

# Mapping Geographical Education in Canada: Geography in the Elementary and Secondary Curriculum across Canada\*

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## Abstract

This project builds upon previous surveys of geographical education across Canada completed by Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005). The purpose of this study was to survey the geography curriculum in each of the ten provinces and three territories in Canada. Geography and social studies curriculum guidelines for grades 1 through 12 were collected in each regional jurisdiction across Canada. A summary of key information was recorded for each grade in each jurisdiction; included were course title, prominent themes, and units of instruction.

The overall goal during data analysis was to draw a series of comparisons between the general trends discovered by Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005) and the patterns that emerged from geography curriculum documents as of 2009. The data suggested that, with the exception of Ontario, all provinces and territories have de-emphasized or deleted specific courses or units in geographical education. In a social studies curriculum dominated by history and civics, there is often little stated emphasis on geographical content, concepts, or skills in grades 1 through 12.

**Keywords:** geographical education, geography, social studies, curriculum, Canada

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## **Introduction**

In Canada, education has always been a provincial responsibility, which has resulted in “strong central control over curriculum in each province, and of textbooks authorized for each subject in every grade” (Warkentin & Simpson-Housley, 2001, p. 287). The constitution prevents strong federal involvement in the provincial or territorial education systems in Canada; therefore, provincial and territorial governments hold most of the power in shaping their elementary and secondary curricula. Canada is therefore an interesting case study for surveying elementary and secondary curricula.

The fact that curricula and teaching resources are authorized by provincial and territorial ministries of education becomes especially important in the context of geographical education, an academic discipline concerned with examining local landscapes, community cultures, and regional rarities. Broadly speaking, the history of geographical education in Canada is diverse, across both time and space. One important way to understand past and present patterns in geographical education is to examine geography curriculum guidelines.

## **Purpose**

This project builds upon previous work done by Dr. R. Baine titled *A Survey of the Status of Geography and Social Studies in Canadian Elementary and Secondary Schools* (1991) and Dickson Mansfield’s *Geography and the Schools* (2005). The geography curriculum was surveyed at the elementary and secondary level in each of the ten provinces and three territories in Canada in the hopes of informing the geographical education community across Canada of past trends and current patterns in geographical education, according to geography curriculum guidelines. Presented in this report are a series of general trends with respect to geographical education across Canada. These trends are reported for grades 1 to 6, 7 and 8, and grades 9 through 12. Based on these findings, a series of comparisons are made with the conclusions presented by Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005) in order to provide a greater understanding of the current status of geographical education in Canada, including where we have been and where we are headed.

## **Project Background**

In 1991, Richard Baine chaired the Education Committee of the Canadian Association of Geographers and reported on the state of geographical education in Canada, including elementary, secondary, and francophone education.

Baine reported the existence of 55 ministry-approved courses in geography across Canada; however, none of these courses were offered between kindergarten and grade 6. Even more disappointing, Baine noted that enrollment rates dropped significantly in grades 11 and 12 to a meager 15%, the same grade level at which geography courses were optional and not required. Finally, Baine drew attention to a division that existed at the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border; fewer geography courses were offered west of the border, especially in Alberta and British Columbia, in contrast to the 44 courses that were offered east of the border, most notably, in the province of Ontario.

More recently, in 2005, Mansfield examined the state of contemporary geographical education in North America, focusing specifically on the province of Ontario. In fact, both reports highlighted the province of Ontario as a beacon for geographical education in Canada. In 1991, Baine stated that the province of Ontario offered the greatest number of geography courses of any province or territory, with 14 courses in total. According to Mansfield (2005), in Ontario, geography was a compulsory subject in grades 7, 8, and 9 with a total teaching time of 220 hours over three years, the highest in Canada. Ultimately, however, Baine cautioned that “a mixture of courses is offered under the general classification of ‘Social Studies’” (Baine, 1991, p. 6). Mansfield echoed this concern, concluding that, despite a variety of curricular configurations across the country, “geographical education in Canada must contend with an approach to social studies that is dominated by history and civics” (Mansfield, 2005).

### ***A Brief History of Geographical Education in Canada***

The history of geographical education in Canada is as diverse as the country itself. The discipline of geography has survived difficult times when geography was left virtually invisible in curriculum documents and many elementary and secondary classrooms. This is contrasted with periods of prosperity, when an abundance of geographical content could be found in regional curriculum documents and was taught in classrooms across the country.

As early as the 19th century, Ontario was involved in the active publishing of geography textbooks written from the Canadian perspective. Although in most Canadian provinces there was little geography taught at the secondary level, since 1910, geography has been taught as a required subject in Ontario. The 1920s witnessed the importation of the term ‘social studies’ to Canada from

south of the border. This development was especially significant in Western Canada, where the provinces west of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border became the recipients of a social studies curriculum based on the fusion of history and geography (Warkentin & Simpson-Housley, 2001).

By the 1930s, geography had withered away as an independent course of study in many provinces and territories across Canada. However, a geographic revival of sorts was experienced between 1950 and 1970, when a “strong mutually supportive education system for geography was in place in most parts of the country” fostering improved geographic curriculum and teaching resources (Warkentin & Simpson-Housley, 2001, p. 301). Credit for these accomplishments was owed, in part, to the Canadian Association of Geographers, who in 1955, established an Education Committee, charged with the arduous task of improving the quality of geographical education in Canadian schools.

Beginning in the late 1980s, the pendulum, once again, swung the other way, as the promising developments of the 1950s weakened. The addition of technologically-based studies, a heightened emphasis on numeracy and literacy, and budgetary constraints resulted in “fights between subjects for a place in the school curriculum, and for teaching hours in the classroom” (Warkentin & Simpson-Housley, 2001, p. 301). It was during this period that Baine’s survey of the geography curriculum in Canada’s elementary and secondary schools was completed. The issues facing geographical education in the 1990s have only intensified since. According to Mansfield (2005), the approach to social studies dominated by history and civics, and a curricular approach to education dominated by English, mathematics, and science has generally resulted in a low level of basic geographical knowledge, helping to “explain the results of a poll in 2002 that found Canadian scores in geographical knowledge to be third from the bottom among nine participating nations, only slightly ahead of the United States and Mexico” (Mansfield, 2005).

### ***Defining Geography***

Before analyzing the geography curriculum guidelines that were collected from the provinces and territories, it was necessary to create a screen that was used when examining these documents in order to determine what courses or units would be included or excluded from the survey as having geographical content. For the purpose of this project, the definition offered by the Canadian Council for Geographic Education was used. According to the Council:

Geography's focus is thus on the evolving character and organization of the Earth's surface, the way in which the interaction of physical and human elements creates distinctive places, and the way those places interact with or influence others in space and over time. (Canadian Council for Geographic Education, 2001, p. iii)

Key areas of study included physical geography, human geography, world geography, regional geography, resource management, tourism, environmental science, and geotechnologies. Numerous themes appeared repeatedly throughout curriculum guidelines but were not included as geographical education, most notably, politics, citizenship, democracy, economics, law, anthropology, and sociology.

## **Method**

Prior to engaging in a detailed examination of the geography curriculum guidelines and the themes that emerged during the phase of analysis, the approaches that were used to guide the collection and analysis of data are presented.

### ***Data Collection***

Data collection took place between September 2009 and September 2010. The primary sources of data were geography curriculum guidelines, most of which were available electronically from various ministries of education in all thirteen provinces and territories. To facilitate the timely collection of data from all of Canada's provinces and territories, the websites for the various ministries of education served as the main sites of data collection. In some instances, provincial or territorial curriculum departments were contacted to assist in clarifying certain pieces of data. The geography and social studies curriculum guidelines for grades 1 through 12 were collected from each province and territory, where documents were available. Not only were regional geography curriculum guidelines collected, they were also compiled and cited in a master reference list that assisted in the dissemination of the data to other partners in geographical education across Canada. Where information was available, a social studies curriculum specialist contact list was also created to facilitate communication with regional leaders in geographical education.

### ***Data Analysis***

The process of analysis began with a summarization of key information for

each grade in each jurisdiction. Included in this initial summary were course title, prominent themes, units of instruction, and student expectations. In order to synthesize the collected data, a matrix was created that listed all of the geography and social studies courses, by title, that were offered in grades 1 through 12 for each of the thirteen regions in Canada. After synthesizing all of the geography curriculum guidelines into a more manageable data set, analysis focused heavily on drawing comparisons between the general trends discovered by Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005) and the patterns that emerged from the matrix of geography and social studies courses from the 2009-2010 survey. This phase is elaborated on below, where the general findings for grades 1 to 6, 7 and 8, and 9 through 12 are presented.

### ***Limitations***

Before delving into a detailed discussion of the findings that emerged from this study, the limitations of this study must be noted. First, curriculum is a provincial and territorial responsibility, and is in a constant state of change. There may have been changes to individual provincial and territorial curriculum guidelines that were not reflected on the respective websites during the period of data collection, and therefore, are not included in this project. Second, no effort was made to determine the degree of popularity or specific enrollment rates of geography courses that were identified as optional. Third, only a limited effort was made to collect science or technology curriculum guidelines in order to uncover content or courses related to geology, earth science, environmental science or, geotechnologies. Finally, as with all research, the observations drawn are the subjective interpretations of the author and are based on the screen that was used to define geography throughout this project.

### **Findings**

The following section presents the findings that emerged from this study in three categories: geographical education at the elementary level, geographical education in grades 7 and 8, and geographical education at the secondary level. In each of these three sections the general trends that emerged from the analysis and the particular course offerings are presented.

#### ***Geographical Education at the Elementary Level***

In 1991, Baine observed the absence of any geography courses across Canada between kindergarten and grade 6. Unfortunately, the picture has not changed substantially over the past twenty years. According to geography curriculum

guidelines collected at the elementary level, all provinces and territories across Canada offer a mandatory social studies course in grades 1 through 6. Although a social studies program is taught in every region across Canada, the classroom time and educational resources devoted to the teaching of geographical concepts and skills is often disappointingly limited. The focus in most of these programs expands outward from the student, family, and community, to the province, region, country, and, finally, the world. A detailed analysis of the geography curriculum documents revealed that many of these mandatory social studies courses include a strong emphasis on themes such as citizenship, democracy, and community; concepts that more closely align with the study of civics. Even more disappointing, the sequencing of systematic geographical skill development, specifically, the acquisition, organization, and interpretation of geographical information did not figure prominently in many of the social studies programs offered at the elementary level. It was concluded that, across Canada, geographical content, concepts, and skills have been de-emphasized between grades 1 and 6. Despite this bleak conclusion, it is necessary to recognize that there remains ample opportunity for educators to include geographical content as part of a broader social studies curriculum. Still relevant today, Baine urged that “these mandatory courses are virtually the only vehicles through which any geographic subject matter or skills are taught” (1991, p. 6).

### ***Geographical Education in Grades 7 and 8***

The analysis of geography curriculum guidelines at the grade 7 and 8 levels revealed the existence of a mandatory geography or social studies course in most of Canada’s provinces and territories. Many of these courses focus heavily on history, civics, culture, and identity. Common themes that emerged from the geography curriculum guidelines at the grade 7 and 8 levels include the study of physical, human, and economic patterns at the local, regional, and global level, providing an opportunity for the development of geographical knowledge and skills. The specific course offerings in grade 7 and 8 are detailed below.

The survey of geography curriculum guidelines at the grade 7 level revealed a total of six courses, in six different jurisdictions, with a geography title or identifiable geography component within a social studies course. From east to west, Quebec, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan all offer a social studies course with an identifiable geography component, most often characterized by a focus on regional or global geography. Although the territory of Nunavut and the

Northwest Territories follow the social studies curriculum guidelines for the province of Alberta, it is important to note the development of additional regional social studies modules in each of these territories. In Nunavut, the grade 7 module titled *The Impact of Contact: Inuit Land Claims in the Circumpolar World* was developed to augment the social studies curriculum in the hopes of making it more locally-responsive. In the Northwest Territories, students are exposed to the geography of the North in a locally developed course titled *The Circumpolar World*. Finally, Ontario is the only province to offer an explicitly titled geography course, focused on patterns in physical geography at the grade 7 level.

At the grade 8 level, six provinces and territories offer courses with a geography title or clearly identifiable geography component within a social studies course. In Atlantic Canada, both Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick offer a social studies course focused on Canadian identity and the regional geography of Atlantic Canada respectively. In Quebec, as was the case in grade 7, geographical education is packaged with history and citizenship education as part of a broader social studies curriculum. Locally-developed modules in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories are used to augment the social studies curriculum adopted from Alberta. In Nunavut, a module titled *Nunavut Land Claims: The Social Re-organization of Nunavut* explores the historical and geographical development of the region. In the Northwest Territories, the discipline of geography is combined with history in an exploration of ancient, middle, and modern societies in a module called *The Changing World*. Once again, the province of Ontario is the only region to offer an explicitly titled geography course, focused on patterns in human geography at the grade 8 level.

Finally, in four of Canada's provinces and territories there is no geography titled or geography related course at the grade 7 or grade 8 level, specifically, in Newfoundland and Labrador, the Yukon, Alberta, and British Columbia. The focus of the social studies curriculum in these regions is world history and ancient civilizations.

In 1991, Baine reported that eight provinces in Canada offered a mandatory social studies course. Of these eight provinces, only four offered a mandatory course in geography: Prince Edward Island, Quebec, Ontario, and Manitoba. Data collected in 2009 illustrated that the focus on geography embedded in many of these courses has since disappeared, or the courses themselves have been deleted. In Quebec, courses in general and regional geography were swallowed by a social studies curriculum dominated by history and citizenship

education. Even more disappointing, in Prince Edward Island and Manitoba, geography courses at the grade 7 and 8 level were deleted from the curriculum altogether. Only in the province of Ontario has much of the geographical content in the social studies curriculum remained intact, evidenced by a specific focus on patterns in physical geography at the grade 7 level and patterns in human geography at the grade 8 level.

The data indicated that, with the exception of Ontario, all provinces and territories have de-emphasized or deleted specific courses or units in geographical education at the grade 7 and 8 level. This trend is most evident with respect to courses specifically titled as geography; as of 2009, Ontario remained the only province where an explicitly titled geography course is still offered. It is entirely possible that the spectrum of physical, human, and regional geography content, concepts, and skills has been replaced with content more closely related to the study of history. However, one must caution against the conclusion that no geography is being taught in grade 7 and 8 classrooms across the country. It is important to recognize that despite the bleak picture that is painted with respect to course titles and specific units of instruction, it is possible that some elements of geographical education are being addressed.

The findings presented above provide recent empirical evidence to support Baine's (1991) observation of the division that exists in regions west of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border, where social studies education in grades 7 and 8 was focused almost exclusively on history. In these provinces, most notably Alberta and British Columbia, geographical content, concepts, and skills have all but disappeared from the social studies curriculum. The province of Ontario, east of this border, offers a stark comparison with one of the strongest programs of geographical education in the country in terms of course offerings, geographical content, and overall instruction time.

### ***Geographical Education at the Secondary Level***

The survey of geography curriculum guidelines at the secondary level focused on grades 9 through 12. There is at least one course between grades 9 and 12 in each province and territory with a geography focus. In some cases a course is explicitly titled as geography and in other cases it is a social studies course with an identifiable geography component. The survey recorded a total of 47 geography titled or geography related courses between grades 9 and 12. Only 11 of these courses are classified as mandatory, and most of these mandatory

courses are offered at the grade 9 level. The single exception was the province of Manitoba, where a mandatory course titled Geographic Issues of the 21st Century was offered at the grade 10 level. Of the 47 geography titled or geography related courses at the secondary level, 35 of these courses form part of the social studies curriculum in provinces east of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border, only 7 are offered in provinces west of the border, and five courses are taught in Canada's territories. The specific course offerings in grades 9 through 12 are detailed below.

An effort was made to maintain a degree of consistency with the thematic categories used by Baine (1991) in his survey of geographical education at the elementary and secondary levels across Canada, while also paying considerable attention to recently emerging patterns in the geography curriculum according to 2009-2010 data. Ten categories were identified by Baine (1991) in his survey of geographical education: general geography, geography of the region, geography of Canada, world geography, physical geography, human geography, environmental geography, urban geography, areas of study other than Canada, and unspecified topics.

In order to provide greater clarity and synthesis for discussion, only seven categories emerged that were subsequently used to sort geography course offerings across the country. These categories are: geography of the region, geography of Canada, globalization and global issues, world geography, physical and environmental geography, human geography, and geotechnologies. The categories with the greatest number of course offerings included Canadian geography, globalization and global issues, as well as physical geography, each having 9 courses; there are eight courses in regional geography offered across Canada; and seven courses in world geography were identified. Human geography appears to be the least significant theme in geographical education across Canada. Finally, Ontario is the only province to offer two courses in geotechnologies, a theme in geographical education that surfaced recently, and was therefore, not identified by Baine.

Overall, there were fewer courses offered as of 2009/2010 that are explicitly geography titled than in 1991. However, there are more social studies courses with an identifiable geography component as of 2009 than were offered in 1991. This finding is consistent with the observations made by Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005), that geographical education in Canada is being absorbed by a social studies curriculum dominated by the study of history and civics.

## **Discussion**

A series of prominent themes surfaced following the detailed analysis of geography and social studies curriculum guidelines from Canada's provinces and territories. First, geographical content and skills have been trimmed from the broader social studies curriculum in favour of history and civics; and second, the division between jurisdictions east and west of the Manitoba-Saskatchewan border with respect to geography and social studies course offerings still exists. These themes are elaborated on below and the challenges they present for the future of geographical education in Canada are also explored.

### ***Prominent Themes in Geographical Education in Canada***

Across Canada, the discipline of geography has been subsumed under the banner of social studies, resulting in the de-emphasization of geographical concepts and skills and a renewed focus on history and civics. In 1991, Baine identified four courses in grade 7 and 8 specifically titled as geography; however, the provinces of Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Manitoba have since deleted these courses, or in some cases, the geographical components are now taught alongside history and civics as part of social studies. The same pattern emerged with respect to geographical education at the secondary level. The present study identified the existence of only 11 mandatory courses in geography or a social studies course with an identifiable geography component at the secondary level. Of these 11 courses, 10 were social studies courses with an identifiable geography component.

One must recall the conclusions presented by Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005) that bear relevancy today, especially in an education system that is arguably apathetic to the presence of geography in the elementary and secondary curriculum. The social studies curriculum remains the only opportunity for educators to present geographical knowledge, concepts, and skills. Therefore, geography has either a strong presence or is barely visible, "depending upon teachers' openness to geography's viewpoints in social studies, the soundness of their own knowledge of geography, and their skill in teaching it effectively" (Mansfield, 2005).

There continues to exist an obvious division in geographical education between those provinces east of Manitoba-Saskatchewan border and those west of this border. Of the 59 ministry-listed geography titled or geography related courses, 42 were offered east of this border, eight were offered west of the

border, and nine were offered in the territories. Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005) singled out the province of Ontario as having one of the country's strongest programs in geographical education. This trend was also observed in 2009. Ontario offers the only geography titled courses in grades 7, 8, and 9 as well as the greatest number of courses in geography at the secondary level. According to 2009 data, the province of Ontario had a total of 12 courses in geography between grades 7 and 12. Quebec followed with seven. In Atlantic Canada, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick both had five, Nova Scotia had four, and Newfoundland had three. The picture in the territories offered some degree of promise. Five courses were identified in Nunavut, along with four in the Northwest Territories. However, the Yukon lagged behind with only one. Saskatchewan led Western Canada with four courses, Alberta was not far behind with three, and British Columbia offered only one course.

However, one must remember that these reported figures included all ministry-approved courses listed on a regional ministry of education website or appearing in a particular provincial or territorial curriculum guideline. One should be cautioned that the picture of geographical education in Canada appears better on paper than it is in practice. For example, in the province Ontario, a base threshold of 25 students is often required for a course to be offered in a particular school; "geography courses, *approved* by the provincial ministry of education for grades 11 and 12, might not *actually* appear on the option sheets that schools or school boards ask students and their parents to complete" (Mansfield, 2005). One could expect to find a similar conundrum in other provinces and territories across Canada.

### ***Challenges Facing Geographical Education in Canada***

In 2005, Mansfield identified numerous challenges facing geographical education in Ontario, and the findings from his study shed light on the obstacles facing Canada's provinces and territories as of 2009-2010. First, according to the analysis, many of the geography and social studies courses offered across Canada were classified as optional. Of the 59 courses identified in this study, only 11 are mandatory, and only between grades 7 and 10. Moreover, in grades 11 or 12, where geography is an optional course of study, enrollment rates in these courses have and continue to plummet (Baine 1991; Mansfield, 2005). This occurred at precisely the point in time where many students are choosing their future programs of study at the post-secondary level. As admission requirements for many post-secondary institutions emphasize English, mathematics, and science in the secondary curriculum, there are pressures at work that will tend toward the continued underrepresentation of geographical education. According to Mansfield, "few

require or suggest geography courses in high school as precursors for entry to their geography-related programmes, or allow for them when they have been taken” (2005). Closely related to this concern is the issue of teacher education and subject preparation. Mansfield cited the teacher education program at Queen’s University in Ontario as a generalizable example. The program of study for primary qualification (grades 1 to 6) allots 36 hours each to language arts, mathematics, and science. This is contrasted with the intermediate qualification (grade 7 and 8) where history and geography receive a combined total of 18 hours. More instruction time is devoted to subject qualification at the senior level (grades 9 through 12), where a minimum of 72 hours is allocated to basic subject qualifications, of which geography is listed as a teachable subject in most but not all faculties of education across the country.

Second, the issue of standardization has emerged across Canada’s education system over the past decade. Advocates of standardization argued that it would create a system that was more accountable to the public, ensured through the application of a standardized curriculum and measured through the use of high-stakes, standardized testing. Provincially-controlled standardized testing remains a contentious issue that was not debated in this study; suffice to say, “its practice, for some subjects and not others, sends a message to parents, students, teachers, and administrators alike as to what is really important in the curriculum” (Mansfield, 2005).

Third, although not a new challenge, financial constraints at the provincial, board, and school level continue to impact the practice of geographical education across Canada. According to Mansfield, the reduction of budgets across the education system, and in social studies departments in particular has affected “leadership in curriculum development, the maintenance of standards, and the provision of subject-based professional development in Ontario” (Mansfield, 2005).

Fourth, it is important to consider the implications of this study for continued efforts to improve geographic literacy in Canada and abroad. The National Geographic Society defines geographic literacy as the ability of students to apply geographic skills and understanding in their personal and civic lives. Broadly speaking, geographic literacy is one of many ways to link citizenship education with geographic education. Stoltman (2006) argues that the discipline of geography has a significant role in promoting responsible and engaged citizenship. Like Morgan (2006) and others (Lambert & Machon, 2001; Ross, 2000) I am cautious of using the term citizenship in a neutral way; rather, I understand it as a process that is constantly under construction,

“produced under new conditions, specifically in the context of the political conditions produced by globalisation” (Morgan, 2006, p. 213).

In the Canadian context, promoting geo-literacy is one of the main objectives of numerous geographical organizations including the Canadian Council for Geographic Education (CCGE) and the Canadian Association of Geographers (CAG). Specifically, the CCGE has committed to work towards the 2025 goal for geo-literacy in all thirteen provinces and territories in Canada. The CCGE is following the example set by the National Geographic Society to achieve geo-literacy in all fifty American states by 2025.

The present study has illustrated that formal education in geography across Canada is drastically reduced as students move through the education system from primary to secondary streams and beyond. And yet, emerging global issues such as sustainability and citizenship provide an obvious rationale for the importance of geo-literacy and the role of formal geographic education in cultivating this important form of literacy. Broad educational structures, curriculum being just one example, are becoming less concerned with providing the time, space, and resources necessary to teach and learn geo-literacy. Once again, it is the responsibility of individual educators to teach their students the knowledge and skills necessary to practice geo-literacy in their everyday lives.

As an objective of the CCGE and the CAG, it is hoped that these organizations will continue to play a vital role in providing interested and motivated schools and educators the resources necessary to engage in geo-literacy. Perhaps the linking of geo-literacy to more generic forms of literacy initiatives that receive abundant attention and funding would be a useful strategy for highlighting the importance of teaching and learning for geo-literacy. For example, just as literacy is taught across the curriculum in Canada, so too should the principles and skills associated with geo-literacy. Even more important, is the necessity of engaging in cross-discipline conversations and approaches to teaching and learning. Just as geographical content and skills have been absorbed into the social studies or natural sciences curricula, disciplines such as history and environmental science should have a renewed commitment and responsibility to ensure that students can apply geographical knowledge, concepts, and skills to their everyday decision-making.

### ***Situating Geographic Education in the International Context***

DaSilva and Kvasnak (2011) presented an international perspective on the teaching of geography in the hopes of discovering “how geography is taught

around the world in order to give the reader some insight into approaches that may improve geography teaching in the reader's home country" (p. 17). Graves (2008) warns "of the uneven development of thinking about geographic education and the way in which cultural assumptions inherent in national education systems, could act as a brake on the evolution of geographical education" (p. 5). In light of this warning, it is necessary to foster and support an international dialogue on geographic education so that as an international community we can become more aware of where we have been, where we are going, and what role geographic education plays in this journey. In order to engage with this objective, it is important to position the findings and implications of this study in an international context to advance teaching and learning in the discipline of geography worldwide. A brief comparative analysis of geographic education in the United States of America, Australia, and England is presented below.

### ***The United States of America***

According to Grosvenor (1987), American students' knowledge of geography is far surpassed by students in Europe, Russia, Japan, Canada, and Australia. Unfortunately the picture has not changed substantially since, although Bednarz (2002) noted that improvements in geographic education in the United States were made between 1984 and 2002. Recent polls by the National Geographic Society suggest that geographical knowledge and skills among school-age Americans and young Americans aged 18-24 is severely lacking. For example, in a 2002 National Geographic Society survey, American students received a 'D' grade outperforming only Mexico and surpassed by Sweden, Germany, Italy, Britain, Japan, and Canada (Recer, 2002). It is not surprising then that Edelson (2009) stated "it's no secret that Americans know next to nothing about geography" (p. 9). At the primary level, the social studies curriculum, reflecting trends observed in Canada, "is largely organised following an expanding horizons perspective, beginning with study at the scale of the individual and moving outward in yearly increments" (Bednarz et al. 2006, p. 113). Perhaps even more disappointing is the picture of geographic education at the secondary level. According to Bednarz et al. (2006), "at the high school level, geography is not widely taught. Twenty four per cent of students take a geography course in US high schools" (p. 114). Most interesting for the present discussion are the reasons presented by DaSilva and Kvasnak (2011) for understanding the dismal state of geographic education in America. Consistent with the trends observed in Canada, the authors noted that "geography is subsumed in the social sciences, which are heavily history

oriented” and “compulsory standardized testing in many states does not have a geography or social studies component, concentrating mostly on language arts and math” (p. 18).

### **Australia**

As was the case across Canada, noted by both Baine (1991) and Mansfield (2005), the study of geography as a discipline is virtually non-existence at the primary level (K-6) in Australia and this bleak scenario continues in grades 7 through 12 in many regions across the country. At the primary level, “funding targeted to literacy and numeracy outcomes has deflected the attention of many of the nation’s pre-service teacher training programmes away from the importance of social and physical sciences and the arts” (Robertson & Ferguson, 2006, p. 131). Similar to the observations made by Mansfield (2005), Robertson and Ferguson (2006) argue that “the teaching of geographical concepts [is] a function of teacher skill and interest” (p. 131). The exception to the rule is the region of New South Wales, “where the geography component had at the time been strengthened in the grades K-6 curriculum” (DaSilva and Kvasnak, 2011, p. 19). Even in grades 7 to 10, history and geography are both mandatory subjects (Robertson & Ferguson, 2006). However, there remains great hope for the future and further examination of geographic education in Australia will be important in 2012 when a new national curriculum will be implemented (DaSilva and Kvasnak, 2011).

### **England**

According to Catling (1999), in the United Kingdom, “the importance of geography has been recognized. Since 1988 it has been one of the ten subjects to be studied by children from five years old” (p. 60). More recently, Rawling (2004) argued that geography “seems to occupy a relatively strong position in English schools” (p. 181). In contrast to approaches to geographic education that are common in the United States and Canada where geographic education is subsumed by an approach to social studies dominated by history and civics, geography is taught as a separate subject in England to all students aged 5 to 14. However, Butt et al. (2006) argued that “the teaching and learning of geography in England is currently most threatened within primary schools” (p. 94). At the primary level, “standards of teaching are generally low, leadership in the subject is often minimal and student attainment limited” (p. 94). Although still popular as an optional subject of study at the secondary level, with an enrollment rate of approximately 60% of secondary students choosing to take geography courses, the discipline continues to suffer marginalization as

a result of education policies that promote literacy and numeracy as core subjects since the 1990s (Butt et al., 2006).

### ***Geo-literacy in the International Context***

The brief comparative analysis of the state of geographic education in the United States, Australia, and England illustrated that the pushes towards curriculum standardization and a focus on literacy and numeracy are globally converging policy trends promoting the de-emphasization of geography on an international scale. These are challenges faced by geography curriculum developers, educators, and researchers in many countries around the world. It is important to discuss these international trends in geographical education and the implications they may have for promoting and engaging with geo-literacy. In the Canadian context, the role of geographical organizations such as the CCGE and the CAG, among others, was highlighted in providing interested and motivated schools and educators the resources necessary to engage in geo-literacy. Certainly then, the Commission on Geographical Education of the International Geographical Union (CGE-IGU), could play an important role in advancing geographical education and geo-literacy despite the pressures discussed above through conferences, research, and knowledge mobilization efforts. The necessity of fostering international collaboration then is crucial in this endeavour and is expanded on below.

### **Suggested Future Research Initiatives**

Based on the findings that have been revealed in this study and the challenges facing geographical education in Canada as a result, a series of new questions and issues for future research have surfaced. Discussed below are some suggested future research initiatives in Canada and beyond.

#### ***Future Research in Canada***

First, elementary and secondary curricula across Canada, in most disciplines, is subject to great fluctuation and is in a constant state of change. It is therefore recommended that a similar national survey be conducted at least every five years in order to capture broad changes or particular nuances in the geography curriculum that may result from revisions made to regional curricula.

Second, no data related to course popularity or actual enrollment rates was collected. Although the findings revealed a total of 47 courses between grades 9 and 12, only 11 of these were classified as mandatory. One can deduce the existence of 36 optional geography courses at the secondary level across

Canada. However, what remains less clear, is how many of these courses are actually taught each year and how many students choose to take these courses. It is necessary to collect data on the actual enrollment rates for all optional courses in geography, including longitudinal data, in order to determine trends in geographical education at the secondary level. Closely related to this recommendation, is the growing need to investigate provincial and territorial curriculum guidelines in science and technology in order to look for the presence, if any, of geographical components, units, or courses that are being taught under a related discipline.

Third, in order to thoroughly complete a comparison with Baine's (1991) study, it is necessary to survey geography and geography related courses offered across Canada in the French language. Finally, it would be beneficial to seek support from Canadian geographical organizations including the Canadian Association of Geographers, the Royal Canadian Geographical Society, and the Canadian Council for Geographic Education. These organizations could play an instrumental role in cataloguing geographical education across Canada. It is possible that these organizations would be willing to provide additional resources to support the monitoring of national trends and regional developments in geographical education across Canada. For example, in England, Rawlings (2004) observed:

*...the continuing support for geography from its subject associations – principally the Geographical Association (GA) and Royal Geographic Society and Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) – who have continued to attempt to influence government policy, whilst at the same time also restructuring and repositioning their own organisations.*  
(as cited in Butt et al., 2006, p. 95-96)

This strategy offers promise and could be augmented by attempts to build international collaborations and partnerships in geographical education.

### ***Future Research in the International Context***

The future of geographical education in Canada and abroad is closely related to the activities of researchers, who “have the opportunity, indeed the responsibility, to gather data, analyse them and extrapolate future possibilities...defining trends and offering directions for future progress” (Williams, 2006, p. 181). To do so, we must be aware of current socio-political changes taking place across the globe and how they impact on societies and schools. Particularly relevant here are the tensions between globalization and localization. Globalization is limiting state autonomy to develop national and local curricula evidenced by the convergence of

curriculum trends such as standardization, the subsuming of geography under the banner of social studies, and a focus on English, mathematics, and science. However, curriculum is still largely developed and implemented at local levels; “curricula are designed by government agencies to meet national agendas, though processes of decentralization within national states often permit much more local considerations to be taken into account” (p. 181). An important task for researchers of geographical education is to update studies of geographical education and geography curricula, at the local, national, and international levels in light of the themes that emerged from the present study including standardized curricula that focus heavily on numeracy and literacy.

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