Powerful Geographical Knowledge and Students’ Understanding of Global Migration in Times of ‘Crises’ — Johan Sandahl* & Lotta Dessen Jankell**

‘They come from places of conflict and […] are seeking a safe future, far from war, injustice and persecution’

Background
This paper examines Swedish students’ understanding of global migration in the setting of geography education and discuss possible subject resources that teachers can use to advance students’ understanding beyond their everyday experience. Previous research on young people’s knowledge on migration is limited, but studies show that young people are strongly influenced by media reporting of refugees which they internalise with their own lived experiences of (im)migration (Bello, 2015; cf. van Klinger et al, 2017).

Theoretical framework
The paper departs from Michael Young’s (2013; Young & Muller, 2013) concept of ‘powerful knowledge’, trying to discuss students’ understanding in the context of specialised geographical knowledge or ‘geocapabilities’ (Lambert & Morgan, 2010). Geocapabilities has been described as the ability to acquire and develop deep descriptive and explanatory world knowledge, development of relational thinking and an ability to apply the analysis to particular place contexts, i.e. geographical thinking. Hence, central key concepts in relation to migration is place, scale and interconnection (Lambert, 2011).

Research questions
- In what ways do students understand and reason about global migration?
- What kind of geographical powerful knowledge can offer ways to advance students’ understanding of global migration?

Methodology and design
- The data consist of 118 (n=118) written accounts on global migration, 67 14-15-year-olds and 51 16-17-year-olds, elicited through a projective task (Barton, 2015).
- Students were asked to comment on a UN-graph presenting the increase of global migrants between 2000-2015 and describe who the migrants are where they are coming from and where they are going and discuss important causes and consequences of this development.
- A content analysis was used and interpreted through the conceptual framework of Lambert’s geocapabalites/geographical thinking.

Data analysis
i) Students’ reasoning about causes of migration:
A majority of the students display a refugee narrative and that migration is something forced, mostly driven by push-factors such as war and conflicts. (Fig. 1)

ii) Students’ reasoning about consequences:
None of the 14-15-year-olds display any positive consequences of migration for immigrant countries. Few of the 16-17-year-olds give examples of positive consequences for destination countries, but rather for individual migrants. The dominating picture is that migration is negative for receiving countries. Very few older students reasoned about consequences for origin countries and none of the younger students. (Fig 2)

iii) Students’ reasoning about geographical context:
The geographical context is mostly represented in general terms, like “rich” or “poor” countries. The movement from rich to poor countries (south-north) is dominant. When the answers are more specific the Middle East narrative and Syrian war is dominating. Very few students express that migration takes place between neighbouring countries or inside a region. (Fig 3)

Conclusions
World knowledge: There is a need for students to develop a deeper, more nuanced and critical world knowledge, based on geographical evidence. For example, to distinguish different kinds of migrants and that many places are both emigrant and immigrant regions, such as the Middle East region.
Place and relational thinking: Students need to advance their understanding of specific place contexts and how places and people are interconnected in ways that generate migration patterns.

Important powerful geographical knowledge consists of geographical second order concepts such as place, space and scale (e.g. spatial comparison, spatial influences, sense of place and scale) as well as first order concepts such as circular migration. Geography has the potential to let students learn and apply knowledge from many perspective and through that develop a more holistic and diverse view of the causes and consequences of the phenomena. The data and previous research on young people’s understanding of migration stress the importance of this approach in our diverse classrooms.
Figure 1: Students’ understanding of why people migrate. A majority of the students display an understanding that most people migrate because they are forced to do so by a) war and conflicts or b) poverty.

Figure 2: Students’ understanding of the consequences of migration. The negative consequences for receiving countries are dominating students’ answers (the left side of the blue line). Positive consequences are connected to migration in general (e.g. cultural exchange). Very few students reason about consequences for the originating countries. Some of the older students are reasoning about individual consequences for migrants, but few of the younger students reason in these terms.

Figure 3: Students’ understanding of the geographical context of global migration. Students contextualize migration in regions of war and conflict, particularly the war-torn Syria and the Middle East region. These countries/regions are only expressed as emigration places, and not as regions of immigration. EU and Sweden are seen as immigration countries and none of the students discuss emigration from the EU.

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