

Back to the Future: The Expanding Communities Curriculum in Geography Education

ANNE-LISE HALVORSEN

ABSTRACT. This article traces the history of the expanding communities approach, the leading organizational structure for elementary social studies education since the 1930s. Since its introduction into the curriculum, educators have argued about the approach's effectiveness and suitability. Critics claim it lacks intellectual rigor and is redundant in that it repeats what children already know. Defenders argue that its relevancy to children's lives helps them better understand their world. Yet typically neither critics nor defenders demonstrate an understanding of the approach's deep roots in U.S. education. Long before its adoption as the dominant approach in elementary social studies, educators used it in history, civics, literature, and geography lessons. This article focuses on the approach's successful implementation in nineteenth-century geography curricula and shows that it is possible to teach rigorous geographical content and processes while using this method. The author rec-

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ommends that contemporary educators consider examples of how the approach was successfully used in the past.

Keywords: curriculum, elementary school, expanding communities, geography

In many U.S. elementary social studies classrooms, teachers follow a curriculum called *expanding communities* (also known as *expanding environments* or *expanding horizons*). This curriculum's fundamental premise is the theory that young children learn best when they study what is most familiar and immediate to them and then gradually expand outward from that personal context. In practice, the curriculum uses the structure of child-centered, concentric "social domains" or "communities"—from family to nation—with each domain or community enlarging the previous one. For example, in kindergarten, children study themselves, their families, and their homes; in first grade, the school; in second grade, the local community; in third grade, the region or metropolitan area; in fourth grade, the state; and in fifth grade, the nation. At each elementary level, teachers use the social science disciplines—history, political science and civics, economics, sociology, and geography—as the "scope" of this expanding communities curriculum.

For more than seventy years, U.S. schools have structured the social studies curriculum in the elementary grades using this sequence of ever-expanding sociological, geographic, and political units. The structure has even been called the "de facto national curriculum" for elementary-level social studies education (Brophy 1990, 1; Naylor and Diem 1987, 57). Yet, year after year, despite its evident popularity and apparently secure position in schools, critics have frequently and sharply faulted this curriculum. They have argued repeatedly that it, and social studies in general, abandons the traditional subject-matter content of history, geography, and civics instruction that characterized the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century curricula. They seem to point to a golden age of history and geography study during that time (Frazee and Ayers 2003; Ravitch 1987) yet never provide evidence for this claim (Brophy and Alleman 2006).

When did the expanding communities curriculum for social studies originate? Is it possible to embed disciplinary rigor within the expanding communities approach? Of all the social science disciplines, why does geography, in particular, fit well within this organizing structure? To answer these questions,

I briefly review the arguments for and against the expanding communities approach and then focus on how nineteenth-century educators used it quite successfully in geography education. Using historical antecedents, I argue that although the expanding communities curriculum in itself has worth and relevance as an organizing sequence, it should be enriched and

and civics, disciplinary content includes, for example, significant people and historical events, the earth and its peoples, and the articles of the U.S. Constitution. Disciplinary processes include thinking chronologically and interpreting primary documents in history, creating and reading maps in geography, and learning to make collective decisions in civics. Critics charge that the expanding com-

development that raises a vital question: why has the expanding communities curriculum remained so popular among elementary curriculum planners and teachers? Setting aside the reality that uprooting the existing curriculum would be a substantial and costly undertaking, it is clear that many educators resist dismantling the approach because they see value in key aspects of it. Undeniably, an educational approach that focuses on the child is attractive to groups who advocate the benefits of relevancy in education and child-centered learning and who believe that a child-centered focus promotes personal empowerment and inspires democratic values and behaviors. Some learning specialists also endorse the gradualism of the approach—from the basic and familiar to the more complex and distant—as a coherent cognitive process for acquiring knowledge and skills (Michigan Department of Education 2007; Task Force on Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies 1994; Teachers' Curriculum Institute 2003). However, both critics and defenders rely on an incomplete understanding of this approach's history. In this article, I attempt to correct this problem by focusing on the history of nineteenth-century geography education at the elementary level.

When I was using the expanding communities approach in my kindergarten classroom, I was unaware of its origins, and it was only in graduate school that I first learned of the approach's long and complex history and the controversy it has generated. I discovered that many education scholars and teachers inaccurately locate the origins of the expanding communities curriculum in the twentieth century, attributing it to Paul Robert Hanna (1902–88), a professor of education at Stanford University. In actuality, the approach has roots dating back to the mid-nineteenth century. Thus, while Hanna was indisputably the popularizer of this curriculum in elementary social studies education, he was not its founder.

Nineteenth-century educators in various disciplines, including history, civics, and literature, incorporated the approach to varying degrees (see Leriche 1987; Schwartz 2002). This article focuses par-

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strengthened, with an eye toward how educators used it in the past.

The Expanding Communities Curriculum: Critics and Defenders

Many educators and historians, as well as people outside the academic world (e.g., politicians), have criticized the expanding communities curriculum for blocking students' development of content knowledge, prioritizing the study of family life over the study of important historical figures, and focusing on topics students already know well. The fundamental premise of the approach is also challenged as having no basis in psychological research. In addition, such critics argue that the expanding communities curriculum lacks both theoretical grounding and intellectual rigor (Frazee and Ayers 2003; Ravitch 1987). Implicit in many of these charges is the conviction that the elementary social studies curriculum is a waste of time and resources as well as a so-called dumbing down of intellectual standards.

In particular, these critics note the lack of disciplinary rigor in both the content and processes of the approach. *Disciplinary content* refers to the facts and organizing principles of subject areas. For subjects such as history, geography,

and civics, disciplinary content includes, for example, significant people and historical events, the earth and its peoples, and the articles of the U.S. Constitution. Disciplinary processes include thinking chronologically and interpreting primary documents in history, creating and reading maps in geography, and learning to make collective decisions in civics. Critics charge that the expanding com-

munities approach, which focuses on the daily, immediate lives and experiences of children, does not focus on these kinds of content and processes and is therefore devoid of disciplinary rigor. Conversely, supporters of the expanding communities curriculum report that it allows children to perceive and understand the world in logical and organized steps that link everyday life to the facts and circumstances of the wider world. These scholars believe the expanding communities approach helps students understand social science concepts in a more real-world, meaningful context (Muessig 1987; Thornton 2001, 2005). From a personal standpoint, when I taught kindergarten and used the expanding communities approach, which was part of my school's curriculum, I found it relevant, logical, and effective for students while still allowing for imaginative and interesting lessons that were neither oversimplified nor devoid of content. Focusing on the social unit of "self," students created maps of their bedrooms (using symbols and legends), produced a class census (by family size and type), and tracked the goods and services they and their families purchased.

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ticularly on the discipline of geography because, of the social science disciplines taught in the nineteenth century, geography most closely and logically fits within the expanding communities framework. I provide a general description of how educators presented the curriculum and how teachers taught its subjects following the “immediate to distant” approach. I conclude the article by discussing ways a disciplinary approach toward geography can be used successfully within the expanding communities approach in contemporary social studies education.

The Use of the Expanding Communities Curriculum in Geography Education

Geography is a natural discipline to use in the expanding communities curriculum. Geography studies both link to and use children’s immediate (physical) environments—lessons easily focus on maps of the schoolyard and community, the interactions between people and their natural environment, and the cultural and physical characteristics of various places that have importance in children’s lives. Nineteenth-century teachers using geography lessons to let children see, touch, and experience their immediate environment were inspired by the Swiss educator Johann Pestalozzi, who stressed “object teaching,” a practice that encourages the direct study of natural objects and discourages the dry study of abstract words and concepts (Jenness 1990, 222; Rugg 1923, 59).

Although geography never held the valued place of reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic in the elementary curriculum, nineteenth-century schools devoted some attention to this subject. The physical growth of the United States (through the Louisiana Purchase and westward expansion) and the usefulness of geographic knowledge for business and other practical pursuits inevitably led to increased geography study in schools (McManis 1911, 36).

Textbooks

An examination of nineteenth-century geography textbooks provides some evi-

dence of how geography was studied. In the early nineteenth century, geography was synonymous with topography, or the study of the earth’s physical features. The core of the discipline was locating objects and places on maps (McManis 1911, 36). One geography textbook author, W. C. Woodbridge, had traveled and studied in Europe, where he had encountered the latest European scholarship. Based on this experience, Woodbridge advocated for a new approach: “Let the student next draw simple maps, beginning with a plan of his table, or the room in which he is. Proceeding to delineate successively a plan of the house, garden, neighborhood, and town . . .” (qtd. in McManis, 40). According to Woodbridge, children should experience objects and materials firsthand before they study related abstract concepts such as longitude and latitude (McManis).

Many nineteenth-century geography textbooks supported Woodbridge’s approach to geography study. This methodology, called *local geography*, emerged partly from the “inductive” method of making specific observations and then drawing generalizations from these observations. Accordingly, children spent time actively exploring their local environs. This approach, in which children studied first what was most immediate in their lives and then gradually moved into ever-widening social dimensions, reflected nineteenth-century educators’ conception of the natural and social development of individuals. The expanding communities curriculum of the twentieth century is rooted in these nineteenth-century geography lessons.

The National Education Association’s Committee of Ten Report

The National Education Association’s (NEA) Committee of Ten Report, the nation’s first set of national recommendations for education (published in 1893 and then in 1894 in book form), essentially endorsed the expanding communities framework for its recommendations at the elementary level (most of the report was geared toward secondary education). There were nine subject-specific conferences in which participants wrote

curricular recommendations that would make up a final report (NEA 1894). One conference was devoted to geography (physical geography, geology, and meteorology; hereafter called the Geography Conference). (The other eight conferences were History, Civil Government, and Political Economy; Latin; Greek; English; Other Modern Languages; Mathematics; Physics, Astronomy, and Chemistry; and Natural History.)

The Geography Conference emphasized the importance of observational geography for all grades. Such geography would continually engage students in the study of the natural features of their own environment, including landforms, waterways, temperature and weather, and plant and animal life (NEA 1894, 211, 215)—that is, they learned disciplinary content in physical geography. The Geography Conference advised that “the exercise of the imagination of remote objects should always be preceded, if possible, by the exercise of the observation of similar facts near at home” (NEA, 222). Observational geography also included the human elements of geography, such as population distribution; political boundaries; and the locations of cities, villages, canals, and railways (NEA, 212, 215). All learning in geography, according to the Geography Conference, depended on the students’ *direct* experiences with the natural world (NEA, 219).

Specifically, the Geography Conference recommended a grade-by-grade progression of map study. According to the plan, children began by mapping the schoolroom using symbols for doors, windows, and desks. Next they mapped the schoolyard, followed by nearby streets and roads, their state, and their nation. In this way, they learned disciplinary content (such as location) and disciplinary processes by creating and interpreting maps. Students also had direct contact with their surroundings. Map study, as conceived of by the Geography Conference, was thus a geographic analysis of students’ immediate locality, followed by exploration of ever-widening communities. The Geography Conference reasoned that in moving from the immediate to the distant,

students could cultivate “good intellectual habits” through “correct observation and accurate statement of simple facts” (NEA, 221). Students would then be prepared to study more distant places (NEA, 211, 221). The similarity of this reasoning to the theory of the expanding communities curriculum is noteworthy.

Annual Reports of Local School Districts

The late nineteenth-century annual reports of the Detroit public schools (DPS) reveal how one local school district paralleled the NEA approach to geography study. The DPS educators believed the purpose of geography education in the primary grades was to develop the power of observation. For instance, DPS students studied physical geography, including water and land masses around the school and city such as Belle Isle and the Detroit River. Although the geography lessons included abstract concepts such as direction, distance, and location, such studies were situated within the context of the immediate (and real) environment. Students studied the “daily observation of the weather, together with the special study of the seasons, as they come and go, [that] furnishes many ideas about climate, rainfall and the change of season” (Detroit Board of Education 1896, 36). The DPS believed students should also experience their immediate surroundings as preparation for the study of global geographical concepts:

Their study of home animals, domestic and wild, together with that of our commerce, mineral productions, our people, our ways of traveling, our building, our occupations, our manufactured articles, our principal streets and public buildings open the eyes of our children and help them to much information which is valuable in itself, and more valuable to use as an aid to the study of the world which lies beyond them, and which cannot be studied through observation, but only through imagination. (Detroit Board of Education, 36)

Although the DPS children studied geography in first and second grades, their study became much more formalized in the third grade. They studied the city of Detroit, Wayne County, and the

state of Michigan. They learned about climate, vegetation, animals, minerals, people (races in the communities), modes of life (i.e., occupations and aspects of daily living), and government. They also studied “structure”: land masses and water forms using city, county, and state maps. When studying Michigan, they examined the state’s regions, boundaries, topography, drainage, lakefronts, climate, vegetation, occupations, cities, and railroads (Detroit Board of Education 1894, 149; Detroit Board of Education 1896, 130).

In fourth grade, the DPS children continued their study of physical geography (climate, vegetation, land forms, and waterways) and began their study of political geography (populations, governments, religions, and occupations). The curriculum emphasized important disciplinary concepts inspired by geography study, referred to as the “great essentials,” instead of the minor points, or “burdensome details” (Detroit Board of Education 1896, 37). These essentials included transportation, mineral production, manufacturing, and the relationship between the earth and its inhabitants—what we now call *geo-economics* and *human geography*. In the fifth grade, students studied the United States (population, education, religion, government, and history), South America, and Europe.

In the sixth and seventh grades, the DPS geography curriculum expanded to the continents of Africa, Australia, and Oceania, as well as the earth as a whole. The concentration was on structure, drainage, outlines (national borders), climate, vegetation, animals, minerals, and people. In seventh grade, students also focused on political divisions, governments, religions, occupations, commerce, a special study of Michigan, a review of the United States, and finally, studies of Great Britain, Germany, Russia, France, Turkey, India, China, Japan, Egypt, and Brazil. Taken as a whole, the DPS geography curricula, first through seventh grade, reflect the pedagogy of steadily widening social domains—from the city to the state to the country to the world—in essence, the expanding communities approach

with a focus on rigorous disciplinary content and processes.

The Grand Rapids public schools (GRPS) also used the expanding communities approach. The Grand Rapids Board of Education’s 1865–66 annual report (1866) recommended that children learn the cardinal directions by placing a book on a table and drawing maps of the table (e.g., comparing lengths of the table sides, identifying north and south on the table, and locating the book’s position on the table). The GRPS believed that, by mastering basic map skills, students could draw and interpret maps of progressively larger geographical areas such as the schoolroom, the schoolyard, and finally, the city: “They trace the principal streets, find their own homes and the post office and other public buildings, and measure distances” (Grand Rapids Board of Education 1866, 16). The GRPS children culminated their map study with Michigan, the nation, and Europe.

Reports from the GRPS about two decades later prescribed geography lessons that also began with the local community as a way to learn the compass and map skills needed for national and global geography study. The 1889–90 GRPS annual report emphasized the importance of beginning with the local and familiar to teach new concepts: “All new terms should be explained by reference to what is near and common before the pupils begin the study of the lessons” (Grand Rapids Board of Education 1890, 99). In second grade, students studied direction and distance by mapping their desks and classroom. In third grade, they mapped their ward and the city of Grand Rapids. By fourth and fifth grades, students were ready to study the physical and political geography of their country and the world, often using texts such as *Harper’s School Geography* (American Book Company, 1885).

Thus the geography textbooks, the NEA’s Geography Conference report, and the geography curricula in two Michigan school districts support the conclusion that young children in the mid- to late nineteenth century often studied geography beginning with their immediate surroundings and then progressed to

more distant locales. Educators believed this sequencing plan, combined with the object method of instruction, was suited to developing abilities and increasing interests of children as they moved up through the grades.

Conclusion

In this article, I have emphasized two important points about geography education. First, of all the social science disciplines, the expanding communities approach is especially well developed in geography. With its use of the natural (and civic) environment of the classroom, geography study adapts easily to a curricular structure based on ever-widening communities. This relationship was observed and promoted in nineteenth-century geography curricula—which challenges the commonly held myth that Hanna’s expanding communities curriculum of the 1930s and later was an innovation born in the Progressive Era, without historical antecedents. Second, even though data on the exact nature of the curricula are limited and curricular reports are not necessarily accurate records of what teachers actually taught, the archival descriptions of curricula in the two Michigan public school districts discussed suggest that educators attempted to teach disciplinary content and processes in geography using the expanding environments approach. Students learned substantive, factual material about their community, state, and country. They studied political geography, human geography, and foreign geography as well as geography-related subjects such as climate and vegetation. This meaty geography curriculum argued persuasively that it is possible to maintain disciplinary learning while teaching in a lively, engaging way within the expanding communities framework.

In her article on nineteenth-century civics educators, Sherry Schwartz (2002) noted teaching strategies that helped young citizens “become empowered by discovering relationships between their own personal environment and the

past, present, and future environments of the external world” (61). Similarly, geography education that followed this approach provided students the opportunity of engaging actively with their immediate surroundings in ways that increased their understanding of physical and political communities.

Critics of the expanding communities approach today should turn their attention to the rigorous ways in which nineteenth-century educators used geography studies, demonstrating that it is possible to embed rich disciplinary content and processes within the curricular structure. While other disciplines (e.g., history, which is chronological by nature) may be more challenging to use in concert with this approach, this article points to particular evidence of how geography educators related learning to children’s immediate lives while also teaching them geography concepts like location, mapping, cardinal directions, and boundaries. Similarly, defenders of the approach would benefit from an examination of nineteenth-century approaches. As justification for the approach, they can turn to its rich history in geography education. Geography, with its spatial focus, fits logically with the expanding communities approach, which is spatially based, and helps students transition from family to school to local community and beyond.

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