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# The Good of Geography

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If you look at school curriculums these days you may find that geography has taken a back seat. In fact, quite often, it's all the way back with duffel bags and the family gerbil. With time limited and the conversion of "history" first to social studies, then to thematic learning, geography with its principal products of South Africa and its animals of the taiga may seem precious, quaint, and irrelevant.

And, seriously, what good is geography?

## Building Curiosity

Let's start by asking, equally seriously, what good is education? There's an obvious answer, but maybe a subtler one hiding behind it. Education is good because the distinctive life of humans involves using language and symbols. Lurking behind that, however, is another answer. Education is good because it broadens our horizons. All of us have grown from infants whose world ends at their fingertips—what they can't touch doesn't exist—into babies, whose world embraces mostly what they can see and hear, and finally into adults, whose world includes everything they can think about. Education is supposed to give us a whole lot to think about.

Education is good because it lifts our eyes (unto the hills, as a geographer or psalmist might say). If properly done and the stars align, education also leaves us with curiosity; what lies beyond those hills? Suddenly, we see a role for geography.

If education leads us further and further away from ourselves, outward into imagined worlds, what better subject to provide some

structure for organizing the knowledge? All early education can be thought of as building an inner dresser, a piece of mental furniture with thousands of drawers; to push the metaphor, later education fills those drawers and cross-labels them. In its simplest form, then, geography can help a growing mind first by establishing that there are places beyond one's home, and then by labeling them. However a school construes geography—and it is understood in many and often different ways—it should at least make the drawers and label them.

## Geography at Home

Like the growth of a child's horizon, geography can start at home. Young children who are learning to handle pencil and paper can have a hilarious (and fascinating) time drawing maps of their worlds. They can have fun with a map of the bedroom, a map of the kitchen, a map of the neighborhood, drawn freehand.

If you drive a familiar route you can play wonderful games even with 3- or 4-year-olds. See if they can remember things just before they appear—a fast food joint, a distinctive sign, a tall

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building, a garden gnome, a bridge. Tell them that in two weeks they will be the pilots of the trip and you will follow their instructions—though you might want a backup plan for when you need to

ignore them. It works just as well for a walking route or a regular ride on the subway. Even before they can read, children can learn names: roads, buildings, schools, gas stations, restaurants.

Most 4- and 5-year-olds are crazy about jigsaw puzzles. As they move from 12 pieces to 50 pieces to 300 pieces, get them geographical puzzles, where they fit the states or countries into an outline frame. When they can do it easily, take away the frame.

When they can do that, have them do it with the pieces upside down, especially if the names of the states are written on the reverse side. And don't forget the continent and ocean puzzles.

As children grow, the field opens up. Many love flags. New York is a wonderful place to see flags—the Bank of Brazil, a Danish baker, most any hofbräu, and, of course, for total overload, the United Nations. At first, names of countries will just be words, but a little extra information—Brazil is in South America, Brazil is famous for its soccer players, Brazilians speak Portuguese, you remember our friends the Da Silvas, the equator goes through Brazil—makes the names come alive. If you want to go whole hog, get a poster of the flags of the world, cut them up and paste them on 3 x 5 cards, with the countries' names on the back. Kids are like sponges and knowledge is fun if you make it so. Get into the trenches with them and remember that even quick praise (especially when they beat you) puts frosting on the cake.

Family travel teaches geography with astonishing efficiency and ease. A young man who has been to India knows a lot; a young woman whose family took a summer driving trip across the country, ditto. The trips will produce different types of knowledge, however. Flying trips create a drawer (“India”) and cram it full of exotic sights and foods. That map with the crawling airplane on the seatback video helps, but not very much. The driving trip, however, not only makes a drawer (“New Orleans”) and fills it with muffaletta, but also leaves the girl in the back seat with an unrolling geographic narrative as the climate changes, the distances are measured by the hour, and each night on the road gives her time to absorb and assimilate the geography.

Finally, and this is not a paid commercial, you might think about a subscription to *National Geographic*. There is such great stuff in this magazine, whether sunken ships or old men in the

Altay Mountains hunting elk on skis. Put it in the bathroom where the kids can flip through the pictures. Surprisingly often, they'll read whole articles.

## Geography in School

Geography shouldn't stop when school begins, either. As you begin the process of looking at schools for your children, whether public, private or

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parochial, see what each one says about geography. In fact, do more than listen to the tour guide: let the building itself speak. Go deaf and just look. Are there maps in the classrooms? Globes? Flags? Atlases? Do the hallways have pictures of

other places? Have the sixth graders posted crude poster-board maps of famous battles? Does the playground have the earth painted on the blacktop? Does the school perhaps have a whole classroom devoted to teaching geography? There is a lot to be learned just by looking.

You may also want to ask yourself about the extent to which geography seems politicized. In some schools, it is taught to illustrate or even prove a particular theory. It may be a theory you agree with (climate change is real and pernicious), but dispute should not be the only use of geography.

There are wonderful ways to bring geography into a modern classroom. Foremost, geography should accompany history, for the two play off and deepen each other. Should a chapter touch on the Mormon migration, for example, it is practically an engraved invitation to stop, look at a map, and talk. Talk about westward migration, talk about 19th-century settlement, talk about the topography and climate of the continent, and, finally, show how the Mormons settled in an area previously judged uninhabitable because they saw what few others had: the Wasatch Mountains, brimming with water. The ancient history class should follow Hannibal across

the Alps, elephants piteously falling to their deaths, while the Romans snooze because they believe no one could invade that way.

On its own, geography can prepare a student for world citizenship. It is unexpectedly valuable to know the climate of Australia, the countries that neighbor China, the capital of Slovenia (and its peculiar spelling). Further, it need not be drudgery. Drawing flags in fifth grade can while away the time very pleasantly, especially when you get to the lion of Sri Lanka, the “Zimbabwe bird,” or the AK-47 on the flag of Mozambique. There is a company (Map of the Month, easily findable on line) that sells a wide range of paper maps the size of a student’s desk, and teachers will find good ways to use them, like a game of “neighbors,” starting in September with countries labeled, moving in January to the same map, unlabeled, and finally in March to no map at all.

Middle schools are all invited to participate in the National Geographic Bee. The school has to sign up and it is a bit of a hassle, but the excitement in the sixth, seventh and eighth grades is real as classrooms yield their champs and these champs take part in the finals. The winner takes a written test and with it, in New York, the chance to go to Albany and battle it out with the 99 other best young geographers in the state.

Many schools, alas, have sort of given up on geography or use it only in a tendentious way. On your first visit, you may not see any maps, flags, and globes. If you love the school even so, you may want to plan a lot of family travel and get that yellow magazine into your bathroom. And—remember the animals of the taiga?—you haven’t lived until you’ve seen bobcats in the boreal forests. Unless, of course, you’re a snowshoe rabbit. Then, you have lived.

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