

# CRITICAL SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY: EDUCATION FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

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Huckle, J (2020) *Critical School Geography: Education for Global Citizenship*, e-book, available on author's website: <https://john.huckle.org.uk/critical-school-geography/>

The cover photo of John Huckle's e-book, *Critical School Geography: Education for Global Citizenship*, depicts a young climate striker with a poster stating: 'If you were acting on climate change, I'd be learning at school'. This is an apt image for a book that explores the overlapping fields of geography, education and critical social theory, in pursuit of a way of teaching that is meaningful and empowering for today's young citizens. *Critical School Geography* is aimed principally at post-primary geography teachers in the UK, although much of the content can be applied in the Republic of Ireland and other countries. Looking beyond subject boundaries, the book is relevant to other post-primary social science subjects with a citizenship dimension, such as Politics and Society in the Republic of Ireland, or Government and Politics in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the book is of value to anyone working in the broader fields of formal or non-formal global citizenship education (GCE), education for sustainable development (ESD) and development education (DE).

## **Critical approaches to geography, education and global citizenship**

*Critical School Geography* is based on critical approaches to the contested spaces of geography and education. Broadly speaking, critical geography aims to free the discipline from its imperial roots, to use geographical knowledge to view the world differently, and to seek better ways of living together on our planet (Dorling, 2018). Critical education, as presented in this book, is founded upon Freire's (1972: 28) idea of 'praxis', or reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it. Huckle believes that these two approaches

can be brought together to create a critical geography education that enables students to understand the social construction of space, place, nature and identity, and to take actions towards rebuilding these constructions in more just and sustainable ways.

*Critical School Geography* is clearly aligned to UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation) guidance on GCE and ESD, reflecting Huckle's assertion that geography is the school subject with the greatest potential to provide the knowledge, skills and values that contribute to sustainable development and global citizenship (2). The nine curriculum units presented in the book contain specific links to *Global Citizenship Education: Topics and Learning Objectives* (UNESCO, 2015) and *Education for Sustainable Development Goals: Learning Objectives* (UNESCO, 2017). Huckle supports UNESCO's conceptualisation of GCE and ESD as transformative processes, working across cognitive, socio-emotional and behavioural domains of learning to build the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that learners need to contribute to a more inclusive, just and peaceful world (UNESCO 2015: 15). It should be noted that although the UNESCO conception of GCE/ ESD occupies a core role in Huckle's text, it does not escape his critical eye; he points out that the UNESCO guidance fails to acknowledge that radical global democratisation is needed if the GCE/ESD goals are to be truly achieved (406).

### **Linking theory and practice**

*Critical School Geography* addresses both theory and practice. The chapters provide a framework that teachers can use to explore critical ideas about knowledge, pedagogy, nature, space, place, democracy and citizenship. Each chapter is followed by a curriculum unit, framed in terms of key issues of concern to today's teenagers, such as housing, jobs and health care. This reflects Huckle's belief that geography teachers have a duty to relate sustainable development to young people's anxieties about their futures (5). Each curriculum unit demonstrates how the ideas explored in the chapter can be put into practice in the classroom, including inquiry questions, learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment tasks.

The relationship of theory and practice is well illustrated in Chapter Four on ‘Knowledge’. Challenging empiricist and positivist conceptions of geographical knowledge, this chapter explores the concept of ‘powerful geographical knowledge’ (Lambert, 2018) that can provide students with new ways of understanding the world. This rich discussion is followed by a curriculum unit exploring the causes and solutions of homelessness, in the context of SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and UNESCO GCE topic 6 (Difference and respect for diversity). In the curriculum unit, students probe myths about homelessness, learn about housing policies, and explore how structural change could reduce the number of homeless people.

Another good example of theory linked to practice is found in Chapter Six on ‘Nature’. This chapter opens with a challenging question: ‘Faced with a crisis in our relationship with the rest of the natural world, what competences should geography teachers be developing in their students?’ (247). The chapter examines planetary boundaries, contrasts ‘reformist’ vs ‘transformative’ approaches to sustainable development, and explores eco-pedagogy as a critical approach that develops students’ ability to reflect and act on their relations with the rest of the natural world. The chapter is followed by a curriculum unit on Urban Farming in Chicago, Nairobi and Bristol, linked to SDG 2 (Zero Hunger) and UNESCO GCE Topic 2 (Issues affecting interaction and connectedness of communities at local, national and global levels). In the curriculum unit, students explore the stories that we are told about food and hunger, and consider the social, environmental and personal costs of the ways we eat (267).

Other examples of innovative chapter-curriculum unit pairs are a chapter on ‘Space’ which is linked with a curriculum unit on China’s Belt and Road Initiative and its impacts on Xinjiang and East Africa, and a chapter on ‘Democracy and Citizenship’ which is linked with a curriculum unit on the role of international tax reform in paying for the transition to sustainable development. The theory and practice presented in each chapter reflect Huckle’s four decades of experience as a teacher and teacher educator. They demonstrate how a creative, holistic approach can bring the UNESCO

GCE/ESD guidance to life. Furthermore, the strong content provides a counter-argument to those who have claimed that global citizenship approaches undermine and devalue core subject knowledge (Standish, 2012: 94).

## **Geography and Development Education**

Huckle discusses how DE approaches can inform and enrich teaching about development within the geography curriculum, particularly in terms of examining unequal North-South relationships (302). He argues that geography teachers need to address North-to-South patterns of engagement as articulated by Andreotti (2014) in her “HEADS UP” acronym: Hegemonic, Ethnocentric, Ahistorical, Depoliticised, Salvationist, Uncomplicated, Paternalistic. The Global Learning Programme (McCloskey, 2016) is cited as a key support structure for teachers wishing to augment the DE element of their classroom practice.

For development educators working across disciplines, there are examples of ‘thinking geographically’ that would translate well into DE practice. For example, Chapter 8 on ‘Place’, discusses a critical pedagogy of place which poses questions such as: What happened in this place? What will happen in this place? What should happen in this place? What role should I play in constructing this place? (344). This approach is applied in Curriculum Unit 8, ‘Becoming a young British Muslim woman: the significance of place’. In this unit, students explore the geography of anti-Muslim incidents in UK communities and learn of the strategies that young Muslim women adopt to keep themselves safe in public places (361). Applying this type of place-based approach could enrich DE offerings not only on racism but also across a range of social-environmental issues.

Another benefit that development educators can gain from this book relates to Huckle’s championing of radical democracy as the means of redistributing wealth and power, thereby extending equality, liberty, solidarity and sustainability (IV). Huckle’s vigorous stance provides a morale boost for

development educators troubled by the ongoing ‘de-clawing’, de-radicalisation, and de-politicisation of DE practice (Bryan, 2011).

### **Using *Critical School Geography***

*Critical School Geography* can be used by any teacher interested in strengthening the GCE/ESD dimension in geography or related subjects. The combination of theory and practice make it an ideal resource for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Initial Teacher Education (ITE). *Critical School Geography* is strongly oriented towards the UK (and within the UK, primarily England), not only in terms of educational structures but also in terms of political, social and economic contexts; for example, the data used in the curriculum units is almost exclusively English. However, as the book’s topics are inherently global in scope and significance, readers from outside the UK should be able to translate the content to their own settings. Huckle’s detailed links to UNESCO guidance throughout the book ensure that non-UK educators can extrapolate examples via UNESCO-linked guidance from their own countries, for example the Republic of Ireland’s *Education for Sustainable Development: A study of opportunities and linkages in the primary and post-primary curriculum* (NCCA, 2018).

*Critical School Geography* is accessible in all senses of the word. It is an open-source e-book available for download from the author’s website. It uses a modest 6000 KB of memory despite its 450-page length, enabling teachers to keep it readily to hand on their laptops or tablets. The plentiful hyperlinks in the text will bring the reader to many freely available sources, including books, articles, websites and videos. The e-book format allows for a very current context, as is evident in its discussion of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the text will require continuing edits if it is to remain up-to-date.

Throughout the book, the tone is that of a seasoned educator who enjoys bringing in new voices. Complex concepts are communicated clearly to those who are unfamiliar with the terrain whilst not dumbed-down for those who are more at home with critical theory. The topical themes of the

curriculum units ensure that the activities for students are engaging to young people who are learning to navigate their present lives and plan their uncertain futures. Overall, *Critical School Geography* provides sustenance for any teacher who believes that geography classes can indeed help young people to imagine and create a more just and sustainable world.

## References

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