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Guest Editorial

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Powerful geography and the future of geographic education

Rafael de Miguel González
University of Zaragoza, Spain

The concept of 'powerful knowledge' was proposed 15 years ago by sociologist of education Michael Young, who developed this idea to refer to what 'knowledge can do or what intellectual power it gives to those who have access to it' (2008: 14). In particular, he argues that the main purpose of schools should be to teach a powerful knowledge enabling students to understand and think beyond the limits of their own experience. Drawing upon Young's work, geography educators have begun to consider the notion of 'powerful geographical knowledge' (Catling and Martin, 2011; Lambert, 2014; Maude, 2016; Morgan, 2011; Roberts, 2014). Power implies a capacity to do something that has an effect or outcome, so powerful geographical knowledge should be geographical knowledge that has powerful outcomes for people who have it, and particularly school students.

However, it is important to distinguish 'powerful knowledge' from 'knowledge of the powerful'. According to Young, knowledge of the powerful 'is defined by who gets the knowledge in a society' (2008: 14), so the ruling ideas are the ideas of the ruling class. In geography, knowledge of the powerful was defined during the 19th century by Geographical Societies as institutions to promote the advancement of geographical science, but also to use cartography to advance the project of colonialism in Africa and Asia as they had strong support from the mercantile, diplomatic, and military classes. Thus, 'geographical knowledge of the powerful' served as a mean of political and economic control and oppression of other territories for imperial purposes. In the 20th century, geographical knowledge of the powerful was indeed influenced by academic structures (Johnston and Sidaway, 2016: 8–9, 27), financially dependent upon government funding and private sponsorship. This, combined with technological advancements, enabled a reinforcement of geographical knowledge of the powerful with the rise of quantitative paradigms in the discipline (Murphy and Mamadouh, 2022). These processes are even more evident in the 21st century, where geographical knowledge of the powerful is based on computational analysis and Geographical Information Systems, geo-big data, geo-AI, and geospatial intelligence for military purposes.

By contrast, 'powerful geographical knowledge' provides students and citizens with new ways of thinking about the world for engaging debates on global understanding from local experience. It also encompasses a geographic education and curriculum committed to cognitive processes that go beyond personal experience, which offers an opportunity for disadvantage people to 'acquire powerful knowledge… to move, intellectually at least, beyond their particular local circumstances' (Young, 2008: 15). In other words, 'powerful geographical knowledge' enables students to comprehend the interconnectedness of

Corresponding author:
Rafael de Miguel González, University of Zaragoza, Pedro Cerbuna 12, Zaragoza, Spain.
Email: rafaelmg@unizar.es

various global and local issues, and it is vital for pupils' empowerment as citizens to become aware of their civil rights and the challenges of sustainability for the betterment of their respective communities.

In an attempt to implement powerful pedagogies in the Australian school geography curriculum, Maude (2018) defines five types of knowledge that may be considered both powerful and geographical, namely knowledge that provides students with powerful ways of thinking, analyzing, inquiring, explaining, and understanding spaces, places, environments, interactions, distributions, spatial models, generalizations, and so on, or knowledge that enables students to follow and participate in debates on significant local, regional, national, and global issues, based on a deep knowledge of the world.

In the United States, the *Geocapabilities* project was initially launched with a pilot study in 2011, funded by a grant to the American Association of Geographers (AAG) from the U.S. National Science Foundation, and grounded upon the concept of powerful geographical knowledge. Subsequently, between 2013 and 2015, and funded by a European Commission Comenius project, this initiative developed through a process of international collaboration involving a considerable amount of original research and pilot testing with teachers and teacher educators related to the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union (IGU-CGE), the U.S. National Center for Research in Geography Education, and the European Association of Geographers (EUROGEO), but also related to the British institutions contributing to the academic debate, including the Institute of Education (University College London) and the Geographical Association. Geocapabilities was extended for a third phase (2018–2021) by means of a European Commission Erasmus + project.

Over the last decade, powerful geographical knowledge and geocapabilities have been two highlighted lines of innovation and research in geographic education (Brooks et al., 2018; Lambert et al., 2015; Mitchell et al., 2022) and in presentations at geographic education conferences organized by the IGU-CGE, the AAG, and EUROGEO, thus allowing a fruitful dialogue around these two concepts among international geography educators coming from diverse communities not only in North America but also Continental Europe, Latin America, and Asia, as expressed in the forthcoming *Handbook of Geography Education*. Powerful geographical knowledge and geocapabilities aim to better explain and understand the world; to think about alternative futures of geographic education based on social justice; and to emphasize the role of teachers as curriculum leaders who help young people develop greater potential to lead a life informed by geography's powerful knowledge, especially through the acquisition of geographical knowledge with new geospatial technologies (De Miguel et al., 2019; Fargher, 2018).

An initiative derived from the previous one is *Powerful Geography*, developed by the Grosvenor Center for Geographic Education (Texas State University) and the National Center for Research in Geography Education (AAG). Powerful Geography is a new approach to teacher training and geography education based on theories of human development and powerful disciplinary knowledge, having its roots in Geocapabilities. A proposed curriculum such as Powerful Geography is based upon a simplified content framework, from the five themes of the U.S. National Standards (location, place, relationships, movement, and regions) to the four domains of Powerful Geography (human geography, physical geography, environment and society, places and regions) (Boehm et al., 2018), but changing the teaching and learning perspective from top-down to bottom-up. The powerful knowledge framework also includes geospatial technologies and geographic skills as cross-cutting topics with the four content areas, taking into account personal and career goals and aspirations of students, thus broadening the discipline of geography and the geographical workforce. Therefore, Powerful Geography seeks to make connections between student interest and the real world, and to raise awareness and appreciation among students about geography and its applicability to a wide range of jobs and careers.

In Europe, a parallel approach has been developed by EUROGEO, but it has been contextualized in the *European Framework of Key Competences*

for Lifelong Learning (European Commission, 2019). For European geography educators, powerful (and useful and transformative) geography is based on three competences: geographical thinking, spatial thinking, and spatial citizenship, related to the three components of the European Framework (knowledge, skills, and values), respectively, or to three dimensions of geographic education – geographical knowledge, geographical skills, and geographical practices (De Miguel, 2020; De Miguel and Donert, 2022), as Geography is able to face the complexity and diversity of processes, systems, and interconnections in human–environment relations by developing analytical thinking, critical thinking, and lateral thinking (De Miguel, 2019). Additionally, EUROGEO has implemented the Geography, Democracy, European Citizenship, and the Digital Age (GEODEM) initiative. This has led to the development of a constructive and meaningful dialogue among geography educators from 23 European countries and beyond, and the agreement of a GEODEM benchmark statement about what to teach and how to teach geography in order to empower students as citizens. In this case, powerful geography helps students recognize the societal relevance of Geography when learning about Europe and to weigh up the importance of European values and European rights in the face of local, national, and global challenges.

This influence of powerful geographic knowledge and geocapabilities has recently resulted in other curriculum proposals based on powerful geography, either in primary (Dolan, 2020) or secondary education (Enser, 2021). Powerful geographical knowledge and geocapabilities have also been influential in opening a dialogue in this journal on the relationship between powerful school geography and the future of geography as an academic field of study based on an open pluralist pedagogy to take the discipline forward (van Meeteren, 2023).

The powerful geography movement has considerable potential to cultivate 'spaces of hope' (Harvey, 2000) among the next generation of geography teachers and students. As President of the EUROGEO, it is my hope that a pedagogy based upon a powerful geography will help reshape the future of geographic education in the 21st century.

ORCID iD

Rafael de Miguel González https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9347-5296

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