identities and feelings about being in that space (Hammond and Healy, in press). Children and young people may also want to discuss significant issues in the world, including the climate and ecological crises (Walshe, 2013; BERA, 2021; Walker, 2021), and systemic and everyday socio-spatial injustices (Hammond, 2021; Pike, 2021). It is of critical importance that young people of all ages are supported, informed and empowered to have a role in political processes and 'have a voice in decision-making processes that affect them' (Osler and Starkey, 2018: p.37), at a variety of scales.

Educational spaces can be liberating and offer opportunities for (young) people to think about the world in new ways, to develop life-long friendships and interests, and to access different and new communities. However, children and young people have often been subordinated in education (Catling, 2014), through both formal and hidden curricula and cultural expectations. Applying Foucault's (2004, p. 7) term to education, it can be seen that schools have, at times, *subjugated knowledges*. For example, through blocks of knowledge that have been 'buried or masked in functional coherences or formal systemizations' – i.e. through curricula decision making – but, also through knowledges that have been conceptualised and represented as hierarchically inferior (often localised, or what might be conceptualised as 'everyday' knowledge). Indeed, as Lizotte and Nguyen (2021) explore with regards to public schools in

France, educational spaces can be seen as geopolitical sites. Not only are schools' spaces 'where contemporary struggles over identity, belonging, and security play out', but states also 'mobilize their public education systems and individual schools in the service of their territorial security interests', and 'the characteristics of schooling as an institution impact how teachers and their students rework, contest, and/or acquiesce to these geopolitical maneuvers' (p. 921).

Critical consideration of student voice, and the relationships between schooling and society are significant to considering the spaces that education (re)produces. In the remainder of this paper, we engage with the views of undergraduate geography students. Whilst most school students do not go on to study geography at university (Brace and Souch, 2020; Oakes and Rawlings Smith, 2022), engaging with the perspectives of undergraduate students has the potential to be illuminating to debates about the value of geography education for children and young people. This is because undergraduate students are often 'temporarily close to their school education, but also close to the frontiers of geography in their university studies' (Hammond and Healy, in press, p. XX), thus providing them with a unique vantage point to reflect on geography education across phases.

Challenging assumptions about the value of geography to a person's education by engaging with those we teach

After period of significant focus on the 'knowledge turn' in geography education in England (especially by educators interested in secondary education), more recently research has begun to (re)engage with active consideration as to the value, methods, pedagogies and ethics of education

and teaching. This has included active consideration as to how, and why, it is important to engage with the experiences and perspectives of children and young people within and beyond the classroom (Catling and Martin, 2011; Walshe, 2017; Roberts, 2017; Witt and Clarke, 2018; Hammond, 2020; BERA, 2021). This paper draws upon a survey of undergraduate students who were studying geography across the British Isles in late 2020. The research was conducted following BERA's (2018) ethical guidelines and ethical approval was granted by IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society. Whilst there are many methods which support research with, for and/or by students', our decision to use a survey was to both ensure that data could be collected ethically and safely during the Covid-19 pandemic and to engage with a large cohort of students. The survey was shared with Heads of Geography Department's in universities across the British Isles (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the Republic of Ireland) by the Royal Geographical Society, and via social media. Throughout the survey respondents were encouraged to reflect on their geographical education to date, including consideration of both their experiences of school geography and geography in the academy, and significantly the relationships between these different educational spaces. In this article, we reflect on students' responses to the question 'what (if any) contributions do you think geography makes to a person's education?'

333 students responded to at least part of the survey, with 123 responding to this question which was open ended and asked participants to respond in their own words. One of the 123 responses stated, 'don't understand this question', but all others provided a narrative response. We inductively analysed responses to the question, allowing themes to emerge from the data. Due to the holistic and reflective nature of the questions, we consider responses together and, in this

paper, we do not analyse the data by university, year of study or demographic/identity-based data. This is to support active consideration of the main themes to emerge from the data, with a more nuanced account provided in Healy and Hammond (in preparation).

Through analysis, 17 themes which represented the contribution geography makes to a person’s education were identified. These themes were then grouped with similar themes and five overarching themes were identified, with the original themes becoming sub themes. The percentage of respondents that were coded as related to each of the themes are shown in table one. Responses were coded as relating to all themes they were connected to, and there are relationships between themes. For example, becoming (more) aware of issues in the world may be an affective experience for students, and potentially impact on individual and collective decisions and futures.

| Theme | Sub theme | Percentage of respondents (rounded to the closest integer) |
|---|--|---|
| Skills - considers the skills a geographical education develops. | Critical thinking | 13% |
| | Life skills | 4% |
| | Skills (including - but not limited to – problem solving, research methods, data analysis, statistics, literacy) | 47% |
| Knowledge - reflects the different knowledge(s) a geographical education supports a person to develop and/or engage with. | Knowledge of the world and how it works | 75% |
| | Knowledge of issues and events in the world | 34% |
| | Knowledge about other places, people, cultures and systems | 28% |
| | Knowledge about and/or of value to everyday life | 28% |

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|--|---|-----|
| | Knowledge about the discipline of geography | 4% |
| | Knowledge of, and connections to, other disciplines / interdisciplinarity | 33% |
| Affective - referring to the affective dimensions of a geographical education. | Empathy | 14% |
| Perspectives- representing the vantage points and perspectives a geographical education can provide a person with / introduce a person to. | Spatial | 11% |
| | Scale (as a geographical zoom lens) | 13% |
| | To think with 'a different view' | 28% |
| | Being human in the world | 11% |
| | A holistic / 'well-rounded' perspective | 52% |
| Futures - considering the opportunities for the future a geographical education can provide to individuals, society and the world. | Personal futures (next steps in employment, study and life) | 20% |
| | Acting and actions in the world (individual and societal) | 19% |

Table one: Themes identified from students' response to the question 'what (if any) contributions do you think geography makes to a person's education?'

Table one shows that the respondents considered both the nature of geography, but also geography (as a discipline's) relationships with other subjects and to everyday life. Table one also suggests that the respondents valued the geographical knowledge and skills they developed in, and through, their education, and also considered the perspectives by which this knowledge was generated and/or provided them with, and the (potential) impacts this had on individual and collective futures. In the next section of this paper, we examine respondents' perspectives on geographical knowledge, before moving on to also consider their views on the relationships between skills and education. Finally, we consider responses coded as related to perspectives in, and on, geography education. We have chosen these areas for the discussion because these were the ones most widely discussed by respondents to the survey.

Research findings

Knowledge, and the power and potential of geographical education is a much-debated area, which is significant to considering the construction and representation of school geography. Analysis found that respondents to the survey valued the knowledge they engaged with in, and through, their geographical education. For example, three quarters (75%) of respondents reported that geography was valuable because it gave them knowledge about the world and how it works. As one respondent stated, geography gives one a ‘broad understanding of human and physical systems that are key to the world and its functioning (or dysfunction)’. Here, the respondent can be seen to be expressing the importance of knowledge of systems and processes (natural, human and interconnected), that help a person to better understand the world, and their relationships to it. As one respondent commented, ‘Geography can make you feel a part of every existing creature on our planet. You realize how small you are in such a big world’.

Around one third (34%) of participants valued developing their knowledge of issues and events in the world. For example, 14% of respondents expressed that studying geography helped to develop their knowledge of climate change, often explaining that this supported them in better understanding the world and making decisions about how to act in it. As one respondent commented:

‘Geography graduates gain knowledge from a variety of subjects and topics unlike some more specialised degrees. They also become more knowledgeable on current issues in society, whether its inequality or climate change, which will make them more aware.’

The relationships between studying geography and students’ everyday lives were prevalent in just under a third of responses. As one student commented ‘Geog helps to see how the everything in the world is linked together which includes how our actions affect the world

around us'. Here, another respondent noted (geography is) 'important because it also applies to real world problems which need to be discussed with students from a young age.' This has significant relationships with the affective nature of geography, and the importance of recognising and empowering young people as citizens (Starkey et al., 2014), who have agency over how they act in the world today and in their futures.

Skills was another key theme identified through analysis. Just under half (47%) of the respondents consider the development of skills in, and through, geography as a significant contribution the discipline makes to education. As one respondent commented:

'Geography is such a well-rounded subject and incorporates both a diverse range of knowledge and skills. Academic learning through geography can boost critical thinking, innovation, digital fluency, collaborative working, global citizenship, ethical practise, interpersonal skills, creativity and research practices to name a few.'

In the analysis, we considered the idea of skills broadly with students commenting on a range of as skills which are important in, and to, geography. These skills included but were not limited to; research skills including consideration of research ethics, analytical skills, data analysis skills, writing and statistical skills. Skills which are important to engaging with, and progressing in, geography, but are also likely to be transferable and valuable in other elements of life, and next steps in respondents' studies or careers.

The importance of critical thinking was valued by 13% of respondents, with one respondent noting:

‘Geography provides a lense through which to see the world, and the cross-scale and critical approach the discipline takes is integral and invaluable to understanding our world today.’

However, one respondent also heeded a warning, stating ‘I think it tries to expand one’s opinions on some matters but many modules and the course itself is dominated by a lecturer’s own political and personal beliefs’. This can be seen as the respondent engaging with the politics of knowledge production and teaching, and considering their perspectives as to how (often complex and contested) geographies are explored in classrooms, out in the field and in lecture theatres.

In terms of perspectives, significantly, the term ‘well-rounded’ was used to describe geography by one fifth (20%) of respondents to the survey. With over 50% of respondents referring to the combination of knowledge and skills, interdisciplinarity, and the idea of geography providing both a wide lens view of the world in some way. Respondents often highlighted that they enjoyed the diversity of the discipline, but also the opportunity to specialise. Indeed, as the quotation we use in the title of this paper suggests, geography is valued because it can support and empower young people, not only to learn about the world but to ask questions about it. Whilst this particular respondent does not unpack this further, we might expect the value of asking questions lies in enabling people to uncover taken-for-granted systems and practices, and perhaps even subjugated knowledges, the value of this may ultimately be to challenge systemic and everyday injustices.

Responses that were analysed as relating to perspectives considered not only students’ reflections on the value of studying geography to their futures and/or their careers, but also active consideration of the importance of better understanding the world. For example, one respondent

noted; ‘I think geography is excellently valuable in understanding the world around you, something important even if you don't plan on pursuing geography as your career or main academic pursuit.’ This response can be seen to reflect a perspective that there is value in studying geography which goes beyond what might be conceptualised as an extrinsic aim of education (e.g. to gain qualifications or access certain careers). In this case, it appears that the respondent perceives that there is an intrinsic value in studying geography (Biesta, 2015). This perception can also be inferred from a respondent reflecting on the importance of studying geography in the present time- space, for example through comments including (geography) ‘gives a broader understanding and appreciation for the surrounding world, how humans interact with it and the impacts we have on it.’ To borrow the language used by the Geographical Association’s (2009) manifesto, it can be seen that this respondent felt that geography provided them with the opportunities and tools to think with ‘a different view’.

Finally, respondents also considered how geography is/has been viewed and represented by others and if and how this relates to their own experiences and perspectives. For example:

‘...I loved the variety of things I could learn about under the term Geography, and for me being able to carry on studying things from other disciplines alongside my passion was so important. I think it also gives us a worldview which is unique to the discipline. It is also an undervalued subject, in my opinion, as it is often perceived to either simply be about volcanoes, rivers and rocks or “colouring in”, but in reality it is so much more. There is an opportunity for everyone to find something that they enjoy learning about.’

In this example, the respondent appears to be exploring how they negotiate and contest perspectives on geography education, and how geography has been valuable to them as an individual.

Conclusions

Geography education has been described as a limited field (Butt, 2020), with research regularly self- or un- funded, and conducted by those (like us) who are working in, and passionate about, geography and education. However, geography matters to students, both in their day-to-day experiences of education, and also supporting their development as agentic people in their lives and futures. As the data presented in this paper suggests, students often see an intrinsic value in studying geography as it develops their knowledge of the world and supports them in making decisions about how to act in it. Studying geography is also an affective experience for many, and this dimension is important to both students (in considering their actions in the world, and perhaps more immediately, in their sense of safety, belonging and empowerment in educational spaces), and to educators in considering what and how they teach.

Whilst the data shared in this article cannot be considered representative of undergraduate students studying geography across the British Isles (or beyond), it provides a useful insight into how students perceive the value of geography in, and to, education. These insights are valuable to those teaching and researching in geography in schools and universities. In particular, when considering what, how and why, they teach geography; how students are supported in their studies; and how students are supported as they academically and socially transition between educational phases (Tate and Hopkins, 2019; 2020). For example, the data presented in this article, drawn from the narratives of students who are temporarily close to their school education, but engaging with exciting disciplinary debates in their undergraduate studies, contributes to discussions about what it means to make progress in geography and as a geographer. In addition, the respondents identify specific areas of concern to them, and that are important for educators to

engage with. This includes critically reflecting upon how P/political geographies are explored in education and how this is shaped by wider educational ecologies (such as DfE policy in political impartiality in schools in the English context (DfE, 2022)).

Ultimately, we argue that in examining the value of geography to a person's education, it is of critical importance that a multitude of perspectives and are engaged with, to explore how geography has been experienced, and is perceived, and the impact(s) this has on individuals and communities. This requires not only consideration of what is taught, but also critical reflection on the ethics, methodologies, pedagogies, and spaces and places of teaching. For example, in considering how different pedagogies can lead to the (re)production of spaces of opportunity and discussion between (young) people and educators. Here, we contend that it is important for all of those involved in geography education to engage with, and contribute to, debates in the field. This engagement should be supported by multi-scalar infrastructure that allows students, academics, teachers and educators time, and provides them with the resources and infrastructure (e.g. ethics systems), to engage with research and debates in ways which benefit them as students and educators, and for the latter, the children and young people they teach. This is a matter of intergenerational justice, in supporting and empowering communities with knowledge and skills to shape geographical research and teaching. The value of this lies in providing children and young people with the ideas, knowledges and time to empower them in making decisions about the futures they want for themselves as individuals, for communities and for the world.

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