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Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954

Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK

Journal of Geography

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rjog20>

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Published online: 20 May 2008.

To cite this article: W. M. Gregory (1911) Present Problems in Elementary School Geography, Journal of Geography, 9:7, 193-195, DOI: [10.1080/00221341108986305](https://doi.org/10.1080/00221341108986305)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00221341108986305>

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EDITORIAL

PRESENT PROBLEMS IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY

Modern elementary geography has a complexity and diversity of subject-matter that was unknown thirty years ago. The older geography dealt with the memorizing of unrelated facts and simple rational explanations were unknown. Nothing was then taught embodying the elements of climate, the soil, home geography and the occupations of man. The new ideas which have complicated the subject-matter are the result of an educational growth and progress which has been generally approved by modern educators who consider them vital factors of this elementary subject.

With the introduction of this new material into geography less time has been assigned it in many cities than thirty years ago. This gradual acquisition has resulted in a confused idea concerning the content of geography and a critical valuation of the old and new subject-matter is necessary. A few of the larger cities have attempted some readjustments by increasing the time, some simplification of the content or a definite selection of the important topics.

In the valuation of the material for elementary geography the following factors must receive consideration:—The adjustment of the subject-matter to the needs and the interests of the pupils rather than its logical arrangement, the more extensive study of the occupations and the industries, a definite home geography, modification and considerable reduction of the physiographic processes, a more general use of the map, concrete problems of human interest rather than equal emphasis given to both the essential fact and the trivial detail, the character of location exercises and the wider use of illustrative material.

The large number of children withdrawing early from school, demand that a knowledge of the state, country and a minimum of world geography be taught early in their course. In this the major emphasis properly belongs to the United States and Europe. The fact that nine-tenths of the pupils will enter industrial life and the rapidly increasing importance of the industries, require that the essential facts of these activities occupy a prominent place in the modern school. The soil, relief, climate and drainage are more concrete to the child if they are shown to be the controlling factors in the great industries which make modern life possible.

Home material should be organized and adapted by teachers so that it is a source of definite information and a basis for the elementary instruction. A local club for the study of home geography is valuable, if the ideas gained from the field trips are discussed and organized. In some of the large cities geographical clubs have issued pamphlets which furnish

considerable material for the teaching of local geography and history. The members of such a local club should take an active interest in the selection of modern text-books and the necessary equipment of their schools with maps, globes, charts etc.

The stereotyped definitions in many of the present texts are so broad in their generalizations, that their value to the pupil is questioned. There has been in the last five years considerable reduction in the physiographic material in the elementary course, and still more elimination of technical terms and genetic ideas is advisable. Geographic descriptions suitable for elementary instruction should be more carefully worded than in some of the modern texts where they are vague and misleading.

The study of the map and its practical use should receive greater emphasis. The interpretation of geographic relations from a clear wall map will yield results that few teachers appreciate. Pupils should acquire the knack of rapidly sketching memory maps which illustrate certain definite features. No time should be given to the tracing of the detailed features of an irregular shoreline nor devoted to outlining a continent by an elaborate system of longitude and latitude. Blank maps for each pupil are essential in the distribution and progressive studies of climate, surface and commercial relations. Large blank wall maps are valuable in the class discussion of the resources, relief, drainage and any data that the teacher can readily plot thereon. Elementary geography in this country needs wall maps, charts and diagrams that are simple and clear in their delineated features and adapted to the capacity of the pupil. The American Geographical Society has given a distinct service to education in its traveling exhibit of foreign maps, and there remains a similar duty in a compilation of the American published maps accompanied by a statement of merits, defects and details of price, publisher, mounting, editions etc.

Elementary geography is essentially a fact study. Its content is chosen for the information it yields concerning the relation of life to the earth. Its proper study leads to a rational understanding of the world relations or else geography is merely catechistical. Geographical facts are arranged in distinct groups which are governed by simple and widely recognized principles. This demands the use of the problem which compels the teacher to select the essential from the non-essential in the text and offers an effective training to the pupil. It demands the thoughtful study of the lesson and eliminates "pretty talks about things in the country" which some educators declare is the method of the average teacher in presenting geography. The abandonment of the text by the teacher is deleterious to the progress of the pupil and his habits of study. Few teachers can substitute as suitable material as that of the discarded book. The mastery of the essentials of the text would lessen the confusion of ideas and remove the cause of considerable criticism.

The present elementary geography is criticized for the failure of its students to locate places. From what these critics advocate it seems as if they regard the mere location of places as the sole result to be sought by geography study, but they have obviously forgotten the blighting influence of the once popular but absurd songs of capitals, capes, islands and bays. The pages of a modern text devoted to North America has several hundred more places to locate than a similar text of a generation ago. The places to locate are more numerous now, but some phases of modern geography are of greater value to the child than the mere mechanical location exercises. The plea, for such mnemonic work, indicates a serious neglect of the atlas and the map in the elementary school and a disregard of their habitual use. Why not be as sensible in the use of the map and the atlas as the dictionary? Let the teacher realize that work is half done when the history and the reading classes are conducted without the use of the map. In modern school geography the location of places is only one of the essential items which constitute the study of the earth and its life. A list of the essential places for location might be formulated but with such a name catalog there is a danger of this one geographical item excluding all else.

The necessity of illustrative material in geography is widely recognized by educational authorities. The modern texts have a generous assortment of pictures and maps, but the school equipment of globes, wall maps, charts, pictures, specimens, products and lantern slides is extremely scant in the elementary schools of the large cities. In one large city the cost of the geographical equipment in a single high school exceeds the total value of all the maps and the materials for the teaching of geography in one hundred elementary school buildings. If this is the country wide distribution of funds for this subject, it is a doubtful educational policy. A bureau of exchange among teachers would encourage the use of materials, products, pictures etc. Such an organization was effected in 1899 in connection with this Journal and it promised considerable aid; a trial showed its need and likewise its labor and expense. There are many teachers who have collected considerable material and have it organized as an effective aid to their instruction. This Journal will publish from time to time short articles relating to the use, organization, sources and character of illustrative material.

These ideas concerning some of the vital problems of elementary geography, are presented to arouse a much needed consideration of the whole field embraced by this subject. Radical reform in the present methods of teaching geography is unnecessary, but the purposeful organization of the subject-matter for the benefit of the pupil, the elimination of the non-essentials, the wider use of illustrative material and the more rigorous contact of teacher and pupil with the text are very desirable.

W. M. GREGORY