

Seeking Younger Children's 'Voices' in Geographical Education Research

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While there has been research into children's geographical and environmental understanding, comparatively little has provided insight into children's perspectives on their geographical learning. Some depth of understanding is available about children's personal local environmental experience and about spatial cognition, but there is much about children's geographical experience and knowledge which is either not researched or where the research is very limited. Some recent research is outlined by way of identifying the need for greater research activity in the geographical perspectives of younger children.

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Introduction

Researching children's perspectives or 'voices' in geographical education – and, indeed in their geographical and environmental experience – is vital for the support and development of geography in the school curriculum, at both primary and secondary school levels. While investigating children's geographies has an increasingly considered and useful history, range and extending depth (e.g. Catling, 2003; Matthews, 1992; Spencer & Blades, 2005), children's experience of geography in school is very much under-researched.

Since 2000 an annual analysis of research studies into children's experience of the national curriculum in England has reviewed almost 300 papers (Lord, 2003; Lord & Harland, 2000; Lord & Johnson, 2005). The number of research studies with a geographical context into children's perspectives amount to less than 4%, with primary geography at below the 1% level. If this research base is broadened to look globally for other research into younger children's geographical learning and experience in school, published in the recent years in general and geographical and environmental education journals and books, the position is only a little better. Two reasons, amongst others, may lie behind this situation. Globally, this reflects the reality that for younger children (5/6 to 10/11 year olds) geography tends to be subsumed, even lost, in a social studies curriculum. Furthermore, researching younger children's geographical and environmental education is not a 'sexy' topic; it attracts very limited interest for sponsored investigation.

Such a bleak picture about research into children's geographical experience, perspectives and learning might give the impression that pertinent studies have not been undertaken. Yet, several relevant studies have appeared in geographical rather than educational contexts. Together with a small number of educationally oriented studies this research identifies and communicates children's 'voices'

and/or researcher's interpretations of their 'geographical' understanding and viewpoints (e.g. Catling & Martin, 2004b; Robertson & Gerber, 2000, 2001; Valentine, 2004).

A Brief Journey Through Some Recent Research

During the past 40 years there has been a strong focus on children's environmental and place experience and on their understanding of spatial relationships in places and of maps. Several studies have evaluated and reported on children's environmental knowledge, understanding, concerns and values (e.g. Palmer & Birch, 2004; Rickinson, 2001; Valentine, 2004). This focus on research is important and must continue. The role and value of such studies lies in updating our understanding of children's experience in an ever-changing world, where children's opportunities in the environment are shifting (Thomas & Thompson, 2004). They also broaden our awareness of children's lives and situations across the globe (e.g. Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Edwards, 2002; Young & Barrett, 2001). These situations and changes need elucidating; earlier studies and explanations cannot any longer fully or accurately explain children's 'worldly' experience today or reasonably be the basis for decision-making and adult actions in the environment for children. However, this body of research, while dominant, is not the only research of interest or relevance to the geographical education of younger children. The focus in this paper is on children's 'voices', directly and indirectly: that is, on understanding children's sense of their experience. Several recent studies are referred to below and this brief review locates the studies reported in this Forum in relation to their topics.

Recognising the youngest children

Palmer's international studies of very young children's awareness of the world, physical environments and environmental care (Palmer & Birch, 2004) have illustrated the extent to which children's embryonic geographical knowledge and understanding are underestimated. It needs to be recognised that many children at four and five years old in more economically developed nations can talk about, for instance, their sense of hot and cold places, refer to local experiences and places beyond their experience, and indicate their concerns and values for the environment; do hold misconceptions, and have inaccurate, even false, information, and are limited in their environmental awareness; but a few, can, even at four years old, refer to aspects of environmental processes, such as recycling, from family experience.

This work supports strongly the contention that geographical education, however it is construed and provided, needs to begin in school with the youngest children. Left till later too many ill-conceived perceptions and misunderstandings will be difficult to dislodge. An informal, play-based approach to learning, where very young children might be 'hunting' for objects guided by information in a large-scale aerial photograph (Plester, 2004) or involved in outside play activities based in their 'secret places' in their nursery outdoor area, using stories or going on 'map walks' (see Cooper, 2004), both bring out and enhance the environmental awareness, skills and knowledge that many children bring to school. The imagination that children demonstrate in their 'place-based' and 'environmentally

connected' play draws from the range of their experiences – from family activities and discussion, travel, stories and television – and can be supported and enhanced in school to extend and deepen their understanding of places and environments. They are informative for teachers and enable informed teaching.

School grounds

One place, much overlooked in studies of children's geographical experience and learning, is the school environment itself. Owen's (this issue) study of children's environmental values, drawing on their experience of the school playground, supports findings by Tranter and Malone (2004) that children value play opportunities in 'natural' areas in school. A more varied and natural school outdoor environment seems to provide a more stimulating, social and enticing site, where children's play is more varied, and where greater use is made more effectively of the school grounds for planned and taught learning experiences (Jeffrey & Woods, 2003). Children appear rapidly to be able to learn the nature, structure, territoriality and rules of playground spaces (Devine, 2003; Owens, 2004; Thomson, 2005). All this contributes to their sense of school as a place of meaning and value, supporting the findings of Titman (1994). However, not always are children's views necessarily positive. While children value well provided and varied school grounds for play during school break times, they also recognise and appreciate where teachers do not value their playground 'lives', exhibited through overly rule-bound controls, barren play spaces and unfriendly interventions and surveillance (Devine, 2003; Thomson, 2005).

Place experience

School playgrounds are one locus of children's place experience, perhaps offering some consistency, if not always pleasure (Armitage, 2001). Studies of children's experience in the local environment indicate that their experience appears to be changing. Analysis by Thomas and Thompson (2004: 3) confirms that, while children retain a 'strong sense of the environment as a social space', increasingly fewer children walk to school, they are more aware of dangers in the locality, as are their parents, have more commodified play areas to play in, and get out less. However, arguments that more violent neighbourhoods restrict younger children's home range have been challenged by Spilsbury (2005), supporting Valentine's (2004) argument that children may not only be more competent in the environment than they are usually credited but continue to develop ways to extend their home range beyond their parents' / carers' restrictions and knowledge. In this experience, there are variations between children living in rural and urban environments (Giddings & Yarwood, 2005) and between boys' and girls' in their extent and styles of use of the environment. Children's environmental experience, while a matter of personal interest, is strongly socially constructed, whether in relation to friendships, family interests or leisure activities (see Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Edwards, 2002); this influences their awareness and the way they make use of the environment in 'controlled' and 'out-of-sight' sites. Children sense the tensions that they have to overcome to gain increasing control of their home range and activities.

Matthews (2002) and Valentine (2004) argue that research such as that referred to above must lead to recognising, valuing and using children's environmental

experience, capability and competence. Matthews suggests that this should be at a community level, involving children in democratic and citizenship processes to improve their environment, developing their social skills as they do so. Thomas and Thompson (2004) argue that children seem to have a clear awareness of environmental issues and that this correlates with the amount and extent of children's 'freer' local explorations. The corollary to neighbourhood involvement is that such an approach should be followed through in school, for example through the participation of children in the development of the school's grounds and their use, of building an eco-culture in school, and through focusing within geographical and environmental study topics on place and environmental matters concerned with critical investigation of the local area and further afield.

Out-of-classroom learning

Pedagogic research into children's learning in the 'outdoor classroom' has recently been reviewed (Rickinson *et al.*, 2004). While there are a limited number of studies of younger children's experience on which to draw, some tentative findings have been identified. At the personal level, out-of-classroom work motivates young children, enhances their knowledge and understanding of the topics they study, and develops their social and interpersonal skills, especially when they are involved in cooperative activities where they can use their initiative, persevere, undertake some leadership and show reliability. Tasks in the environment seem to enhance children's self-esteem and self-confidence. It also seems that studies which involve 'green' initiatives in the school and its grounds help to develop children's knowledge, understanding and valuing of the environment and may foster general cognitive achievement. Working outside in school and at other off-school sites appears to develop children's attitudes positively to those sites. Generally, children find outdoor study memorable. The significance of out-of-classroom studies and of fieldwork in geography is considered by Halocha (this issue).

Place identity

Connected inevitably to children's environmental understanding and values is work on children's identity and place. This focus lies at the heart of a number of studies in Fog Olwig and Gullov (2003) which explores the lives of children and their making of meaning and attachment to place in a number of national settings (see also Christensen & O'Brien, 2003; Edwards, 2002). These studies describe the variety and multiplicity of children's interactions within places. There are clear links to the notion of place attachment explored by Ross (this issue) and Spencer (this issue).

In the broader context and at the larger scale is work on children's sense of national identity in European countries (Papoulia-Tzelepi *et al.*, 2005). Examining the social, cultural, linguistic and educational contexts of identity development, aspects of personal, collective and national identity are raised alongside a sense of 'being European'. Younger children appear to be able to carry several layers of identity at once: their local identity, their national or even bi-national identity and their continental (European) identity. Their local identity emerges through their sense of local place (Matthews, 1992). Their national identity is associated with language, food and customs, and history. But children's sense of 'being European'

links more to national, continental location and discrete pieces of information about Europe rather than any developed sense of European citizenship or knowledge of the European Union. This layered and varied sense of identity encompasses the notion of nested hierarchies explored by Storey (in this issue) and Kelly (this issue), but is in need of further research.

How the 'other half' live

Drawing on children's 'voices' is not simply a matter of identifying personal and peer experience; it is essential for children to hear 'other', more distant children's voices. There is an emerging research literature on the impact of poverty, conflict and migration on younger children (Ansell, 2005; Hyder, 2005; Penn, 2005; Young & Barrett, 2001). Given the interest in developing children's understanding of other places, contexts and lives globally, such research offers insights into *other* children's experience and lives which rarely seems to be recognised as relevant to the teaching of geography with younger children, unless they have been selectively 'modified'. Yet, with some half of the world's children living in poverty, and with very many affected by conflict, health problems and migration and asylum issues (Bellamy, 2004), such information and understanding cannot be discarded from young children's education without leaving a sanitised, partial and misleading sense of the world and of children and the range and variety of their experiences. There are serious issues here in learning about distant places, which Pike and Clough (this issue) consider. There are clear implications, as well, when it comes to developing an appreciation of global citizenship, related particularly to the question of perceptions of other parts of the world, a matter Disney (this issue) considers.

The physical environment

While Palmer's research (Palmer & Birch, 2004) indicates that very young children know about aspects of the natural and physical environment, this is not an aspect of geographical understanding that appears to have been of much interest in geographical or geography education research. For example, research into and discussion about children's understanding of aspects of the physical environment is remarkably limited in recent collections on environmental and educational research (Bowles, 2004; Catling & Martin, 2004b; Phillips, 2001; Robertson & Gerber, 2000, 2001; Scoffham, 1998).

Mackintosh (this issue), in exploring children's ideas about rivers builds on earlier studies by May (1998) and Tapsell *et al.* (2001). While May explored children's sense of the physical processes of rivers, Tapsell *et al.* examined children's perceptions, experience and use of rivers in their local environment. It is clear that there is a range of understanding between children, which moves from a reasonably sound sense of river formation and action among some children, to others with very misconceived ideas and to those with poorly, even negligible informed understanding about the physical geography of rivers. In part, this can link to a lack of experience (some children have never seen or recognised a river), but it relates also to finding, in urban contexts, rivers unattractive and polluted and seeing them only in culverts and as partial stretches of water, where natural processes are not observed. Nevertheless, involving children in visiting and exploring rivers does appear to have a beneficial affect on developing their

awareness, understanding and interest (Tapsell *et al.*, 2001). This supports the importance of field experience (see Halocha, this issue).

Conclusion

The lack of studies of children's geographical perspectives on the natural/physical environment is just one aspect of geographical education where research is limited. This is equally the case in relation to the use of many geographical resources and children's learning about the world through them in school and at home. The use of information technologies in younger children's geographical learning, for instance, is still in its infancy (Owen, 2004). There is much yet to be researched in relation to children's understanding of 'geographical' citizenship, national and global. Little is known of the role of imagination in geographical learning, such as the ways in which children's play in the earliest years or later imaginative activities involving role play, simulation and children's own imagined worlds, reflect the variety of sources from which they begin to make sense of the world; indeed, *how* such imagination might help children make sense of the world more effectively is an important potential area for research.

Alongside these aspects of children's geographical 'voices' very little is known about how teachers recognise and involve children in contributing their environmental knowledge, understanding and values. It remains unclear what sense younger children make of their own geographical learning, what they recognise as geographical, how they think of and value this learning and what use they might see themselves making of it, such as in their sense of progression in geographical learning. Younger children's 'voice' about the geography curriculum is lacking (Lord & Harland, 2000; Lord & Johnson, 2005) in relation to what they think and feel about what they are taught and what they might wish to be taught about that would help them be better informed, be more critically aware and feel more able to use their understanding in their current and future lives.

Agendas for research in younger children's geographical learning are not new and have been elucidated elsewhere (Catling, 1999; Catling & Martin, 2004a; Martin & Catling, 2004). There is much that needs to be investigated and for which the building blocks of insight and deeper understanding need to be laid. The current level of understanding about children's geographical and environmental learning and understanding, in and out of school, provides a foundation to build upon.

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