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Editorial Article

Teaching Geography for a World in Transition: Navigating Knowledge, Complexity and Change

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Abstract: This Special Issue, inspired by the 2026 EUROGEO Conference *Geographies in Flux: Navigating a Shifting World Order*, examines how geography education can respond to geopolitical realignment, climate change, spatial inequalities and digital disruption. Comprising 24 peer-reviewed contributions by 65 authors from twelve countries, the issue is organised around five interrelated discourses and represents the largest thematic collection on geography education published in EJG to date. Across these, contributions converge on a shared argument: geography education requires both epistemic access to powerful disciplinary knowledge and the capacity to critically examine how such knowledge is produced, represented and contested. Neither curricula, technologies nor assessment practices are neutral; their educational value depends on geography teachers' professional judgement, conceptual framing and institutional conditions that support reflective, knowledge-rich geography education for a world in transition.

Keywords: Geography education; powerful disciplinary knowledge; socio-scientific issues; climate change education; teacher agency; geospatial technologies; data literacy; artificial intelligence;

1. Introduction

The world in which geography is taught and learnt is changing rapidly. The years 2023–2025 were the three hottest in recorded history, with average global temperatures exceeding 1.5 °C above pre-industrial levels for the first time (World Meteorological Organization, 2026; Bevacqua et al., 2025). Armed conflicts in Europe, the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa have displaced millions and redrawn geopolitical alliances (UNHCR, 2025). Generative AI has begun to reshape educational practice faster than curricula or teacher preparation have been able to respond (Dong, 2026). These are deeply interconnected geographical processes that demand new forms of spatial understanding, critical judgement and democratic engagement.

It was against this backdrop that the 2026 EUROGEO (European Association of Geographers) Conference in Tilburg, The Netherlands, *Geographies in Flux: Navigating a Shifting World Order*, provided the starting point for this Special Issue (SI_TGEO). The call for papers, released on 27 July 2025, invited scholars to examine how geography education can respond to a world marked by geopolitical realignment, climate change, spatial inequalities and digital disruption (Budke, 2016; Lambert & Walshe, 2018; Puttick, 2025). Central to many of the contributions in this Special Issue is the concept of powerful geographical knowledge (Young, 2008), which enables learners to develop new ways of thinking about and critically engaging with complex human–environment relations (de Miguel González, 2024; Béneker et al., 2024; Maude, 2018). The transitions outlined above raise important questions about what knowledge and skills students

need, how they learn to deal with complexity and competing claims, and how teachers select and structure geographical content to support students' understanding of the world (Bednarz, 2018).

Of the 39 manuscripts submitted to this Special Issue, 24 were accepted following rigorous peer review: 19 research articles, four short papers and one review article, spanning 381 pages. These contributions involve 65 authors based in Germany, Australia, the United Kingdom, The Netherlands, Spain, Austria, New Zealand, the United States, Greece, Türkiye, Nigeria and Singapore (see Figure 1). Together, they bring together theoretical, empirical and practice-oriented approaches to geography education. This diversity was also reflected in the closing panel discussion that we chaired at the EUROGEO conference, where scholarly voices from Germany, Spain, the United Kingdom, Nigeria and New Zealand discussed regional differences in how epistemic boundaries are drawn around complex socio-scientific issues and how the gap between geography education research and classroom practice can be narrowed through pre-service and in-service teacher education. Taken together, these contributions offer insights into three interconnected areas: how geography education is being (re)conceptualised for a world in transition, how teaching and learning are responding to new forms of geographical thinking and emerging skill demands, and how evidence from primary, secondary and higher education points to the need for curriculum innovation and the professionalisation of geography teachers.

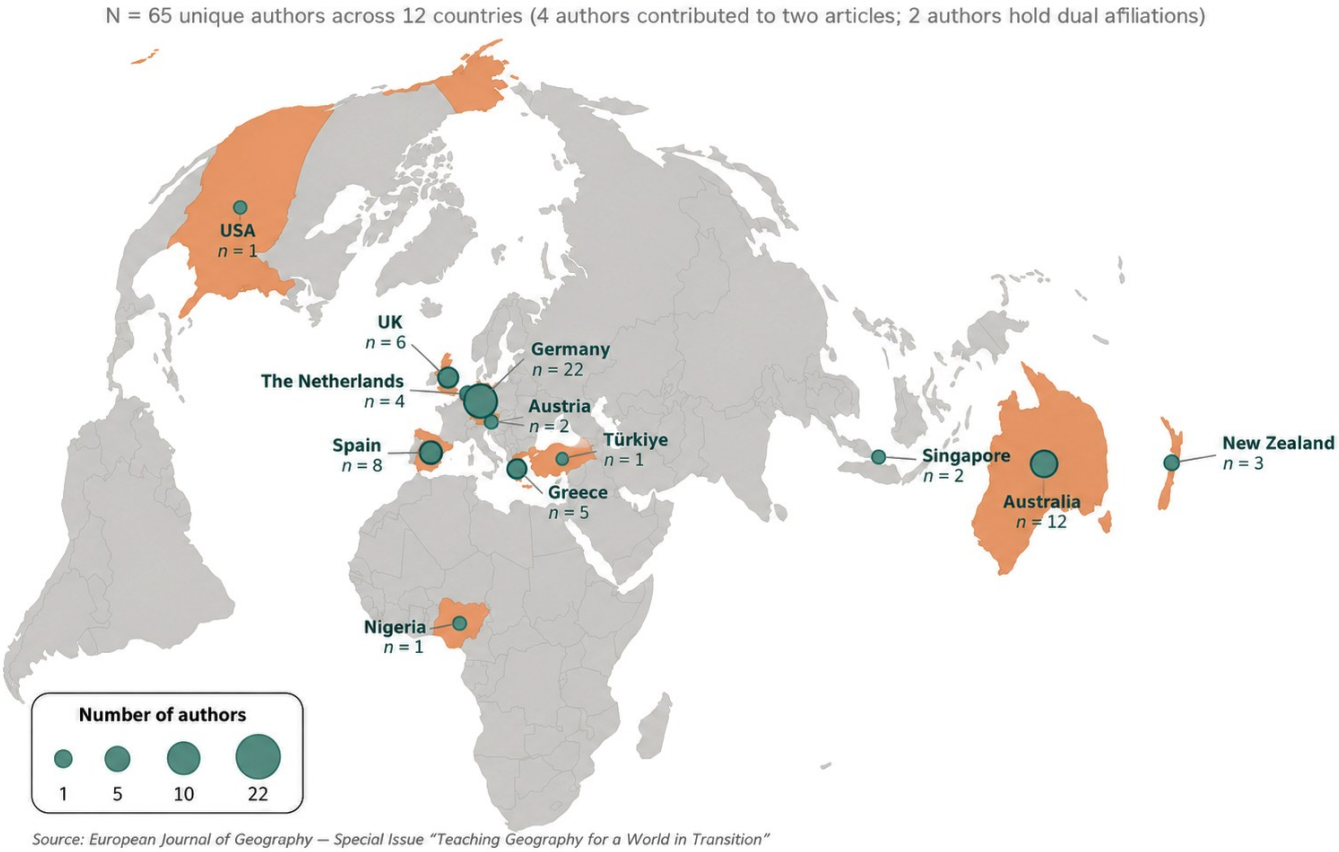

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of author affiliations

2. Mapping the Special Issue: Five Key Discourses

The articles in this Special Issue emphasise the transformative potential of geography education in preparing students and teachers to respond to a world in transition. Building on these contributions, five key discourses emerge (see also Figure 2): the recontextualisation of knowledge through teacher learning and curriculum assessment; complex socio-scientific issues, including climate change, sustainability, misinformation and democratic engagement; decolonising and Indigenising geography education; geospatial technologies and data literacy; generative AI, digital pedagogies and serious games. These discourses are not exhaustive, nor are they mutually exclusive. Climate misinformation, for example, is also a question of data literacy; decolonisation raises questions about knowledge and epistemic boundaries; and

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the educational value of digital tools depends on curriculum choices and teacher mediation. The overlaps between the clusters are therefore as significant as the clusters themselves. We encourage readers to engage with the contributions across these clusters and to consider the interrelations between them.

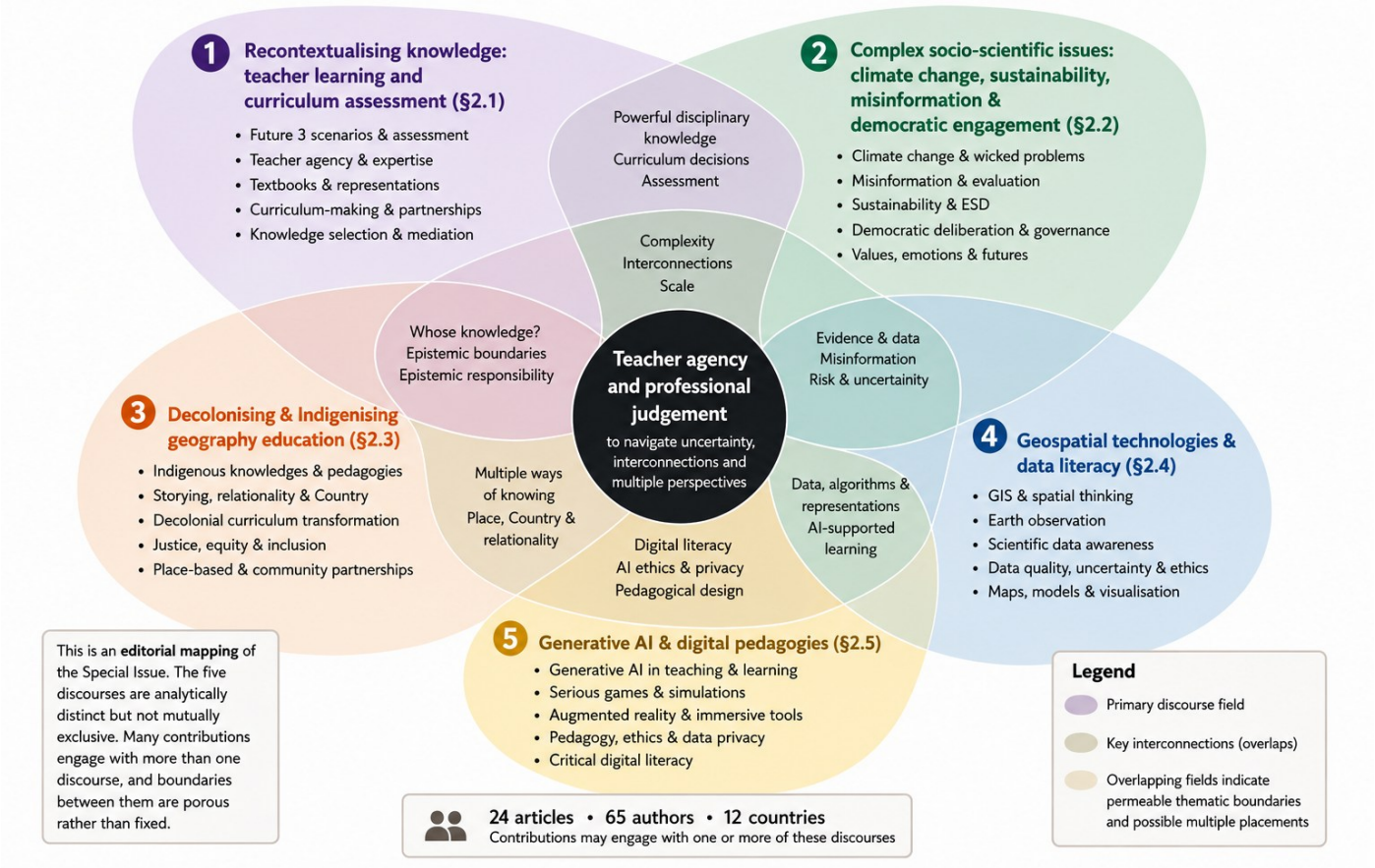

Figure 2. Five key discourses of the Special Issue and their thematic interconnections. Dashed lines indicate cross-cutting overlaps between adjacent clusters. Article counts are indicative, as several contributions span more than one discourse. Section references (§2.1–§2.5) correspond to the thematic overview in this editorial.

2.1 Recontextualising geographical knowledge: Teacher learning and curriculum assessment

This thematic cluster examines how geographical knowledge is selected, interpreted and recontextualised through teacher learning, textbooks, partnerships, curriculum-making and assessment. The contributions operate at different levels, from specific professional and curriculum contexts to broader theoretical questions about knowledge and epistemic boundaries. Central to this issue is the reimagining of the "Future 3" curriculum, which prioritises epistemic access to powerful disciplinary knowledge.

Lambert and León (2026) explore the practical enactment of Future 3 curriculum scenarios through an 18-month collaborative case study with in-service teachers. Their work connects geography teaching, racial literacy and truthfulness with teachers' professional knowledge work and curriculum-making. This study demonstrates how racial literacy can contribute to teachers' ongoing work of questioning, interpreting and recontextualising knowledge. Truthfulness offers a way of maintaining responsibility towards knowledge while recognising its social and political conditions. Rawlings Smith & Krause (2026) address a largely neglected aspect of Future 3: assessment. They argue that epistemic access to powerful disciplinary knowledge cannot be achieved when assessment rewards only reproduction or predetermined responses. The article formulates seven design principles for Future 3-aligned assessment and illustrates them through international examples. Assessment is thus treated as part of the curriculum system itself. Standish (2026) approaches

the question of knowledge from a different theoretical position. He underlines the importance of epistemic boundaries without treating the boundaries as fixed or merely as expressions of Western dominance. Although such boundaries can and should change, teachers and scholars remain responsible for maintaining an educational space organised around scholarly and democratic values. His argument exposes a central Future 3 problem: how to widen access to disciplinary knowledge without dissolving the criteria by which knowledge claims are judged. In addition, Wieczorek et al. (2026) show that geography teachers' expertise develops through reflective practice, professional exchange, mentoring, leadership and direct spatial experience, rather than through experience alone. Their findings underline the importance of professional environments in which teachers can examine and further develop their curriculum and pedagogical decisions. Two studies consider how teachers connect prescribed curricula with a changing world. Cheak and Seow (2026) show how textbook representations of urban housing in Singapore can support knowledge development but also reproduce simplified or stereotypical understandings. Teachers may counter these limitations by introducing alternative narratives. Curriculum-making here becomes a form of mediation: teachers work with prescribed resources but are not confined to reproducing their representations. Rawlings Smith et al. (2026) explore how a partnership with a major infrastructure project can connect disciplinary knowledge with contemporary geographical work and possible careers. Such partnerships may reduce the distance between relatively stable curriculum content and the changing work of practising geographers, without reducing school geography to employability.

Although the contributions in this cluster differ considerably, all concern the relationships between disciplinary knowledge, curriculum structures, and the role of teachers and students in geography education. They also show that teacher agency is not exercised independently of knowledge or institutional conditions. Teachers select, interpret and recontextualise geographical knowledge through textbooks, professional collaboration, partnerships and assessment practices.

2.2 Teaching complex socio-scientific issues in geography education: Climate change, misinformation, sustainability and democratic engagement

Climate change forms the most substantial empirical strand within the Special Issue. The contributions examine how teachers and students engage with it as a complex, contested and politically consequential geographical issue. Authors highlight the urgency of building resilience against climate change misinformation.

In the context of democratic engagement, Simon and Budke's (2026) study shows that students generally support democratic decision-making processes in urban climate governance. Interest in climate change and being female are associated with more democratic positions, while students' knowledge of local governance processes appears to be limited. Geography education consequently has a role in contributing to understanding climate change and how spatial decisions are negotiated. Lämmer and Ohl's (2026) empirical study with primary school students indicates that students' existing conceptions of climate change shape how they assess misinformation. Students often struggle to identify misinformation when it appears plausible or relates to their everyday experiences. The authors highlight the need for targeted educational strategies that foster both differentiated conceptions of climate change and critical evaluation skills from an early age. Heidari et al. (2026) conducted a systematic review and found that, while interventions often operationalise Nature of Science, media literacy, as well as inoculation and debunking, a significant gap remains in addressing AI-related misinformation. Integrating these approaches into climate change education holds potential for strengthening students' resilience to misinformation in geography education. To address "wicked" challenges, Flucher et al. (2026) argue for professionalisation practices that help teachers exercise professional judgement particularly through multimodal vignettes by engaging with ESD (Education for Sustainable Development) conceptualised as a wicked problem to encourage reflexive engagement with complexity and uncertainty. Furthermore, Enzmann et al. (2026)examine how geography teacher educators decide which perspectives on climate change warrant inclusion in the classroom. Their findings show that public controversy alone is an inadequate criterion. Teachers must remain open to different perspectives while also maintaining epistemic standards beyond public debates on climate change . Comparing expert and novice teachers, Mar-Beguería et al. (2026) find that experts reason more consistently across systems and scales and are more able to relate empirical evidence, values and uncertainty. Novices more often reduce the complexity of the issue. Expertise, then, involves more than possessing subject knowledge; it also requires the capacity to work with complexity. Finally, Wils and Schutjens (2026) approach sustainability education from a different angle. They argue that students need to reconsider their relationship with the non-human world before education moves too quickly towards

action. Storytelling, dialogue and imagination offer ways of moving beyond a simple division between humans and nature.

Across these articles, climate change and sustainability move beyond curriculum topics. They become education contexts for examining how teachers and students engage with evidence, complexity, uncertainty, misinformation, epistemic boundaries, controversy, human interaction with the non-human world and democratic discourse and choice. These dimensions cannot easily be separated. Sound judgement about complex socio-scientific issues requires geographical thinking and geographical skills that support reflection on how knowledge claims, interrelations and decisions are developed.

2.3 Decolonising and Indigenising geography education

A third prominent strand concerns decolonisation, Indigenisation and relational approaches to geography education. These contributions arise from Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. They therefore provide a regional understanding of decolonisation in geography education, with a substantial body of work grounded in contexts where relationships between colonial education systems, Indigenous knowledge and practice are particularly present.

Authors examine the discipline's historical entanglement with colonialism and offer strategies for transformation. Redesigning a large first-year geography subject in Australia requires reconsidering how the curriculum is structured, whose knowledge is recognised and how students encounter that knowledge (Kamp 2026). Findings from Aotearoa New Zealand identify three orientations: classroom practice, engagement with Māori communities and teacher reflexivity. Their model shows why classroom change cannot be separated from community relationships or from teachers' examination of their own positioning (Finn et al., 2026). Two contributions place Country at the centre of learning. In the Indigenous-led project on Wiradjuri Country described by Hammersley et al. (2026) storytelling becomes a form of repair and Country an active teacher rather than an object of study. Experiences from and with Country are reflected upon through creative forms of expression such as painting (Storying). Storying as repair serves as a means of fostering a relational ethic of care towards colonial forms of environmental destruction. Smith et al. (2026) additionally explore what it means to teach in relation with Country. Listening to and being guided by Country require changes in educational relationships and practice.

Together, these articles demonstrate the depth of the decolonising and Indigenising debate, particularly in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Their geographical concentration also identifies a regional focus. The Special Issue does not include contributions examining how decolonisation is interpreted in other national and regional traditions of geography education.

2.4 Geographical thinking through geospatial technologies, Earth Observation and data literacy awareness

The three contributions in this cluster share an interest in geographical data and geospatial technologies, but do not treat access to technology as an educational outcome in itself. They ask how students in geography education and prospective teachers actually learn from working with data and what support they require. Studies on Earth Observation (EO) data demonstrate that using key concepts like "spatial patterns" enables even lower secondary students to analyse complex phenomena. Their design-based study results in design principles with relevance beyond the intervention itself (Keller & Siegmund, 2026). Conversely, Rodriguez-Domenech and Aguilar-Cuesta (2026) measured the effect of GIS use on rural depopulation across five dimensions (conceptual understanding, spatial thinking, quantitative competence, digital competence and metacognitive awareness) and found that while GIS improves digital and conceptual skills, spatial thinking and metacognition require longer, more reflective interventions. This finding contributes to a crucial distinction between learning to use a geospatial tool and learning to think geographically with it. Critically, Robakiewicz et al.'s (2026) evidence suggests that pre-service teachers often lack scientific data awareness, including and understanding of where data originate and how data quality can be compared. In the context of mis- and disinformation, access to reliable data is therefore insufficient. Authors emphasise that critical engagement also depends on understanding how data are constructed, selected and used as evidence .

These contributions converge on a clear point: geospatial technologies and scientific data do not automatically develop geographical or critical thinking. Their educational value depends on conceptual framing, designed tasks, reflection and teacher guidance. Digital empowerment without an understanding of data provenance, quality and interpretation remains insufficient.

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2.5 Digitizing geography education: Generative AI, digital pedagogies and serious games

Four articles on games, augmented reality and generative AI likewise avoid a simple innovation narrative. They consider the educational possibilities of digital tools for geography and the conceptual, pedagogical and ethical problems they introduce.

The rise of generative AI presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Bueno-Picazo & Tirado-Olivares (2026) found that guided inquiry supported by ChatGPT produced stronger gains in geographical knowledge and thinking than inquiry using Google Search. The intervention points to educational potential, but also confirms the importance of task design and teacher guidance. Klocker et al. (2026) show that AI use in higher education research training requires educators to proactively manage ethical obligations and data privacy, particularly when students upload interview material to AI systems during an undergraduate qualitative methods course. They defend the importance of students gaining direct experience of qualitative research rather than simply transferring analysis to AI. The two studies on serious games show both their possibilities and their limitations. Eze and Mehren (2026) find that pre-service teachers regarded the UN *Stop Disasters* game as engaging, but also as being epistemically limited due to oversimplification, functioning best as a pedagogical adjunct rather than a standalone solution. Georgiou et al. (2026) examine hybrid tools, such as serious games integrating AI and augmented reality to address misconceptions in planetary geography. The game supports comparison between the atmospheres of Earth, Venus and Mars and reasoning across very large spatial scales.

The articles highlight that digitalisation alone does not necessarily improve geography education. Instead, they ask what geographical understanding a tool enables, what it may obscure, and what teachers and students need to know to use it responsibly.

3. Conclusions & Key Contributions of the Special Issue

As the open access journal of EUROGEO, the European Journal of Geography continues its long-standing tradition of publishing thematic collections arising from its conferences and the broader geography community (see Alvanides et al., 2025), ensuring that research remains freely accessible to scholars, educators, and policymakers across Europe and beyond. This Special Issue (SI_TGEO) makes four key contributions to geography education, with relevance for geography education researchers, geography teachers, geography teacher educators, policymakers and the wider geography community.

First, geography education in a world in transition requires both access to disciplinary knowledge and the capacity to examine how knowledge claims are produced, represented and contested. This is not a choice between established knowledge and openness to diverse perspectives. Students need substantive and disciplinary knowledge precisely to engage with complexity, misinformation, uncertainty and competing claims. At the same time, widening epistemic access does not mean abandoning the criteria by which knowledge claims are judged.

Second, knowledge does not move unchanged from the discipline into classrooms. It is selected, represented and recontextualised through curricula, textbooks, partnerships, teaching resources and assessment. These processes may open access to powerful disciplinary knowledge, but may also simplify issues, reproduce stereotypes or privilege particular forms of knowing. Curriculum-making therefore involves more than choosing content; it also requires attention to how geographical knowledge is framed and made available to students.

Third, teachers' professional judgement is central to this process, but should not be understood as an individual capacity alone. Teachers decide which perspectives are educationally legitimate, how uncertainty should be represented, how different forms of knowledge can be brought into relation and when particular resources add value. Their ability to make such decisions develops through disciplinary knowledge, reflective practice, professional exchange, mentoring and supportive institutional conditions.

Fourth, neither technologies nor assessment are neutral means of delivering a curriculum. GIS, Earth observation data, games, AI, textbooks and vignettes can support geographical thinking, but their contribution depends on the disciplinary questions, conceptual structures and teaching practices in which they are embedded. Assessment is equally consequential: if it rewards only reproduction or predetermined responses, it may restrict the epistemic access that a more open and knowledge-rich curriculum seeks to provide.

The Special Issue also leaves gaps. Its contributions are drawn from a limited range of geographical and educational contexts. Most contributions explicitly addressing decolonisation and Indigenisation are concentrated in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, while other regions and traditions remain underrepresented. Several studies are case studies,

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leaving questions about longer-term learning and transferability. Students' access to powerful disciplinary knowledge is widely discussed, but the institutional conditions that enable or constrain this access receive less attention. More research is also needed on assessment, particularly empirical work examining how alternative assessment practices affect what students learn and how teachers teach.

These gaps do not detract from the collection, but point to directions for future research. Geography education must continue to examine how disciplinary knowledge can remain rigorous while being open to different experiences and perspectives; how students can learn to judge claims under conditions of complexity; and how teachers can exercise informed curriculum judgement while content, technologies and societal conditions are changing.

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