

<BOOK REVIEWS>

Curriculum Standards for K-12 Geography Education: Cultivating Citizenship for a Near-Future Society

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*Curriculum Standards for K-12 Geography Education:
Cultivating Citizenship for a Near-Future Society*

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Curriculum Standards for K-12 Geographical Education

One of the aims of school education is to cultivate citizens capable of creating a better society (Westheimer, 2024). In the particular context of social studies and geographical education, the development of students' sense of citizenship is regarded as an important element (Bednarz & Bednarz, 2015; Thornton, 2019), where geographical education gives special consideration to the topic of sustainability, which has been explored in numerous studies (Kidman & Papadimitriou, 2012; Nakayama et al., 2014).

Precisely because geography and geographical education are considered useful tools for promoting sustainability (Meadows, 2020), many countries are striving to strengthen the links between geography education, citizenship education, and sustainability in their national curriculum (Kim, 2012). Notably, sustainability has its place in Japan's national curriculum, and relevant educational practice is currently being trialed (Sakaue et al., 2024). As geographical education contents vary by country and the country's context (Butt & Lambert, 2014), more in-depth discussions regarding the practical implementation of geographical education in each country at the international level are warranted to position the findings of related efforts in an international context and promote international collaboration. Focusing on the creation of our near-future society, this book by Yoshida et al. (2025) proposes consistent and coherent geographical education curriculum standards from kindergarten through high school (K-12) aimed at cultivating students' sense of citizenship.

This book by Yoshida et al. (2025) aims to ensure "coherent geographical education for character formation," which can be achieved by understanding "the meaning and significance of various phenomena related to nature and humanities on the earth's surface" (p. 7). To this end, the book proposes placing geographical

concepts at the heart of curriculum formation and implementing an exploratory process utilizing geographical tools. Thus, students will not only understand current geographical content and learn relevant skills, but also acquire attitudes based on geographical values and improve their sense of citizenship, ultimately contributing to the creation of our near-future society.

This book is the outcome of the research conducted by the Geographic Education Society of Japan's Research Group for Geographical Education Curriculum for K-12. It has been edited by three academic experts in geographical education in Japanese schools—Tsuyoshi Yoshida (Miyagi University of Education), Shigefumi Nagata (Hiroshima Shudo University), and Hiroaki Sakaue (Chiba University). It was coauthored by a total of 36 researchers and teachers, including the editors. A research paper by Yoshida, the group leader, forms the bedrock of the book, which builds on an earlier book by the Geographic Education Society of Japan, titled *Chiri kyōiku kariikyuramu no sozo: Sho chu ko ikkan kariikyuramu* (*Creation of a geography education curriculum: Coherent curriculum from elementary to high school*; Yamaguchi et al., 2008).

Chapter Overview

The book comprises seven chapters divided into a theory section (First Section: Chapters 1 to 5) and a practical section (Second Section: Chapters 6 and 7); however, the discussions in each subsection of Chapters 2 through 6 are independent of each other. In the theory section, the main research method is literature review, analyzing curricula, textbooks, and research papers. In the practice section, there are descriptions about the design, implementation, and significance of educational practices based on the theory presented in the previous section. Chapter 7 concludes the book, proposing a matrix for a coherent and consistent K-12 geographical education curriculum and delivering a summary and critical discussion of each chapter.

Chapter 1 (Creating theory based on geographical concepts) proposes setting educational targets centered on geographical concepts from three domains—contents (knowledge and understanding), methods (skills), and values (attitudes and values)—in developing a geographical education curriculum. The chapter highlights that a changing society makes geographical concepts based on the outcome of academic research all the more essential. Such concepts should, thus, be the basis of relevant educational targets to ensure the coherence and consistency of the geographical education curriculum from kindergarten to high school. Sustainability is also mentioned as the top-ranking concept in our near-future society. In this book, the three domains of contents, methods, and values consistently and coherently explain Japanese and overseas geography curricula and educational practice, affording invested stakeholders a helpful perspective for curriculum development.

Chapter 2 (Understanding what a curriculum looks like) outlines the content composition and educational methods of geographical education curricula, uncovered through fieldwork in 1) Japan, 2) the United States of America, 3) Australia, and 4) Germany. It describes how these curricula are structured from kindergarten to high school. Based on an examination of these cases, the researchers identify challenges for the geographical education curriculum in Japan: a) sorting out the construction of geographical concepts and their relationship (from the US case); b) basing content on the developmental stage of students (from the Australian case); c) making sustainability a core concept (from the Australian case); and d) understanding the systemic relationship of humanity with our environment (from the German case).

In Chapter 3 (Considering the domain of curriculum “content” composition), the current situation of the

curriculum regarding geographical knowledge and understanding is described, and relevant challenges are identified. The chapter focuses on 1) the organization of geographical concepts and local frameworks, 2) analysis of educational content in textbooks, and 3) how population is actually handled as an educational topic. That the Japanese national curriculum goes no further than applying the geographical concepts found in the International Charter on Geographical Education is considered problematic (International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education, 1992). Therefore, with the aim of designing geographical concepts unique to Japan, the composition of the content of the geographical education curriculum is reconsidered, with an emphasis on the concept of sustainability. It is proposed that, after clearly defining the scale of “local” at each stage of K-12 education, students be taught about their relationship with their community through a gradually expanding exploration of their local environment, following a multilayered framework of spatial scales aligned with each stage of schooling.

In Chapter 4 (Considering the domain of “method” composition), the current situation regarding geographical skills in the curriculum and in learning and teaching is described, and relevant challenges are identified. The chapter focuses on 1) an overview of geographical skills; specifically, 2) fieldwork and 3) Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and maps. It is suggested that the learning process, in terms of geographical skills, should foster student competency in both geographical inquiry and geographical tools. Emphasis is also placed on geographical skills encompassing students’ ability to use new technology, media, and their information literacy. Fieldwork is a cornerstone of academic research in geography, and the chapter stresses the importance of its proper inclusion in school geographical education. The chapter also underlines the need for systematic teaching of maps and GIS skills in line with the students’ development stages. It also discusses how the consistent use of GIS, which can be accessed online, in high school would allow the use of maps and GIS to become embedded in students’ lives.

Chapter 5 (Considering the domain of “values” composition) describes values and attitudes related to geography, focusing on 1) Education for Sustainable Development (also known as ESD) and 2) citizenship for wellbeing and our near-future society. Regarding ESD, geographical education is intended to allow students to build up their participation in the creation of a sustainable community in stages. This book suggests that the positioning of the concept of sustainability within the geographical education curriculum can help students form geographical values and attitudes. Furthermore, it proposes that educators be conscious of realizing the wellbeing of individual students and society via geographical education, and that such consciousness would foster students’ sense of good citizenship for our near-future society.

Based on the outcome of the research from the earlier chapters, Chapter 6 (Researching practice) describes K-12 geographical education focusing on 1) the use of digital technology, 2) location as a geographical concept, 3) students’ immediate environment, and 4) transport, land features, and cities as topics. In addition, 5) educational practice matrices are introduced. This chapter highlights the importance of the clear handling of geographical topics and concepts and the scale relating to the term “local.” It proposes the use of the latest digital technology in geographical education.

Chapter 7 (Considering a consistent and coherent K-12 geographical education curriculum) summarizes each chapter and presents a matrix for a geographical education curriculum. In curriculum development, once relevant theories have been clarified, they must be continually revised in response to their application in educational practice. The three editors also make recommendations for geographical education practice.

Discussion

The strength of this book lies in highlighting the challenges facing geographical education in Japan by not only examining relevant curricula in the country but also by comparing them with curricula in other regions. The perspectives uncovered are likely to contribute to the progress of international academic research on geographical education. Furthermore, the book includes research focused on kindergarten and the lower grades of elementary school, where social studies and geography do not exist as subjects in the official curriculum within the Japanese school education system. Consistency and coherence from kindergarten through high school are required if students are to acquire a geographical mindset. The fact that those involved in geographical education in Japan came together (as done in this book) to conduct large-scale practical research, including joint curriculum development, is noteworthy. Furthermore, regarding international guidelines, the book adapts the International Charter on Geographical Education (International Geographical Union Commission on Geographical Education, 1992) to ensure that it fits the context of Japanese education, delivering a procedural record of the emergence of a “Japanese way” of geographical education.

However, the book has some gaps in coverage. It uses sustainability as one geographical concept among others, but it could have envisaged concrete concepts relating to sustainability. Moreover, although climate change is mentioned in Chapter 6, this concept could have been considered in regard to the creation of our near-future society. Climate change has been the focus of substantial research in the social studies and geographical education fields (Chang, 2021). It would also have been beneficial to improve evidence of the effectiveness of educational practices based on curriculum standards by qualitatively and quantitatively analyzing the activities of practitioners and learners.

Conclusion

When developing yearly plans and units that consider geographical concepts, schoolteachers will be able to refer to the geographical education curriculum matrix and educational practice examples presented in this book. Importantly, the lack of a consistent and coherent geographical education curriculum from kindergarten through high school is not a problem exclusive to Japan, but appears worldwide. The fact that the curriculum standards presented in this book stem from researchers and practitioners in geography and geographical education is expected to contribute to teachers’ understanding of the structure of geographical education curricula and offer a helpful perspective for teachers in all schools when developing relevant curricula. As widely discussed internationally, teachers need knowledge to develop curricula (Alvunger, 2021). Accordingly, understanding and properly utilizing the content of the curriculum standards presented in this book will provide teachers with insights on how to develop their subject knowledge and beliefs. Co-editor Sakaue points out the importance (p. 205) of teachers changing their perception, such that they look upon theory and practice as something that they create and adapt themselves. Consistent and coherent curriculum standards (frameworks) for each area of study are needed in Japan, and we should look for the professional development of teachers to enable them to use such standards in curriculum development. This book compares examples from Japan with initiatives in other countries and demonstrates the potential for collaboration.

It would be beneficial for teachers working in early childhood education and the lower grades of elementary school to acquire the geographical concept perspective presented in this book. That said, actual application should be based on the unique characteristics of each type of school and subject. This book showcases that the living environment studies curriculum, along with the teaching and learning, in kindergarten and the lower grades (Grades 1 and 2) of elementary school in Japan diverge from the social studies and geography curricula and the educational principles and mindset that begin at Grade 3. Thus, further dialogue is needed regarding the results of research in the area of early childhood education (from birth to eight years old).

In addition, the authors further aim to develop teacher education and professional development aligned with the standards of the geography education curriculum. By recreating the curriculum standards proposed in this book, teachers could foster their professional development, which can, in turn, lead to initiatives that contribute to international issues in geography teacher education. The book contains suggestions not only for researchers in the fields of geographical education and social studies education but also for teachers wanting to examine their everyday educational practice and for university students aspiring to be teachers.

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