Ethnogeography: A Future for Primary Geography and Primary Geography Research?

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A common theme of the papers presented in this forum is that of the importance of listening to children’s voices. They key messages conveyed by the authors are synthesised in this paper and the implications for the development of the subject and research within it are considered. This is then placed in the context of some recent doctoral research that draws on beginning teachers’ voices and proposes a new way of conceptualising primary geography – ethnogeography – that might set an agenda for the future development and direction of primary geography research.

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Children’s Voices

In the opening paper Catling puts forward a compelling argument for listening to children’s voices, raising issues for the development of primary geography research that can be summarised under four broad headings:

• teaching for learning;
• resources;
• the curriculum;
• the future of the subject.

The first three will be examined briefly, drawing on the key messages conveyed by the authors in this publication, and an initial agenda for future research will be identified. The remainder of the paper will examine the subject issue in greater depth, drawing on some recent doctoral research into beginning teachers’ development as teachers of primary geography.

Teaching for learning

As part of the agenda of building on ‘where children are’ it is crucial for us to identify their current levels of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes. In terms of children’s conceptions and misconceptions of the physical world, Mackintosh and Halocha demonstrate the need for teachers to elicit children’s alternative frameworks about rivers and coastal processes. Mackintosh goes on to suggest that teachers can use this information to take a bottom-up approach to progression in learning that uses concept ladders, rather than the more traditional top-down approach which focuses on progression in teaching. Halocha, Mackintosh and Owens stress the importance of outdoor learning as a key element in
helping children develop their understandings about the physical world and a range of environments.

Kelly, Pike and Storey identify aspects of children’s knowledge and understanding of places – names, locations and nested hierarchy understanding – and suggest a possible progression in learning that takes account of children’s perceptions of the world. In all of these cases the emphasis is on the child and learning as the starting point for any thoughts about teaching and a number of elicitation techniques are described that could serve equally well as teaching and research tools.

Disney, Owens, Ross, and Spencer’s papers provide ample evidence to support Catling’s assertion that it is not helpful to conceptualise geography in a narrow sense because key geographical concepts such as place, space, and sustainability are inextricably linked with children’s sense of identity, social justice and dispositions for action. This mirrors much of the recent emphasis on creative as well as critical thinking in education (Fisher & Williams, 2004; Higgins & Baumfield, 2001; McGuinness, 1999), which is underpinned by what has been learnt from brain research – usefully summarised by Scoffham (2004).

All of these authors recognise that the most effective learning takes place when activities have an affective as well as a cognitive dimension. Each author also identifies the importance of geography in contributing to what has been called The New Agenda (Grimwade et al., 2000) of global citizenship and sustainable development, which itself has a strong values dimension.

Resources

Several of the papers here indicate that children do not understand the world in the same way as adults, even when they use the same concept terms (Kelly, this issue). It is a logical next step to consider who has created the majority of the resources that are used in primary geography classrooms and whether they reflect children’s understanding, interests and concerns. Providing children with access to their and other children’s conceptions and perceptions about the world could act as an important bridge in the progression from a child’s to an adult’s world. Ross’s paper gives a good example of how such resources might be developed using digital cameras to support local area understanding from a child’s perspective, while Owens (see Owens, 2004 for detail) describes the use of concept drawings as a means of creating a resource that can then be used as the basis for discussion with KS1 children. Indeed, one might argue that the tools used for gathering data, and the data themselves, could form the basis of resources that reflect children’s voices. There is much scope for further research in this area.

The curriculum

Assuming that there is general agreement over the desirability of identifying and including children’s voices in our planning and teaching (for an overview of a counter-argument see Martin & Catling, 2004) it follows that if we are to motivate children in their geography lessons we need to give them more control over the curriculum, selecting content areas that reflect their interests and concerns rather than solely those of adults. A major challenge to this view is that, within the UK, the curriculum is centrally prescribed and it generally takes specialist subject knowledge for a teacher to feel confident enough to interpret the
curriculum in such a way that allows children’s voices to come through. Recent Ofsted reports (Bell, 2004) have shown that geography is the worst taught subject in primary schools and it is possible that this is due to a combination of factors such as lack of teacher subject knowledge and a mismatch between curriculum choices and children’s ways of seeing the world. Disney, Halocha, Owens and Pike each demonstrate, in different ways, that if selection of content from the curriculum is not perceived by children to be relevant to their lives, or is misunderstood by the teacher, then subsequent learning is minimal and can even counteract the learning intended by the teacher.

However, there seems to me to be an argument that is more fundamental than those above and that is concerned with the nature of the subject itself and the extent to which it is perceived to be relevant by primary teachers, let alone children. The majority of primary teachers are non-specialists and I have recently completed some research (Martin, 2005) that identifies how beginning primary teachers conceptualise geographical education and which has led to some proposals for the future development of the subject.

**The Future of Primary Geography**

The research findings showed (Martin, 2005) that students begin the geography component of a PGCE primary course with a wide range of conceptions and attitudes towards the subject based on their prior experiences. In addition, findings suggested that there is a significant gap between what students reveal, through elicitation exercises, of what they ‘know’ and what they actually know and understand about geography. This appears to be because they tend to discount life experiences as a valuable source of geographical knowledge. They do not discount life experiences altogether, but do not appear to readily perceive that many of their everyday experiences are geographical.

In the same way as Catling, Kelly, Ross and Spencer suggest that children are geographers in their own right, so primary beginning teachers are also geographers, but they do not recognise this. It therefore seems necessary to develop a way of conceptualising primary geography that (1) enables students to recognise the value of their everyday experiences and that they are already thinking geographically in their everyday lives, and (2) is suited to the context that the students are working in – that of the primary school, and the evidence emerging from the data suggests that this could be an ‘everyday’ or ‘ethnogeography’.

**Everyday (Ethno)geography**

As a result of the data analysis and development of a theory of beginning teacher development I was already formulating ideas around the concept of ‘everyday’ geography when I encountered what seems to be a parallel in the field of mathematics, that of ‘ethnomathematics’:

...a key underlying assumption in this field...is that, through interacting in a myriad of daily-life activities, people already think and, more specifically, they think mathematically. (Frankenstein & Powell, 1994: 74)

Frankenstein and Powell assert that the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity, action and reflection, teaching and learning, and between knowledge
and its applications is a false one and that ‘underlying these dichotomies is the split between practical, everyday knowledge and abstract, theoretical knowledge...’. They make the further point that ‘knowledge is produced as we, individually and collectively, search and try to make sense of the world’ (1994: 76). If so, this poses for geography the question of what geographical knowledge would be appropriate if it is used by students for living effectively in the world on the one hand, and for teaching primary school pupils to live effectively in the world on the other. This might be a geography that would reflect the culture of the everyday and its application in a primary education context.

Ethnomathematics ‘emerged from the discourse on the interplay among mathematics, education, culture, and politics’ (Frankenstein & Powell, 1994: 77), founded on Freire’s (1972) ideas, which demonstrates how the dominant discourse is that of the powerful and does nothing to reflect the lived experiences or culture of the oppressed. In Initial Teacher Education the voices that have been ‘oppressed’ are those of the students, while in primary schools the ‘oppressed’ (or perhaps suppressed) voices are those of the pupils, as already established by the other papers in this Forum.

As referred to above, the students in this research project (Martin, 2005) seemed to assume that geography is academic and so they did not appear to recognise that their life experiences were valuable in the context of teaching primary geography. At the same time, even when some students did acknowledge the relevance of their everyday experiences, these did not match with the conception of geography as it is set out in the English National Curriculum programmes of study (DfEE/QCA, 1999). It seems there is a need to develop a geography that recognises students’, teachers’ and pupils’ lived experiences and cultures and that gives them a voice. Due to the parallels with ethnomathematics (and my understanding of the term ‘ethno-’ meaning of people, culture) it seems appropriate to call this ethnogeography.

Ethnogeography reflects the view that all students are geographers because they all live in the world. They all negotiate and interact with a variety of landscapes (human and natural) on a daily basis. For example, they have all planned routes and holidays, they have all stopped to admire a view, and they have all made decisions about where to live, work and play. Through these daily interactions and decisions they will have built up a wide knowledge base about the world, near and far, through a range of direct and indirect experiences. What they don’t perhaps recognise is that this knowledge is useful geographical knowledge and a point from which deeper conceptual understanding can be developed. I therefore think that there is a distinction to be made between academic geography, the discipline, and being a geographer in the everyday sense described above. I believe that this would provide a suitable base from which beginning teachers could then help children develop as everyday geographers, in other words to help them learn to live in the world, an aim closely allied to the overall purpose of citizenship education and thus the New Agenda (Grimwade et al., 2000).

The challenge, as suggested earlier in this paper, is how to enable students to see the link between these everyday experiences and the ways in which geographers make sense of the world. Here the concept of a geographical imagination (Geographical Association, 2005a; Massey, 2005) is useful. This is similar to the concept of a sociological imagination (Giddens, 2001; term originally coined by...
Wright Mills, 1959) which ‘requires us above all to think ourselves away from the familiar routines of our daily lives in order to look at them anew’. This does not mean to ignore the everydayness of our experiences, but to see them from an alternative perspective. Giddens gives an example of sitting drinking a cup of coffee in a café. This very familiar experience can be viewed from a sociological perspective by looking at the number of interactions between the person drinking the coffee, and the people in the café – both customers and workers. These interactions will be a mixture of verbal and non-verbal and could be related to certain sociological theories about how people behave in certain social situations and so on.

If we take the same example of drinking a cup of coffee in a café, how could this be seen anew using a geographical imagination? When I am in Worcester shopping and stop for a cup of coffee there are a number of decisions that I make (most of them sub-conscious) which have a geographical dimension. First of all I think about where the nearest café is which serves the type of coffee I like best in the time I have available and which offers the type of environment I prefer (comfortable armchairs, modern art on the walls, daily papers to read). Once in the café I make decisions about where to sit so that I am warm enough, where I will be least disturbed by movement in and through the café, and do some people watching! Underlying some of these choices is an implicit understanding of location, sense of place and micro-climates. Whenever possible I choose a café that serves Fair Trade products (issue: economic exploitation). This decision is based on my knowledge of the impact of the coffee industry on farmers, their families and the environment in coffee producing countries, and my desire to live in the world sustainably (issue: sustainable development). My choice is based on a mixture of social, economic, environmental and political factors all linked to places that have local (the cafe itself, the city I am in) and global (where the coffee is grown, for which company) dimensions.

This is an example of what it means to think geographically, and is the sort of thinking that Massey (Geographical Association, 2005a) recommends we ‘dig up’ and examine. It is the type of understanding that would be missing if geography was not in the curriculum. I do not, however, believe that there is one geographical imagination. There are many types of geographical imagination each with its own emphasis (cultural geography, environmental geography, radical or critical geography). While the concepts of place and space might arguably be essential to all (and a recent debate within the Geographical Association (2005b) suggests that this would be the case) there are then a variety of perspectives of which ‘ethnogeography’ would be one.

An ethnogeographical imagination

What might an ethnogeographical imagination look like? What is it about living in the world today that, coupled with a geographical dimension, would enable us to live more effectively? One example of the impact of the 21st century on our lives has recently been written about by teacher educators in Finland who have noted that:

The ability to obtain geographic information has grown considerably as the use of the Internet has become more commonplace; a fact that leads to even
greater demands being placed on students’ information skills. In addition to locating and interpreting the information and being able to evaluate it... a central part of civic skills is being network-literate. Attention is increasingly drawn to this in teacher training in Finland. (Houtsonen, 2004: 191–2)

Another example is the growing concern that is now permeating society about geographical and environmental issues such as climate change that relate to the sustainability of life on earth. Acting locally and thinking globally is a slogan that has developed from the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 which was translated, at a local level, into Agenda 21 and is built on an understanding of the interdependent nature of the world. These are all geographical notions that have developed as a result of human activity but there are some notions resulting from human activity that have not become part of ‘privileged’ subjects. It seems essential that we pay attention to the perspectives and ideas ‘manifested in written or non-written, oral or non-oral forms, many of which have either been ignored or otherwise distorted by conventional histories’ (Frankenstein & Powell, 1994: 88, referring to mathematics).

For example, over the last four years I have been involved in a project that has been part of the work of a partnership between TiDE (Teachers in Development Education, Birmingham, Martin, 2004) and the National Environment Agency of The Gambia. The project focuses on developing teacher understanding and practice about climate change and sustainable development. One of the key features of this project has been the ways in which, through intercultural, collaborative learning, teachers in both countries have developed a more complex understanding of the issues because they have had their own knowledge and perspectives challenged by perceiving it from other points of view. This has given the teachers an expanded frame of reference from which to evaluate information available on the Internet and reported in the media. I would suggest that, from an adult perspective these are the sorts of ways of thinking that stem from everyday experiences that could form part of ethnogeography. At the same time, the papers offered in this Forum identify some of the children’s voices and experiences that could contribute to ethnogeography.

Conclusion

To conclude, I believe there is a strong argument for developing a new framework for primary geography based on an approach I have called ethnogeography and what this, and its development of geographical imagination, might look like, and how it might be implemented, requires further research. In the lists that follow I make reference to student teachers, since they were the focus of my research. However, a similar agenda could be made for incorporating children’s voices. The personal, or private, geographies of children identified by Catling and investigated by the other authors in this Forum have all represent children’s everyday geographies. To adopt the quote given earlier in this paper, I am making an assumption (but it is based on evidence provided by those such as Catling, Kelly, Ross and Spencer) that, ‘through interacting in a myriad of daily-life activities, children already think and, more specifically, they think geographically’. Equally, in these daily-life activities children do not make the distinction between the practical, everyday knowledge and the more abstract,
theoretical knowledge that they gradually develop. It is only through their formal education that they ‘learn’ to separate the everyday from the theoretical and this is something that we need to guard against (Martin, in press). In the ideas for further development below I therefore use the term ‘learners’ to refer to an agenda that can be established for learners of all ages, from young children just beginning school to student teachers and even to those primary teachers who are non-specialist geographers and engaging in Continuous Professional Development activities.

Frankenstein and Powell make some suggestions for how ethnomathematics might develop which are also pertinent to ethnogeography, namely (rephrased as appropriate) to

(1) Develop co-investigations between learners and teachers to discover each other’s ethnogeographical knowledge.
(2) Constantly relate formal geography to real geography so that the relationship between the two is established and the false dichotomy between practical, everyday knowledge and abstract, theoretical knowledge is removed.

These imply the need to

- develop methodologies that ‘probe effectively and ethically’ learners’ geographical knowledge;
- incorporate learners’ perspectives into educational research – the projects reported in this forum have begun this process, but there is a need to extend this to wider samples and to use the current findings to refine the tools that might be used;
- relate learners’ perspectives to our own critical and theoretical frameworks (as geography teacher educators and researchers).

In relation to this final point, within a liberatory paradigm the voice of the academic, or specialist should not be ignored. To replace the privileging of one group with that of another would be just as questionable, so the approach recommended is to find ways of helping learners to become aware of their ethnogeographical knowledge without ‘denying the inequality of knowledge’, but as much as possible ‘based on co-operative and democratic principles of equal power’ (Youngman, 1986: 179 cited in Frankenstein & Powell, 1994: 92). As teachers and teacher educators we need to avoid uncritical faith in the ‘people’ so:

...while we listen to students’ themes, we organize them using our critical and theoretical frameworks, and we re-present them as problems challenging students’ previous perceptions. We also suggest themes that may not occur to our students, themes we judge are important to shattering the commonly held myths about the structure of society and knowledge that interfere with the development of critical consciousness. (Frankenstein & Powell, 1994: 92)

This seems to me to be a goal worth working towards.
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