Out of Place in School Geography

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Abstract
The purpose of this paper is to establish how the Geographical Association's DFID funded Valuing Places project has explored the possibilities of teaching place as a contested concept. The project is concerned with raising the quality of "geographical thinking" for 7-14 year old pupils.

Valuing Places works critically from the proposition that the Key Stage 2 and 3 geography national curriculum presents a geography interpreted and selected by adults, such a curriculum may limit the value of school geography and its potential for developing young people's geographical understandings.

Geographical education represents and interprets places. This works best when it keys into young people's personal geographies and geographical experiences. The project involves pupils, teachers and the academic geography community in examining the value, purpose and role of place-based learning. One of the project's goals will be to help geography educationalists articulate the subject's contribution to the overarching aims of the National Curriculum for England, as well as meeting the DFID poverty reduction agenda. The project raises awareness of how pupils' cultural frameworks can be refined in their learning about place, to engage them in a more purposeful way.

Introduction
First, a challenge for you. How would you answer Professor Doreen Massey's question, "Where would you draw your line around the grounded reality of your daily life?" (Massey 2004 p.7) A meaningful response involves consideration. Thought needs to be given to the places that your daily life demands that you connect with. You will perhaps review how you perceive those places (your geographical imagination) and critically, how these places are represented to you and by you. The Geographical Association's (GA) Valuing Places project, funded by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Tubney Foundation is challenged by this question. The project is concerned with exploring place based teaching to support a meaningful sense of global interconnectedness. This involves thinking about places, values and identities. To help explain the project's approach, let us consider for a moment the juxtaposition of these two perspectives.
“Our mental maps are stubborn constructs and in some respects as individual as fingerprints. But make no mistake, they are being redrawn by the forces of globalization. Our challenge today is to retain their diversity, while stimulating greater awareness of our common heritage, values and interests. The idea of interdependence is old hat to geographers, but for most people it is a new garment they are only now trying on for size.” (Kofi Annan, 2001 United Nations Website, appeal to US geographers)

and

“Of course the normal response to all of this is just to say, ‘well this is Africa, if it’s not one problem then its another, I mean why should I bother, why should I help them, what difference can I make anyway?’ And you shouldn’t feel bad or evil about feeling that because it’s a normal attitude to have, but what we do know is this. If it was happening to a neighbour of yours, you’d bust a gut to help, if you knew somebody on your doorstep who walked 11 days because they were starving and they needed a quid for food, you’d say have a bloody quid. Actually have five. The point is forget geography, these are your neighbours, this is your doorstep.” (Lenny Henry, Comic Relief website, 2003)

The Valuing Places project aspires to support pupils in thinking geographically so that they consider the person who walked 11 days for food as a neighbour. To do this Valuing Places is:

- Developing teacher confidence about geography’s contribution to supporting pupils living in a complex interconnected society
- Engaging in professional development that challenges how and why we select and represent places to our pupils. (www.geography.org.uk)
- Investigating a range of pedagogic approaches that support and develop pupils’ spatial curiosity and place based negotiations.

Valuing Places

Valuing Places is a three year (2003-6) project. It aims to involve teachers in the negotiation and creation of curriculum materials. These consider:

- **increasing public understanding of our global mutual dependence and the need for international development** by valuing the uniqueness of places at a variety of scales and exploring how these are interconnected
- involving a large number of pupils in England through the Geographical Association’s networks and mailings to all schools, thus supporting DFID in calling for every child to be educated about development issues so that they can understand the key global considerations that will shape their lives.
- starting with local connections to motivate and engage all learners to consider that development education is going beyond attitudes to development based on compassion and charity and establishing a real understanding of our interdependence and of the relevance of development issues to people’s everyday lives
In addition, we hope that the project will provide some exemplification as to how an effective geographical education can contribute to the two overarching aims of National Curriculum 2000. These are significant since they are the first aims that state schools in England have had.

Aim 1: "The School Curriculum should aim to provide opportunities for all pupils to learn and to achieve."
Aim 2: "The School Curriculum should aim to promote pupils' spiritual, moral, social and cultural development and prepare all pupils for the opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of life."

(DfEE/QCA, 1999 p.11)

The Valuing Places project teachers are exploring these aims alongside the concerns of DFID. This is a key role for the project. The purposeful linkage of curriculum and poverty reduction aspirations through appropriate pedagogic strategies is potentially significant. This includes, for us, valuing pupils' spaces, places and identities.

Out of place in school geography?
An interesting quote from the author of Chocolat, in Blackberry Wine, challenges us about two of the essential concepts of Valuing Places, place and identity.

"Travel far enough, Joe used to say and all rules are suspended. Now Jay began to understand what he meant. Truth, loyalty, identity. The things which bind us to the places and faces of home no longer applied. He could be anyone going anywhere. At airports, railway stations, bus stations, anything is possible. No-one asks questions. People reach a state of near invisibility. He was just another passenger here, one of thousands. No-one would recognise him. No-one had ever heard of him." (Harris 2000 p 71)

The reference to place here is emotive, value laden and challenging. One of the central concerns of Valuing Places is that pupils are disconnected from their learning in geography. This runs counter to the aspirations of most teachers of geography. Pupils' own views and (mis)conceptions of particular places were not being included. They were made to feel uncomfortable, out of place in school geography. Some geography classrooms and texts have started to resemble the 'airports, railway, bus stations' that Harris describes. Places where places have no meaning attached to them. Catling (2003) reminded us of the significance of valuing children's geographies.

He suggests that we should "articulate a changed emphasis in primary geography, away from the current adult-oriented sense of geography towards a more child focussed approach, which builds from children's geographies" (p.204) he continues "primary geography and social justice are only apart where the curriculum is sterile"(p 205)

His statement, we would contend, is as true for pupils within secondary education. Through both its CPD and curriculum materials Valuing Places aspires to include and give credence to pupil's places and their geographical imaginations

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles/
Places

We all have placed based memories that provoke a myriad of reactions. It is often when we think of local places or places at the local scale that these emotions are at their most intense. This matters. A review of the Key Stage 3 Curriculum in Northern Ireland (2003) states that:

"Recently, neuroscience has established a number of factors which are critical to learning and to motivation, about how our brains process information. We now know that the human brain creates meaning through perceiving patterns and making connections and that thought is filtered through the emotional part of the brain first. The likelihood of understanding taking place is therefore increased significantly if the experience has some kind of emotional meaning, since the emotional engagement of the brain on some level is critical to its seeing patterns and making connections." (Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment [CCEA], 2003)

Subscribers to this argument will recognise the learning gains to be made by accessing and including pupils' geographical imaginations. These should of course not be accepted unquestioningly. Teaching that does not probe for the origination and rationality of pupils' place based emotions would be limited in its value. Additionally a pupil's geographical experience would be flawed if teaching geography centred too much on the individual, the local scale and the local place. The challenge of Valuing Places is to provoke a similarly intense learning situation around the global in the local, global interconnectedness.

Valuing Places is engaged with global interconnectedness through exploring the significance of interconnections. The project aims to support pupils in providing a meaningful answer to the opening question. To do this the global should not be consistently represented at a distance. If globalisation is seen as a force all around us and not located here, then there are dangers. This approach could lead to classrooms within which globalisation is imagined as an uncontrollable force that no one can influence. (Allen, 2004) To refer back to the Harris quote, this conceptualisation of globalisation can lead to pupils considering themselves as "invisible" and as "passengers" rather than as active global citizens.

One way to achieve this is to emphasise places as arenas of negotiation.

"What we want to emphasise is a notion of place as one of the arenas where people of all ages learn to negotiate with others - to learn from a thing called society" (Massey, forthcoming)

This is a notion of place that is not easily represented on a double page spread! If prior place based decisions excluded a part of the (global) community then it is unlikely that they have a place in that place. In the future, it will be that much harder for their perspective to be considered. This is true too for our global neighbours (remember Lenny Henry's concern). Valuing Places is about a variety of potentially different geographical imaginations. These are based on social justice issues. It is here that

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles/
geography, place and poverty reduction can usefully intersect. As Massey (forthcoming) states “Really thinking spatially means looking out beyond ourselves: a recognition of others.” The challenge is to use this articulation of geography, complex as it may appear, successfully in geography classrooms. Two Valuing Places strategies are explored here.

**Pedagogic Approaches**

“Think Maps” is a term that the Valuing Places teachers have started to use. Initially “messy maps” was the phrase that we used to described maps that demonstrated thinking. However use of the term ‘messy maps’ had connotations that were inconsistent with developing cartographic capabilities. ‘Think Maps’ are maps which illustrate spatially a learner’s perceptions, emotions views about a place. They illustrate a stage in understanding. ‘Think Maps’ can be used at any time in a sequence of learning. They are representative of the learning journey rather than the destination. All too often maps are created solely as a finished final project. ‘Think Maps’ are maps that demonstrate the thinking processes that the learner is engaged in to develop their sense of place.

‘Think Maps’ support pupils in representing their spatial curiosity about global interconnections. Places may be ‘background noise’ for many subjects. Geography however is the discipline where an understanding of place is essential. When considering how to answer the opening question, “Where would you draw your line around the grounded reality of your daily life?” many of you will have considered mapping your ‘grounded reality’. Mapping involves considering and emphasising spatial relationships and the importance and significance that we attach to these. One ‘Think Map’ strategy is that of affective mapping

“Affective mapping means plotting on maps the feelings that particular places evoke. Feelings are shown by symbols, possibly supplemented with annotation.” Roberts (2003 p 173).

Some aspects of this work have already been shared through the DEA/GA booklet “Geography: The Global Dimension.” (2004)

**Situated Ethical Enquiry (SEE)**

Situated Ethical Enquiry (SEE) strategies emphasis place based negotiation. Through SEE, the project’s pedagogy can be said to mirror its philosophy. The approach is based on exploring social justice issues through a sense of place. This sense of place recognises that the global is as grounded as the local is (Massey, forthcoming). The pedagogic approach that is being used to access ethics through geography is ‘place-based negotiation’ This negotiation needs to accommodate the physical layout, the geographical imaginations and the spatial vocabulary (names of places) and grammar (networks and systems) that create and change places. SEE can be summarised as follows:

- Situated ethical enquiry emphasises context. Places, their location and juxtapositions matter, not just as spatial outcomes of interconnected systems, but also as spaces that create or deny access

http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles/
to various parts of society. Any work should be based on real places and real people and use spatial representations as part of the classroom approach. Places should be seen not as being territorially bounded but as porous.

- Situated ethical enquiry, emphasises the ethics of place. The organisation and layout of a place is because of decisions made by people in power relationships. These need to be made transparent. Geography offers the spatial dimension to ethical debates.
- Situated ethical enquiry, involves curiosity driven research about places. The enquiry process needs to release and challenge young peoples own geographical imaginations.

One concern is that whilst many of these activities place an emphasis on the individual, we should not lose sight of the negotiation involved in creating communities that make up wider society.

**Conclusions**

Valuing Places is developing a confidence about geography's contribution to the poverty reduction agenda with 7-14 year olds in schools in England. Indeed the structure of the project aims to mirror its content. Project ideas, strategies and philosophies are negotiated between the pupils, teacher researchers, regional coordinators and steering group representatives. Power is not located at any particular scale of the project. It flows between the participants. Through these flows the projects philosophy, content and pedagogy is recreated and negotiated. In this way, the project is hoping to develop teachers' professional capacities by stimulating and nurturing their creative potential to design fresh pedagogies and teaching programmes. It aspires to support pupils in making rational, informed place based decisions, not only about the places with which they interact but also about the different ways that they can participate in helping shape that place.

**References**


Websites
Development Education Association

Geographical Association
http://www.geography.org.uk_ Accessed August 2011

Department for International Development (DFID)
Includes comprehensive information on who is producing what on the global dimension in geography. The booklet Geography: the Global Dimension can be downloaded as pdf from the website.

Global Gateway
http://www.globalgateway.org.uk
A DfES and the British Council developed resource, drawing together information on relevant websites, providing a powerful search engine and offering advice and news about international issues, plus a service for finding overseas partner schools.

Valuing Places
a CPD led curriculum development project funded mainly by DFID and managed by the Geographical Association aims to generate curriculum materials relevant to teachers and pupils of geography at Key Stages 2 and 3.

Further Reading and Websites


Society for Advancing Philosophical Enquiry and Reflection in Education

Further thoughts upon developing thinking skills with application to geography are to be found in the articles by Rowley, North and Higgins http://www.geography.org.uk/eyprimary/primaryresearch/researcharticles/