

# RESEARCHING SCHOOL GEOGRAPHY: EXPERIENCES AND POSSIBILITIES

**Alexander Cely Rodríguez**

National Pedagogic University, Bogota, Colombia

E-mail: acely@pedagogica.edu.co

## Abstract

*Reflecting on research experiences does not only have the intention of socializing some of the findings but also that of comparing contexts and socio-cultural realities that shake up the teaching of geography and about which it is necessary to delve into even more. In this sense, it is also pertinent to be able to compare and contrast other experiences with the aim of providing pathways that will allow diverse ways of teaching, thinking and constructing spatial thought from the perspective of the school. The main outcome of the current deliberation is to compare uncertainties, illusions, projects, and ideas, among others, around school geography, its challenges, tendencies and possibilities.*

*Geopaideia research group has spent more than fifteen years to reflect on the current state of geographic education not only in the Colombian and Latin American contexts, but also analyzes the global world with the intention of finding opportunities and to suggest alternative ways teaching space according to contemporary societies and territories.*

*Concern has taken special focus on research projects that the group ahead, but also networking and linkages with other research groups in the world, so that roam the roads safer and to accurate and for teaching geography.*

**Key words:** didactical, geography, teaching, research, investigation and geographical space.

## Introduction

Geopaideia, like every research group and as a social actor, is the result of processes and misgivings that are regularly born in the Colombian context out of the necessity to strengthen teacher training in the social sciences, but especially in the teaching of geography. As such, teaching entails both working objectives and the horizon. The master's degree in education with an emphasis on the teaching of geography (Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, postgraduate programme) functioned as ferment so that its students and later graduates could unify efforts via the creation of an academic group centered on the teaching of geography that today is called *Geopaideia*. The history of the Research Group is presented in *Cotidianidad y enseñanza geográfica publication* (2008). More information on the group can be found at the following web site: [www.geopaideia.com](http://www.geopaideia.com).

Perhaps one of the first apprenticeships to deal with recognizing the fact that permanent research is a significant way to transform teaching practices in as much as the main investigation that defines the master's programme was the following question: How can we train geography teachers that will transform teaching and learning in Colombian basic and medium-level education? We don't have the answer, but we believe we can find it through research and dialogue with other communities interested in geographic education.

## Analyzing Problems for the Construction of Alternatives

One possible response to this concern maybe is in entails rethinking teacher training in the learning and disciplinary environments; resorting to delving more into teaching and

geographic theory; holding seminars with lecturers who are well prepared in one topic or the other; facilitating encounters of teachers of the different academic levels (basic, medium and higher); the elaboration of materials on topics experts recommend teaching with step-by-step instructions; risking the proposal of developing the master's programme in socialization but at the same time maintaining an ardent interest in national as well as international events with the aim of inquiry<sup>1</sup>.

The outcomes in this sense permit identifying certain basic concepts in the teaching of geography such as locale, situation, orientation, location, geographical space, continuity, and vicinity. Significant errors were detected not only in the concepts the teachers themselves possessed but also in the way they delivered these in school<sup>2</sup>; therefore, instead of developing spatial, functional and significant learning, they reaffirmed a rote, book and reductionist type teaching of geography.

Below are some of the main problems concerning the teaching of geography in the Colombian context and, with the certainty of being able to depend on a research group that becomes interested in and assumes these errors as challenges, the following research projects are carried out:<sup>3</sup>

*1. Learning difficulties in geography of basic education students:* The main objective of the research concerns reflecting on the didactics of geography in basic education via the orientation in developmental research of the future licensed teachers in the LEBECS programme (*Licenciatura en Educación Básica con énfasis en ciencias sociales*) of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional; this programme can be similar to other teacher development programmes in the country in that it seeks feedback regarding the processes and didactics implemented in the institutions that are the object of research. Keeping the same order, one tries to identify learning difficulties experienced by basic education students starting with the teaching of social sciences, especially geography, which in Colombia presents deficiencies concerning method, contents, strategies and evaluation. This situation labels this type of geography as one based on memory, description and traditionalism. For this reason the projects and reflections that aim to transform the school take on greater relevance and interest while being considered possible windows for observing, with new eyes, the scenario of school geography.

*2. Construction of social knowledge from a geographical perspective and its occurrence in critical thinking.* The proposal seeks to identify how social knowledge is constructed starting with the teaching of geography and what its occurrence is in the development of critical thinking in the social sciences in general, and in geography in particular. The project emerges as an answer to the necessity that diverse reflections- posed in Colombian education starting with the teaching of geography- entail. These reflections have gone deeper into aspects referring to the construction of the concept of geographical space in Colombian children and the learning of geography at the basic education level. Based on the outcomes obtained from the research project carried out during 2004-2005 on *Problemas de aprendizaje de la geografía (Learning problems in geography)*, the necessity to discern, pinpoint and establish the way to construct social knowledge from the perspective of geography at the basic education level arose. Starting with social knowledge, it is possible to develop critics. Criticism is a quality appreciated in all discourses and fundamental in curricular projects related to the social sciences, but, in reality,

1 Direct reference is made to the participation of the Geopaideia Group in the V Encounter of Latin American and Caribbean geographers- EGAL- which took place in Havana, Cuba, in August of 1995. Different results of the research undertaken in the master's programme were socialised. The construction of the concept of the city in the Colombian context was the focus.

2 More information about this research inquiry can be found in the Revista Folios and in the Revista Colombiana de Educación de la Universidad Pedagógica Nacional (2002), as well as in the Revista Educación y Cultura N° 47 edited by FECODE (Federación Colombiana de Educadores).

3 Research that has been carried out with the support of the Research Centre of the Universidad Pedagógica Nacional – CIUP – División de Gestión de Proyectos for the study terms 2004 – 2005; 2006 – 2007; 2008 – 2009, respectively.

it is not perceived. Research attempts to foster pertinent and necessary reflection in students of basic and medium education in our country as well as in the students of the LEBECS programme of the UPN via developmental research and social knowledge learning that influences the development of critical thinking.

3. *Literature in geography as a pedagogical alternative for the teaching and comprehension of geographical space.* Research assumes as its main focuses of investigation the category urban space, the novel, and the teaching of geography in basic education, which attempts to contribute to the processes of knowledge, development and appropriation of space. As such, the following has been determined:

- Identify the concept of urban space that can be constructed upon joining the category 'city' with the idea and representation of the same via the novel, in such a way that it is possible to establish didactic alternatives for teaching geography in basic education.
- Establish the concept of urban space that the basic education students possess in relation to their training in geography as a result of the process of having been schooled.
- Identify the pertinent urban novel for the project, one that refers to Bogota in the 1975-2005 period and, in particular, the zone under study (La Candelaria district), joining, also, the categories, namely city, urban space, literature and subjective personal experiences.
- Elaborate, beginning with the experience derived from the research, a reflection on a didactic project for the teaching of geography which states: the urban novel concerns Bogota with its theoretical references to humanistic geography and perception, which allow guaranteeing the relation geography, city, and literature.

The current research proposal reveals, due to its character and intentions, the epistemological advances and horizons that emerge in the geographical investigative fields not only in the Colombian context but also in broader spatial scenarios. The project *Construcción Sociocultural de los Territorios Urbanos (Sociocultural Construction of Urban Territories)* is an interinstitutional and international research project that seeks to identify the concept of the contemporary city present within the students that study professional education majors (teaching, social sciences, geography). This way, an attempt is made to understand, analyze and compare as they learn the diverse ranges of spatialness and temporalness which denote ways of being, acting and interacting within the Latin American metropolis from its material contents (architecture, morphologies, functionality) to its symbolic contents (feelings, narratives, languages, aesthetics, practices, uses and appropriations). In order to achieve this stated aim, the project in reference to scenario involves the cities Medellin and Bogota in Colombia, Sao Paulo, Goiania and Ijuí in Brazil and Santiago de Chile in, of course, Chile. These cities have been selected as referents since they have campuses of the universities and the research groups that participate in the project. As such, one of the significant results of the investigation is the elaboration and presentation of a proposal for educational policy guidelines for the teaching of geography in the respective countries. The ultimate aim of the project is to generate the following impacts:

- Establish general guidelines for the teaching of geography and social sciences to various entities, institutional organizations and academics interested in the topic (of the participating countries).
- Foster a total vision in the teaching of social sciences from the study of school geography.
- Strengthen the processes of debate and reflection as concerns REDLAGEO (Latin American network of researchers in Geography Didactics)

- Enable processes of interchange, mobility and academic production among teacher-researchers and participating students in the developmental process of research.
- Establish and cooperatively develop academic events that reveal the progressive results of the research.
- Publish and socialize the research results (in their different developmental stages) before peers in academic events to be held in Brazil, Colombia, and Chile.

## Outcomes and Research Possibilities

The completed research, experience and reflection *in situ* of the educative contents, as well as the epistemic maturing of the Group, allow establishing some of the outcomes, tendencies, problems and demands that are detected in the teaching of geography in the Colombian context; these aspects are important to identify and interpret not only from the abovementioned context but also because some of these elements become the bases for broader scenarios. Therefore, the following are highlighted:

1. At school a geography and traditional pedagogy dominate which limit the very objective of school geography, decreasing the possibility of innovative alternatives. Notwithstanding, it is important to note that efforts and intentions exist among some teachers and institutions to update geography teaching practices, thereby seeking to bring these closer to the connotations of social science. These teachers and institutions are concerned with recognizing, understanding, and interpreting aspects of social knowledge.
2. Some learning problems in geography are found in the traditional rote approach and lack logic and significance which causes problems for students but are also relevant for some teachers who in numbers greater than imagined lack knowledge concerning not only how to discipline but also the pedagogical tendencies that promote learning according to current sociocultural contexts. As such, the concept of teaching school geography is limited and debilitated.
3. Geography allows a range of learning styles such as social, affective, conceptual, verbal, attitudinal, those of intellectual and motor abilities, political, economical, cultural, spatial, and historical that are not so obvious within formal teaching and that demand a quick establishment in schools so that they can become a potential in light of social knowledge.
4. It turns out to be important to think of the social and territorial with greater potential; nevertheless, in order to construct a social knowledge concept that refers to the interests, concepts, and necessities of school geography, it is necessary to develop a route toward reflection around what is pertinent geographical knowledge in accordance with the levels of students' cognitive development; for instance, the revision of the sociocultural contexts in which they immerse themselves in a way that would be viable to "season" some new concepts as regards teaching geography.
5. The aim of relating geographical knowledge to social knowledge and the construction of critical thinking responds in great part to the possibility that social sciences offer the chance for students to understand human problems from a perspective of interdisciplinarity, reflecting on them and seeking alternative solutions within the framework of their daily experiences. The routes are barely being laid out but the challenge is not to mold them but to highlight them so that teachers, researchers, students and others interested in the topic can delve farther and enrich their diverse alternatives.

6. It is necessary to continue reflecting on the teaching and learning of geography so as to allow the possibility of *rethinking* main concepts for constructing this knowledge, enabling the achievement, in a systematic and gradual manner, to spread appropriate pedagogical practices.
7. The implementation of new strategies, as happens in literature, should correspond to a complete task in which one does not employ this implementation as an instrument onto that which already exists but that one discovers the converging categories and spatial concepts in such a way that city and literature, for example, can be the scenario of a dialogue in the school both for students and for teachers and, as such, can promote other alternatives of knowledge and the study of the spatial and, similarly construct spatialities.
8. The daily routine is an epistemological challenge for spatiality, contrary to the scientific world of laws and the rigid cause-effect of the society-nature relationship. Hence, daily routine seeks to support the rescue endeavours in the world of perceptual knowledge, of sensations, and the world of life; in this scenario many alternatives for the development of research and for spreading the teaching of geography in school contexts exists.
9. It is important and necessary to support the development of geography teachers under philosophical, scientific, technical, and affective conditions in order to enhance the tasks they are going to perform having access to the emergent fields of the specific discipline and with the constant ability to recognise within the simplicity of space the complexity of locales. Supporting the development of a teacher who studies a view of the world of life, the world of spatiality, including maintaining a dialogue with those in other fields and disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, architecture, and semiotics, among others, is an interesting and courageous alternative.
10. It is necessary for the groups responsible for research to guide the developmental processes and evaluations of teachers and/or those professionals interested in the fields of humanities and education.<sup>4</sup>

Finally it's important that, the work and research conducted by Geopaideia show the need to continue thinking about geographical education not only in schools and education, but also in higher education programs, in teacher training programs and the international community in general. Every day the geographical space is more complex and diverse, therefore we cannot think only from local and small scales, contrary to this, we must also think global spaces. It is thought by, from and for people in the world today. That is the importance to think in international level and international communities.

### Some Final Considerations

Research work considerably nurtures the work of groups to take part in dialogue and similar interaction with other teacher-researchers, concerned perhaps about common problems and about shared necessities and expectations; as such, demand exists for the consolidation of academic networks that share concrete spaces represented by events, colloquia, and congresses as well as virtual scenarios in which new technologies such as forums, chats, and web sites foster other alternatives of contact.

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<sup>4</sup> Mention is made of the work carried out and guided by Geopaideia in the teacher training programmes for Basic Education with a concentration in social sciences (University: Pedagógica Nacional y Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá, Colombia); as in the postgraduate programme for social construction of space in the Master of Social Studies of the University Pedagogical National.

However, not less relevant is the challenge to share projects and investigative findings so as to reveal, along with common problems and diverse sociocultural contexts, other ways of being, thinking, acting and living spatiality which, in the end, is another way of recognising school geography. It is also necessary to reaffirm the need to unite efforts in order to achieve joint publishing, which allows similarities among particularities, innovation in the midst of tradition and, more importantly, the constitution of spatial subjects who socially know their position in life but are committed as world and local citizens.

Geopaideia again addresses all those who actively wish to enrich this project- limited by academic rigour- but through which, basically, one grows as a social subject with work and a commitment that, given the current national and international dynamics, invite viewing our roles much more as teachers who are active, reflective, critical, participative and confident.

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*Advised by Laima Railienė, University of Šiauliai, Lithuania*

**Alexander Cely Rodríguez**

Professor at National Pedagogic University, Member of the Research Group Geopaideia, Bogota, Colombia.

E-mail: [acely@pedagogica.edu.co](mailto:acely@pedagogica.edu.co) [alexcel@gmail.com](mailto:alexcel@gmail.com)

Website: <http://www.pedagogica.edu.co/>

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