

Reconstructionism Ideology: A Perspective on Geography Curriculum

Bambang Sugeng

Abstract: One of the philosophical questions which should be principally answered in curriculum development for any subject is why a particular subject needs to be taught to children in school. The answer to such a question is basically influenced by ideology or beliefs and values system believed in society. *Reconstructionism* is regarded as an appropriate educational ideology which gives the basis for the Geography curriculum development in society characterised with democratic values such as that of Indonesia. The discussion on this issue leads to suggestion that Indonesian primary school educators need to reconsider the deferment on Geography teaching until Grade Three in primary school and to regard Geography as an important and strategic subject matter to be taught to the primary pupils as early as possible.

Key words: Reconstructionism, Geography, Curriculum

In education it has been suggested that there are at least three basic educational ideologies, each of which generates a different type of curriculum theory, i.e. *Classical Humanism*, *Progressivism*, and *Reconstructionism* (Skilbeck, 1986). An essential feature of *Classical Humanism* is that it associates traditional culture and values with a small elite. In this case, the elite are to receive an education quite different from the other groups-middle and lower classes. It concentrates on cultural heritage; those kinds of knowledge worked out over periods of this ideology to

Bambang Sugeng is a lecturer at the Faculty of Social Studies Education (FPIPS) IKIP MALANG. This article is edited by Utami Widiati.

give the best in term of literature, music, and history. This ideology tends to be knowledge-centered. *Progressivism* is openly child-centered, representing a rejection of traditional values and practices in favor of the goal of the child discovering for himself and following his own impulse. Childhood becomes important in its own right as well as freedom is more important than social order. Therefore, this ideology sees that curriculum would be based on experiences and topics chosen by the pupils themselves. On the other hand, *Reconstructionism* is basically to see individuals and society as harmoniously integrated. It regards education as a way of developing individual members of society, and at same time improving society. Education should provide opportunities for individual growth, thus ensuring an improving quality of life for individuals as well as improving the quality of society itself.

In terms of the three ideologies briefly described above, Lawton (1989) suggests 'In a democratic society which values certain kinds of freedom, a version of reconstructionism is considered the most appropriate planning model of curriculum'. Thus, in the light of this reason and the attempt of trying to justify and strengthen the continued existence of geography in the school curriculum, in this article, I am interested in developing a critical analysis in trying to answer, from the perspective of Reconstructionism ideology, the basic question 'why geography is important to be taught to children in school?' Alongside this, I suppose this issue is essential to consider to strengthen the existence of geography in the Indonesian primary school curriculum. It seems that in Indonesian primary schools, geography needs revitalization and reorientation particularly of the issues of the fundamental ideas and the essence of its teaching for primary school children. The reason is that the teachers are likely to have no properly awareness of such issues, which, in turn, results in less teacher's positive attitudes towards geography teaching.

By reconstructionism perspective, my intention is mainly to develop analytical description in trying to justify that geography is essential to be taught to all pupils, not only because it is essential for their development as individuals, but also because it is essential for understanding of the society and a variety of environments. Accordingly, in the next section of this essay, the points I share to address are, firstly, the personal context of geography which is intended to elaborate what geography can contribute to the child's development as an individual and, secondly, the social

context of geography which is intended to describe the social role of geography in extending children's horizons in the sense of developing local, national, and global perspectives. The discussion will be focused on the primary school level.

THE PERSONAL CONTEXT OF GEOGRAPHY

This section will focus on the points reflecting how geography teaching significantly contributes to the children's development as individuals, i.e. their intellectual and cognitive mapping development. Actually, the teaching of geography to primary children is regarded as an essential part of their education. The study of places/locality, for instance, with which geography is mainly concerned gives an important role to a child's intellectual development. From the perspective of intellectual development, the facts, ideas, and skills required to understand places are important and useful contribution to children's cognitive growth. In this case, Williams and Catling (1985) have also stressed that through geographical study, children are systematically introduced to the variety of intellectual skills employed in geography such as: using scientific methods of enquiry, including measurement and quantification; posing hypotheses, problem solving, testing, decision making, drawing conclusions, generalizing and evaluating; experimenting and observing.

Children from birth, of necessity, develop a sense of locational awareness in exploring to themselves where they and other features are in the environment, and how all these elements relate to each other. Children are frequently first attracted to places through recognizing their immediate environment or the world where they live. Hence, for the reason of their mental development, children seem to need involvement with place initially through their immediate environment. Their involvement with place and their intimate interaction with environments could enable them to construct their various experience of place/environment place which, in turn, could accelerate their mental development.

Children's involvement and interaction with environments can strongly foster their *curiosity* in the world in which they live. Theorist appear to agree that curiosity is a pre-requisite to functioning as a competent, self-sufficient human being and that it is fundamental to any learning or

problem solving. Children's desire to investigate comes from their curiosity. Investigations means seeking answers to questions about the world in which they live and, ideally, children's investigation begins with questions that are personal and often arise in contexts such as the neighborhood, the community, and the nation. Investigation, on the other hand, clearly need to involve some basic intellectual skills. Thus, this means that through geographical study which tries satisfy their curiosity in the world, children can develop from the earlier stages their basic intellectual skills such as observing, exploring, identifying, inquiring, classifying, and interpreting. Related to this, Mills (1988) suggests:

Geographical study with primary children builds on fundamental aspects of children's experiences. Children are fascinated by the world they see about them: their own environment, places they visit, and distant places they see and hear through the media or other experience. This *fascination* should be exploited; Children's curiosity about places is as much to do with events and people in those places as it is with the natural and man-made facets of those places. Their *curiosity* should be fostered. Children explore the world about them, particularly their immediate locality, the home and neighborhood; they also explore and piece together places in their imagination. The *exploration* should be encouraged.

These fundamental elements of *fascination*, *curiosity*, and *exploration* are powerful motivating forces for children's learning development. Children's natural wonder about and enthusiasm for places is a focus for learning that can not be left untapped. Geography provides children opportunities for satisfying their curiosity and their sense of wonder both by what the children experience around their own school and home and also by what they learn of other parts of the world. As such, geography appears to be concerned with an attempt to engender children's curiosity by providing them opportunities to explore and inquiry about place and environment in which they live and the world beyond. In other words, geography is concerned to encourage children to keep an open mind and curiosity in further understanding.

Alongside this, geography through human geography offers almost unlimited opportunity for training the reasoning faculties of children, because it involves a constant quest of the 'why' behind the 'what' reflecting patterns of cause and effect relationship as, for example, why the people of the polar regions wear fur clothing while those of the warm tropics

wear little or none. In human geography, such a pattern of cause and effect relationship progresses gradually from the simple one, which is called one step relationship, to the more complex ones consisting of two or three step relationship (Thomas 1991). Among the major objectives of an introductory study in geography, also argued by Thomas, are to catch and hold the interest (curiosity) of the pupils of the worlds in which they live and simultaneously to develop their *reasoning power*. Children's interest in the world and reasoning power with the arise and are maintained through geographical study, in turn, will ensure knowledge and constructive thinking in the them.

Naturally, children are constantly trying to make of sense of their world in the light of their present understanding and this attempt can be seen as the desire to order environment. Their ability to sense of their world around them is than called a *cognitive map* or Palmer (1994) calls it as *mental model of the environment*, the ability to imagine and think about the world around them. Such an ability is obviously essential in children's life to create capacity to make sense of the world around them (cognitive mapping ability).

Nevertheless, Mills (1988) argues, 'An understanding of the world is not something that children possess magically as from birth or at five years old, it is a quality that grows'. This, however, implies that it needs deliberate teaching to introduce children to their world. Geography, which is about the study of place, space, and environment, aims to help people make sense of the world and develop an understanding about the interaction of people and their environment. Geographical study in school is committed to helping children understand their world and thus help them develop their cognitive mapping. Moreover, Manson, and Vuicich (1995) suggest that from geography comes ideas that will contribute to helping children comprehend and deal with the world around them. Such ideas mainly concern to relationships between people and their surrounding and concern the spatial organization of their society.

The contribution of geographical study to fostering the development of cognitive mapping ability and children reflects the needs of the individual. Children need to be able to navigate the environment familiar to them in daily movement. In order to be able to get to the local shops, the stations, school, or a friend's home, they need to build up a sound

local place knowledge. Such knowledge will need to be detailed, current and manageable. It will reflect the spatial structure and feature of the local area, and be adaptable in that changes can be accommodated by our cognitive map as they occur locally, as for example when a shop using alters or a throughroute is closed off. A concern of geographical work with all children will be the study of the local environment of the neighborhood of the school and children.

Besides knowledge about the immediate environment, children also need to extend to their knowledge about distant place or beyond their immediate environment. Children do this naturally with journeys to other places or beyond their immediate environment. Yet it is vital for children to be able to relate the place of destination to their home location. Geographical study, however, is a means of helping children to appreciate the spatial structure of places (area) both near or distant which enable them to extend both their knowledge of the region in which they live and move and their understanding of how places relate to each other spatially.

Furthermore, because of great development in information technology, children, nowadays, frequently deal with lost of second-hand experiences about distant place in many parts of the world, for example, through hearing, reading, and seeing. Such experiences are powerful influences, and inevitably children build up a mental map or image of foreign places. Obviously, children need to be able to relate places which they only encounter at second hand to their own experience and to each other in the world at large. In this case, a fundamental aspects of geographical study lies in enabling children to create a mental image of the world at large, to appreciate its interrelatedness, and to be aware of the range and variety of places in it.

Geographical study also help children develop the skill to construct or reconstruct imaginatively changes in the world around them. This is not skill which unnatural to children, who constantly imagine places in fantasy play and in story, reading, but as Mills (1988) argues, such a skill is a skill in need of enhancement. This skill will strengthen children's capacity to imagine how an area locally may look if it is redeveloped from allotments to housing, how the filling of a valley for a reservoir will alter the landscape, or how an environment appear prior to urban growth. In the light of this, the role of such geographical imagination is

crucial to making sense of children's environment experience in times of constant environmental change.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF GEOGRAPHY

According to the reconstructionism perspective, in addition to the opportunity for the development of children as individuals, the teaching of any subject at school should also be beneficial to improving the quality of society. There is interdependency between them. Naturally, individuals are not equipped to live in isolation from each other and world about them. They can grow as human beings only if they grow in community/society. Therefore, their existence is an integrated part of community in a local, national, and global setting. As human beings their activity usually involves organization of various kind. Thus, in the light of this context it is vital that children grow to understand and appreciate this setting for the sake of the community and the environment in which they live.

Geography, through the study of its components, i.e.: place, physical, human, and environmental geography, apparently has a significant social role in extending children's horizon, in the sense of developing local, national, and global perspectives and knowledge. From geography comes ideas that will help children understand places-in particular, ideas concerning the relationships between people and their surroundings and ideas concerning the spatial organization of the society.

This role of geography is complementary to the needs of the individual and is important in enhancing children's understanding of interrelatedness between people and their environments (Mills, 1988). The study of spatial aspects of human activities and their setting, that is the description and explanation of the location and distribution of certain kinds of human behavior, is of geography's main contributions to helping children to understand contemporary society at local, national, and international level.

The social dimension of geographical study, as also stated by the *Geographical Association* (1982), makes a significant contribution to wards establishing social attitudes for children to appreciate the total background of other people, their culture, religion, and family life as well as their country and its industries. it seems that only through this way can we attempt to lead children to see through other people's eyes, and only by

doing this can we hope to establish the children's tolerant attitudes to other places and people that will eventually lead to sympathy and understanding for those whose lives are different of ours. Williams and Catling (1985) also identify that children's working with geography in school with develop some social skills in them, such as sharing by pupils of their studies and findings, investigation and involvement in the community, the recognition of the diversity and value of people in the local community and elsewhere, and their awareness of their own changing attitudes to aspects of the environment.

Children need to understand the way in which the environment works in order for them to function in a range of environments. Functioning in environments means that we should be aware of both human and physical patterns, the process creating, sustaining and changing them and the forces linking places together. This means that children should be introduced, for example, to the types, distribution and patterns of phenomena (buildings, routes, land use, relief, forms, landscape, and resources) and to the processes involved—the movement of people and goods, the action of wind and water, the regeneration of renewable resources, the use and development of leisure facilities, or the planning of new use of land, and the pulls and pushes of urban areas, the water cycle, the political and economic decisions in influencing land use, etc.

Besides that, encouraging children to be aware of human and physical patterns and processes emerging on the world around them is essential because this can enable them to think and anticipate the way to respond to such patterns and processes in order to give benefit to the social life. For example, climate and physical features greatly influence the behavior of human societies. Children, even at elementary level, may be led to appreciate how these two fundamental geographical factors still exert powerful influences in human affair. Hence, one of important contributions which geography can make towards helping children to be able to participate in developing human societies is to lead them to knowledge of the distribution of climates and relief features on the earth surface in relationship to the promise they bear and the problems they pose for habitation.

The widespread human behavior definitely cannot be divorced from the physical and natural environment, such as geology, relief, climate, soils, and vegetation. Physical conditions influence human activity and

vice versa. They are involved in a complicated system and each of them often produces conflicting interest. In modern community, for example, people tend to utilize potent technology to satisfy human wants and needs. This way often recreate, and occasionally destroy their environment in drastic ways. Unwise exploitation of natural resources and pollution as a result of the use of advanced technology have influenced the balance of ecosystem and raised some serious problems of environment. Such problems, even, have been a great anxiety for human beings at present time.

To avoid more serious environmental problems which can endanger the existence of humanity in the world, we need to change people's attitudes from exploitation and dominance to global protection and care. For this purpose, geography is very fundamental to introduce to children since earlier stages/primary level in order for them to learn the meanings and relationship of people, environment, and technology to understand the importance of creating in the intimate and harmonious relationship among them. This way is mainly intended to foster from earlier children's awareness of environment and create a positive attitude toward caring for the environment. As Mills (1988) also suggests 'The study of geography should not only introduce children to an awareness of their own environment, but should specifically foster caring attitudes towards the environment, through which children come to appreciate its potential and balance'. As such, geography also functions to foster the acceptance by children of the responsibility to become involved in environmental issues at local, national, and global levels.

Geography is not a discipline which solely observes, describes and reflects on the environment, but a discipline which is capable of offering responses to the potentials and problem's of the world for the sake of human society. Even, the Council of Europe claims that geography has now reached a degree of maturity and development enabling it to make a vigorous contribution to the development of human society (DES 1992). Through studying geography at school children acquire special knowledge, skills, and attitudes which are important resources required by adults as citizens of a complicated world. Geography, more than other subjects in the curriculum, helps children to make sense of current events and informed judgment on economic, political, social, and environmental issues. Therefore, the skills and knowledge acquired in geography classroom in dealing with world knowledge are both useful and vital.

CONCLUSION

From the whole discussion at the previous sections, we come to the general conclusion that from the perspective of Reconstructionism ideology, geography is a subject which is fundamental and beneficial for children in primary school. From a personal context, geography appears to be an area of study which provides children a great opportunity for their development as individuals, mainly in terms of promoting their intellectual development, developing their cognitive mapping ability, and even giving a significant support to their learning experience in other areas of curriculum. From the social context, geography plays a strategic role in fostering children better understanding and awareness of cultural and environmental differences and better understanding of interdependency and interrelatedness among geographical factors, people and physical features/environment which, in turn, lead them to having positive attitudes toward caring for environment, concerning, for other locally, nationally, and globally. In Indonesia, a country characterised with pluralism, it is the role of geography in social contexts which becomes more important for maintaining the nation unity. This is mainly intended to strengthen the people's awareness and better understanding of the uniqueness and diversity of places within the country in terms of geographical features, ethnicity, culture, language, religion.

The discussion of two contexts of geographical study in separate sections does not mean that one is exclusive to each other. The notion Reconstructionism ideology views these two context/dimension as harmoniously integrated. In other words, geography appears to provide an opportunity for children growth as individuals and at the same time ensuring an improving quality of human society.

Thus, in the light of its strategic role as viewed from the Reconstructionism perspective, geography should be regarded by all educators mainly in the primary level as an extremely worthwhile field of study for children's whole learning development.

Its existence in the school curriculum should also be regarded as essential as other subjects. Finally, I would like to quote from Daugherty (1989), who remarks that without some geographical education one cannot know his own places within the world that support him: where he is; what is going on for him (or not!) at those specific places.

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