

Interrogating Place, Space, Power and Identity: An Examination of Florida's Geography Standards

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Abstract: In this paper, we examine Florida's sixth-eighth grade geography standards to determine the potential for teaching critical geography, a field that interrogates space, place, power, and identity. While 57% of the standards demonstrated evidence of critical thinking, only six standards foster higher levels of critique consistent with critical geography.

Current conversations about 21st century learners stress the importance of skills necessary to function in a global society. These conversations have raised awareness of the interconnectedness of economic issues, problematized notions of citizenship, and complicated political and cultural boundaries (Castles, 2007; Suarez-Orozco, 2004). In the United States, the social studies curriculum at the K-12 level builds a foundation to help students address these issues. However, as reading and math are privileged in the current high-stakes testing environment and research initiatives encourage Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) disciplines, social studies education is marginalized in American school systems (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, & Stewart, 2012). As a result, social studies is taught only when it is tested, and these tests usually only feature American history and civics knowledge. A global perspective requires knowledge, skills, and dispositions addressed within geography-related material (Hanvey, 1982), yet geography courses are virtually non-existent in primary and secondary schools.

In this paper, we examine the importance of, and potential for, geography as a discipline to prepare global citizens. In order to do this we feature data from a larger cross-case analysis of geography standards. Our analysis uses a lens that privileges critical geography, a field that interrogates the intersection of place, space, power and identity. Florida Department of Education's (FLDOE) Next Generation Sunshine State Standards (NGSSS, FLDOE, 2008a) at the middle school level were analyzed to determine where there is potential to have conversations facilitated by critical geography. We argue that a foundation in this field helps individuals develop an inclusive global perspective and higher level critical thinking skills.

Conceptual Framework

One cannot understand the complexity of global issues without an understanding of geographic concepts. Critical geographers are scholars interested in interrogating space, place, power, and identity, arguing that distinctions over location are never neutral (Allen, 2003; Helfenbein, 2009). This vein of inquiry was developed in response to traditional geographic literature dominated by racism, ethnocentrism, and paternalism (Harvey, 2001). Critical geography analyzes the relationships and intersections between place and space, in regards to how these concepts operate within domains of power or contribute to identity formation (Helfenbein & Taylor, 2009).

A key distinction must be made between how traditional and critical geographers theorize *space* and *place*. *Geography for Life: National Geography Standards* (Boehm & Bednarz, 1994) favors a traditional notion of absolute space defined by location and distance. Place represents a

set of relationships between environmental and human characteristics. Critical geographers problematize the notion that space is bounded, objective, and temporal (Massey, 2005). They argue space as traditionally conceptualized is actually socially constructed. However, spaces overlap and interact and are not restricted by time. “For (critical) geographers, place is the localized community – filled with meaning for those that spend time there” (Helfenbein, 2009, p. 306). Because place is influenced by human components, it is political and cultural.

Gruenewald (2003) outlines a framework for what he calls place-conscious education. This framework outlined five dimensions of place that can aid in the analysis of geographic education: the perceptual, sociological, ideological, political, and ecological. Gruenewald (2003) reminds educators that

A multidisciplinary analysis of place reveals the many ways that places are profoundly pedagogical. That is, as centers of experience, places *teach* us about how the world works and how our lives fit into the spaces we occupy. Further, places *make* us: As occupants of particular places with particular attributes, our identity and our possibilities are shaped. (p. 621)

This approach helps students consider multiple perspectives as they recognize that place consists of more than just physical features and is influenced by identity, ideology, and power.

Consider the following scenario as an example of how place is political. In April 2012 Ozzie Guillen, the manager of the Florida Marlins baseball team, was suspended due to public out-cry over statements he made indicating he admired and respected Cuban dictator Fidel Castro (Thomposon & Macur, 2012). While Guillen’s statement may have shocked or angered baseball fans throughout the U.S., his words were particularly offensive to Marlin fans. In order to understand the reaction to these statements individuals, need to understand the historical roots of the controversy within this specific location, as well as the political and economic influence of Cuban individuals within this particular place. The team is attached to the city of Miami, which has a large Cuban population. Many of these inhabitants immigrated to the U.S. during the Fidel-led coupe that installed a pro-communist government in that nation. Finally, a large percentage of the business and political leaders of the city have personal or familial ties to Cuba.

As demonstrated in this example, we argue it is essential for students to understand that their worldview is not universally shared because the “place” they occupy is political. Global educators stress the importance of these skills as they advocate for perspective consciousness and cross-cultural awareness. Critical geography can help prepare individuals for global citizenship by providing a framework to examine the complexities of people and places around the world. This analysis remind us that the term “culture” often conflates space, place, and identity (Helfenbein, 2006) without accounting for differences and change within places or addressing those who live on the margins (Anzaldúa, 2012; Gupta & Ferguson, 1992).

Place-based and global citizenship educators also agree that students need skills to link issues and solutions they find in their local community with issues and alternatives found at the global level (Maguth & Hilburn, 2011; Merryfield & Wilson, 2005). Critical geography can help students develop the ability to engage in multiple scales of analysis, investigations that range “from the body to the global capital and then back again” (Helfenbein, 2009, p. 304) using a cyclical process of recursive analysis (Martusewicz, 2009). This form of critical inquiry requires that individuals compare and contrast positions in order to analyze or evaluate multiple perspectives and alternatives. Therefore, state curriculum must be open towards helping students critically analyze information.

Theoretical Perspectives

Educators' often privilege Bloom's (1956) taxonomy of cognitive domains when developing standards and objectives. Critics, however, caution against simply designating an action as "critical thinking" based on specific verbs (Hess, 2005). Instead, individuals are encouraged to analyze the nature of processes involved within the action. This study employs two frameworks for determining the level of critical thinking a standard might promote: Webb's (2002) depth of knowledge level and Alessio's (1996) framework for critical thinking.

Instead of providing a hierarchy of cognitive domains, Webb's (2002) depth of knowledge examines the number of cognitive processes an individual must use in order to perform a function. At level one, recall of information, students are asked to recall basic facts, names, or events in ways that only require one cognitive process. Level two, basic reasoning, requires that students engage in at least two mental processes. For example, they might be asked to compare and contrast two geographic aspects. At this level they might also be asked to not only describe but to explain how or why something may occur. Level three, complex reasoning, requires that students use multiple forms of evidence to justify their thinking. They might have to draw conclusions, explain misconceptions, or propose solutions. Finally, level four, extended reasoning, usually asks students to create something utilizing the skills needed to organize, apply, and analyze information within and across disciplines (Hess, 2005). For Webb (2002), critical thinking was promoted through reasoning processes found within the second, third, and fourth levels.

In order to examine the potential for promoting critical geography within the standards' discourse we needed to go beyond Webb's pragmatic identification of cognitive processes. Alessio (1996) outlined a framework that results in a paradigm shift, distinguishing between three levels of critical thinking. This framework was an effort to push-back upon a Western education that Alessio (1996) felt supported critical thinking without critique and was too "narrow, exclusive and ethnocentric" (p. 2). Level one, critical thinking as logic, uses skills like analysis, synthesize, evaluation, observation, and experience based on traditional Western notions of logic and reason. While the author recognizes that this stance offers valuable components for thinking, he argues that it is difficult to achieve any paradigm shift when operating within the traditional archetype. Level two, critical thinking as critique, is the practice of constantly calling into question how we know what we know, as well as the means through which we come to know it. "Researchers and teachers should make revealing and studying the consequences of values an integral part of all their work" (Alessio, 1996, p. 4). Finally, level three, is labeled critical thinking as critique and multiculturalism. As argued in current scholarship, in order to eradicate ethnocentrism, it is not enough to just insert new voices (Nieto, 2010). It is imperative that we critique the bias perpetuated within Eurocentric methods used to arrive at given information (Banks, 1993, 2012). In order to see the world in a more holistic manner, we should utilize methods that are used by marginalized voices.

Subjects of Analysis

The following manuscript offers data from a larger content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) of the language embedded in state geography standards, primarily the states which are found on the border of the United States. The research presented below outlines data derived from the State of Florida's NGSSS (FDLOE, 2008) for social studies within the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. While we chose Florida for its physical proximity to international borders, the populations within Florida represents an excellent sample of a case study to expound on Gruenewald's (2003) place-conscious analysis due to its complex racial and ethnic variations.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) the total number of Florida's non-White students in 2010 was 1,505, 487 exceeding the White population by 367,627. Out of the non-White population Hispanics constituted the largest group totaling 740, 786, which is more than three times the United States average. The population of the category Black and Two or More Races is two times the national U.S. average. Florida, offering an instance where the nation's minority culture exceeds the majority, therefore calls for an examination into state standards to determine whether they reflect the population's diverse world views.

Issues found within Florida mirror the ethnic complexity described in Andalusia's (2012) *la frontera/borderlands* as she "remaps" our understanding of what borders mean. In cities like Miami, Orlando, and Jacksonville there are complex political, socio-cultural relationships between Cubans, Venezuelans, Nicaraguans, Puerto Ricans, Colombians, Peruvians, Dominicans, Haitians, African Americans, and Caucasians. Rather than borders serving a dualistic perspectives, us/them or here/there, the issues within Florida renders an understanding of the dynamics surrounding malleable borders, dynamics that expand and problematize the social and cultural terrain with which we live (Anzaldúa, 2012). The history of these relationships, as well as contemporary interactions within these cities, directly impact how power and oppression is manifested in public schools.

Critical social theorists in education examine the ways in which social structures play out in the classroom (Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosley, Hui, & Joseph, 2005). State standards are shaped by ideological forces because, as Gee (2004) asserts, all discourse is social and ideological. As teachers are mandated to follow state curriculum frameworks, standards serve as an ideological conduit between the state and the classroom. It is our position that the state's curriculum should reflect the diverse demographics of the pupils attending Florida schools. As educators we also believe in a social studies curriculum, which encourages critical thinking. Therefore, we feel that a critical analysis of the discourse within geography standards can indicate whether or not state curricula encourage students to interrogate place, space, power, and identity as a form of critical thinking for global citizenship.

Methods of Analysis

Using a structural coding framework (Saldaña, 2009), influenced by a critical analysis of discourse (Gee, 2004), we analyzed the NGSSS to determine the extent to which the standards were open to promoting critical geography. Webb's (2002) depth of knowledge and Alessio's (1996) framework for critical thinking were used to examine the extent to which a standard promoted critical thinking. Instead of looking at specific verbs in the standards the researchers analyzed the number and nature of cognitive processes suggested in the standard's language. Before engaging in an in-depth analysis, we first identified and removed standards that promoted only level one cognitive processes (i.e., recall) as these do not promote critical thinking. For example, we immediately classified the following standard as level one recall: NGSSS SS.6.G.1.3: Identify natural wonders of the ancient world (e.g., the seven natural wonders). (FLDOE, 2008). This standard only requires that students locate specific information such as physical features or the natural wonders of the ancient world. Students are not asked to answer questions that might promote more than one cognitive process simultaneously. They are also not asked to critique criteria used to determine how something is considered an ancient wonder of the world.

After determining that a standard met our conditions for critical thinking, in that it met Webb's criteria for basic, complex, or extended reasoning, we analyzed the nature of critical thinking promoted in the standard's language. This analysis recognizes that while it is important

to examine, which cognitive processes are encouraged within the text, it is also important to examine the social and cultural models tacitly embedded in the discourse (Rogers et al., 2005). Therefore, we applied Alessio's (1996) framework for critical thinking, looking for language that would explicitly encourage processes utilized in critique and in critique and multiculturalism. In adhering to Alessio's (1996) notions of critical thinking as critique and multiculturalism this research reflects an epistemological view that research cannot produce a single Truth; all research is subjective at some level. We include our categorization of the standards (see examples in Appendix) in order to make our analysis transparent to the reader.

Findings and Discussion

Out of 25 geography standards at the sixth grade level, 10 (40%) standards included phrasing that did not lend students to think critically, 14 (56%) standards encouraged critical thinking as logic, and 1 (4%) standard had terminology that promoted critical thinking as critique. In seventh grade the breakdown of 12 geography standards is as follows: 7 (58%) standards were labeled not critical thinking, 5 (42%) standards as critical thinking as logic, and 0 (0%) standards were found to promote critical thinking as critique. Finally, of the 17 standards at the eighth grade level, 6 (35%) did not provide opportunities for critical thinking, though 6 (35%) standards encouraged critical thinking as logic and 5 (30%) standards included processes that fostered critical thinking as critique.

Overall our analysis of the NGSSS geography standards demonstrated that the majority either did not specifically mention critical thinking outcomes, or only mentioned goals related to critical thinking as logic. Only 11% of the standards, 6 of 54, promoted critical thinking as critique, and none demonstrated critical thinking as critique and multiculturalism. We conclude that students are not asked to analyze the intersection of space, place, power, and identity. In other words if teachers translate the standards verbatim into their instruction, there will be minimal opportunities for students to engage in critical thinking past the first level (i.e., logic).

While the discourse did not explicitly outline processes for critical thinking as critique, and critical thinking as critique and multiculturalism, some standards were worded in ways that had the potential to promote these high levels of critical thinking. Standards that addressed issues that can be examined through a critical lens offered opportunities to engage in higher level cognitive thinking. These include issues such as cultural diffusion, religion, cultural regions, human elements, and political boundaries. Yet, many standards included specific examples that might narrow the range of study. For instance, examples of cultural landmarks that were provided, such as, the Statue of Liberty and the Golden Gate Bridge, lead to assumptions that privilege Anglo American and Western cultural achievements. We argue cultural achievements of minority groups that are not proposed in the examples are equally important.

While an analysis of the NGSSS geography standards demonstrated few opportunities for higher level thinking, we do believe there is a potential to extend critical thinking. Take for example NGSSS SS.6.G.2.7: Interpret choropleth or dot-density maps to explain distribution of population in the ancient world (FLDOE, 2008d). This standard requires students to engage in multiple processes at once, applying the information that they know about ancient civilizations while interpreting maps as visual images. This would require traditional Cartesian logical-reasoning skills. Savvy teachers might help students question the authenticity of data, or why these areas are privileged as culture hearths. Yet, the standard asks to interpret and not to examine or question. There is no indication that students should develop hypotheses about why some cultures became extinct while others remained intact. There is also no evidence that teachers should help students interrogate assimilation, or include the impact of cultural diffusion

from civilizations from East Asia or the Americas prior to European contact. An analysis of this nature would help students understand that the places the state deems important to study are also political. In this instance, ancient civilizations that are privileged, as stated in the examples (e.g., Phoenicia Greece and Rome), are the civilizations widely known to have contributed to Western ideals. Indigenous knowledge is disregarded.

Another example is SS.6.G.6.2: Compare maps of the ancient world in ancient times with current political maps (FLDOE, 2008d). This standard asks students to engage in more than one cognitive process as they have to compare historical projections of various spaces with our current geospatial orientation of the world. While not specifically stated in the standard, there is a potential for helping students recognize the socio-political forces that shape global perspectives. Wood, Kaiser, and Abramms (2006) remind us that “every map serves a specific purpose. Every map advances an interest” (p. 4). Students can be asked to examine what is missing from, and what is included in, historical maps in order to determine the map-maker’s original intent. When teaching this standard there is potential to ask: “Why do we have specific projections for maps?”, “Why are some areas privileged over others?”, and “Are there examples of maps from other perspectives?” Yet, there is no specific verbiage in the discourse indicating the potential to disrupt presented notions of place by interrogating the subjectivity of historical, as well as current maps.

Similar standards with the potential to encourage critical thinking as critique and multiculturalism were found at the seventh and eighth grade levels. Consider SS7.G.4.2: Use maps and other geographic tools to examine the importance of demographics within political divisions of the United States (FLDOE 2008c). The language in this standard requires students use multiple cognitive processes. They have to utilize map skills while, at the same time, drawing upon their knowledge of sociological concepts, such as population demographics and political division. There has potential to promote critical geography if students are asked to question why some groups of people have power while others do not and how the distribution of power may be dependent upon specific places. In one project students could examine the intersection of power and identity through the issue of bilingual education, a practice that is supported in South Florida, but generally rejected in Texas and California (Nieto, 2010; Sleeter, 2010). These policies are impacted by spatially diverse political and ethnic divisions.

Our analysis indicated that the eighth grade standards included more opportunity for students to engage in critical thinking as critique. Examples ask students to analyze the effects of migration throughout the U.S., both on the place of origin and destination (SS8.G.4.2), and analyze case studies of regions that have had critical economic or political ramifications (SS.8.G.2.2). There are even opportunities for students to use narratives to illustrate geographic issues (SS.8.G.6.2, FLDOE 2008b). Teachers could satisfy this standard while incorporating multiple perspectives from a variety of multicultural sources. Unfortunately, the eighth grade course is primarily geared towards the study of American history. Teachers might not devote as much instructional time to highlight the non-western geographic knowledge and skills, which these standards can potentially promote.

Conclusion

During an era of high-stakes testing and conservative educational reform, it is important to continue analyzing the equity in standards using a variety of theoretical lenses. Conversations about 21st century learners claim that it is imperative to educate youth for globalization. We proposed that the processes promoted through critical geography have the potential to facilitate important aspects of global citizenship education: global and spatial awareness, perspective

consciousness, critical analysis, and decision-making. This set of knowledge, skills, and dispositions is vital to a democratic education committed to serving diverse learners in a globalizing world.

Our results indicated that there is not much room within the current NGSSS geography standards for students to acquire the knowledge or develop the skills necessary for interrogating power and identity within an examination of space and place. The pressures of high-stakes testing, as well as teachers' own reluctance to discuss controversial issues, may result in strict interpretation of standards' discourse (Epstein, 2009). Therefore, many teachers may not go beyond the specific examples included in these documents. Rather than projecting our frustration over the lack of critical geography in social studies education today, we offered small snapshots of possibilities to demonstrate how such dialogue can occur. We see conversations over geography standards as an opportunity to add to the academic discourse, as well as support a platform on which to advocate for the importance of geography in preparation for global citizenship.

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Appendix

Table 1

Analysis of Geography Standards by Level of Critical Thinking

Grade Level n = Number of Standards Analyzed	Phrasing Does not Lend itself to Critical Thinking	Level 1 (Logic)	Level 2 (Critique)	Level 3 (Critique & MC)
Sixth Grade	10	14	1	0
n= 25	40%	56%	4%	0%
Seventh Grade	7	5	0	0
n= 12	58%	42%	0%	0%
Eighth Grade	6	6	5	0
n= 17	35%	35%	30%	0%
Total	23	25	6	0
n= 54	43%	46%	11%	0%

Table 2

Florida's Sixth Grade Social Studies Standards

Social Studies, Grade 6, Geography (SS.6.G)	Phrasing Does not Lend itself to Critical Thinking	Level 1 (Logic)	Level 2 (Critique)	Level 3 (Critique & MC)
Understand how to use maps and other geographic representations, tools and technology to report information.	SS.6.G.1.1. Use latitude and longitude coordinates to understand the relationship between people and places on Earth.		X	
	SS.6.G.1.2. Analyze the purposes of map projections (political, physical, special purpose) and explain the applications of various types of maps.		X	(P)
	SS.6.G.1.3. Identify natural wonders of the ancient world (e.g., Seven Natural Wonders of Africa, Himalayas, Gobi Desert).	X		
	SS.6.G.1.4. Utilize tools geographers use to study the world. (e.g., maps, globes, graphs, charts and geo-spatial tools such as GPS, GIS, satellite imagery, aerial photography, online mapping resources).	X		
	SS.6.G.1.5. Use scale, cardinal, and intermediate directions, and estimation of distances between places on current and ancient maps of the world.	X		
	SS.6.G.1.6. Use a map to identify major bodies of water of the world, and explain ways they have impacted development of civilizations. (e.g., major rivers, seas, oceans).	X		
	SS.6.G.1.7. Use maps to identify characteristics and boundaries of ancient civilizations that have shaped the world today. (e.g., Phoenicia, Carthage, Crete, Egypt, Greece, Rome, Kush).	X*		

		Phrasing Does not Lend itself to Critical Thinking	Level 1 (Logic)	Level 2 (Critique)	Level 3 (Critique & MC)
Understand physical and cultural characteristics of places	SS.6.G.2.1. Explain how major physical characteristics, natural resources, climate, and absolute and relative locations have influenced settlement, interactions, and the economies of ancient civilizations of the world.		X		
	SS.6.G.2.2. Differentiate between continents, regions, countries, and cities in order to understand the complexities of regions created by civilizations. (e.g., city-states, provinces, kingdoms, empires).		X		
	SS.6.G.2.3. Analyze the relationship of physical geography to the development of ancient civilizations. (e.g., Tigris and Euphrates [Mesopotamia], Nile[Egypt], Indus and Ganges [Ancient India], and Huang He[China]).		X		
	SS.6.G.2.4. Explain how the geographic location of ancient civilizations contributed to the culture and politics of those societies. (e.g., Egypt, Rome, Greece, China, Kush).		X		
	SS.6.G.2.5. Interpret how geographic boundaries invite or limit interaction with other regions and cultures. (e.g., China limits and Greece invites).		X		
	SS.6.G.2.6. Explain the concept of cultural diffusion, and identify the influences of different ancient cultures on one another. (e.g., Phoenicia on Greece and Greece on Rome).		X	(P)	(P)
Understand the relationships between the earth's ecosystems and the populations that dwell within them	SS.6.G.2.7. Interpret choropleth or dot-density maps to explain distribution of population in the ancient world.		X		
	SS.6.G.3.1. Explain how the physical landscape has affected the development of agriculture and industry in the ancient world. (e.g., terracing, seasonal crop rotations, resource development).	X			
	SS.6.G.3.2. Analyze the impact of human populations on the ancient world's ecosystem. (e.g., desertification, deforestation, abuse of resources, erosion).			X	(P)
	SS.6.G.4.1. Explain how family and ethnic relationships influenced ancient cultures		X		
Understand the characteristics, distribution, and migration of human populations	SS.6.G.4.2. Use maps to trace significant migrations, and analyze results. (e.g., prehistoric Asians to the Americas, Aryans in Asia, Germanic tribes throughout Europe).		X		
	SS.6.G.4.3. Locate sites in Africa and Asia where archaeologists have found evidence of early human societies, and trace their migration patterns to other parts of the world.	X			
	SS.6.G.4.4. Map and analyze the impact of the spread of various belief systems in the ancient world. (e.g., Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism).		X	(P)	(P)
Understand how human actions can impact the environment	SS.6.G.5.1. Identify the methods used to compensate for the scarcity of resources in the ancient world. (e.g., water in the Middle East, fertile soil, fuel).	X			
	SS.6.G.5.2. Use geographic terms and tools to explain why ancient civilizations developed network of highways, waterways, and other transportation linkages.	X			
	SS.6.G.5.3. Use geographic tools and terms to analyze how famine, drought, and natural disasters plagued many ancient civilizations. (e.g., flooding of the Nile, drought in Africa, volcanoes in the Mediterranean, famine in Asia).		X		
Understand how to apply geography to interpret the past and present and plan for the future	SS.6.G.6.1. Describe the six Essential Elements of Geography (The World in Spatial Terms, Places and Regions, Physical Systems, Human Systems, Environment, The Uses of Geography) as the organizing framework for understanding the world and its people.	X			
	SS.6.G.6.2. Compare maps of the ancient world in ancient times with current political maps.		X	(P)	(P)