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Geography teacher educators' perspectives on the place of children's geographies in the classroom

Abstract

Whilst many have extolled the benefits of incorporating children's geographies in school geography (Biddulph, 2012; Yarwood and Tyrell, 2012; Roberts, 2017), its place in the classroom is uncertain (Catling, 2011; Hammond, 2020). To gain a more nuanced understanding of how, and why, children's geographies are drawn upon and engaged with in school geography, this paper examines the philosophies and experiences of geography teacher educators. In doing so, it draws on research conducted by the authors during the 2019 Geography Teacher Educator conference held in Bristol, England. Participants engaged in a reflective discussion about children's geographies, which was framed by Castree, Lambert and Fuller's (2007) notion of 'borders' existing between academic and school geography. It transpires that whilst many geography teacher educators perceive that children's geographies is fundamental to teaching geography, they perceive that there are gaps in their knowledge of the sub discipline, which compromise their ability to utilise it. Furthermore, geography teacher educators opined that the wider context of accountability and performativity that pervades schooling in England today renders it challenging both to explore children's geographies in the classroom, and to develop their knowledge of the field.

Introduction

Every day children and young people enter schools and classrooms across the globe. It is a central part of their everyday lives and spatial practices. When they enter the school grounds, and particularly the classroom, children transition into a formal space of education. These spaces are imbued with explicit rules and ingrained, but not always stated, social imaginations about how children should behave and learn (Giddens, 1986; Aitken, 1994). However, children do not leave behind their rich, and varied, experiences and imaginations of the wider world at the school gate or classroom door.

As geography involves the study of everyday life, the school subject provides an opportunity to consider, and explore, children's experiences and imaginations of the world in a formal space of education. To support teachers in doing this, many geographers and geography educators have extolled the benefits of drawing on ideas and methodologies from the sub discipline of children's geographies (Catling, 2011; Biddulph, 2012; Yarwood and Tyrell, 2012; Young People's Geographies Project (2006-2011)). One of the strongest arguments in favour of engaging with children's geographies in schools comes from Roberts (2017) who, drawing on Vygotsky (1962) and Catling and Martin (2011), asserts that geography education is powerful *if* it provides opportunities for students to connect the geography they are learning in school to their everyday, and prior, knowledge. For Roberts, this supports children in meaning making, respects their geographies and imaginations of the world, and can help develop their understanding of geographical concepts such as place.

Despite many proponents with persuasive arguments, the place of children's geographies in school geography is uncertain. In a socio-political context of increasing concern over performance and accountability in schools (Lambert and Morgan, 2010; Jones and Lambert, 2018), the time and space for teachers to explore children's geographies in the classroom, or engage with wider academic literature, is often limited (Catling, 2011). In thinking about how to move beyond this impasse, this article draws on research conducted by the authors with geography teacher educators, which encouraged them to think critically about the

potential for embracing children's geographies in schools. Here, we begin by introducing children's geographies and considering how they are represented in school geography. In doing so, we examine how the benefits and challenges of exploring children's geographies in the classroom has been conceptualised in academic debate. Following this, we set out the research and examine its findings, positioning our thinking around notion of 'borders' (Castree, Lambert and Fuller, 2007) existing between geography teachers and children's geographies. The paper then concludes with a discussion as to how these borders might be crossed, and why this is of value to both geography education in schools and the children we teach.

Before introducing children's geographies and examining their 'place' in school geography, as both 'the child' and childhood are contested notions, which are recognised in the academy as being socially constructed, historically situated and (at least in part) constructed by children themselves (Aitken, 2001; Freeman and Tranter, 2011; Hörschelmann and van Blerk, 2012; Holloway, 2014) we offer a note on the terminology we use. Throughout this article we use the terms children and young people intermittently to reflect the literature we engage with and the language participants used in their responses to the research. In doing so, we also acknowledge that formal geographical education, which for most children occurs in schools, is an explicit part of the national programmes of study in England between Key Stages 1 and 3 - a period in which children themselves change and develop from being 5 to 14 years old. Following this, school geography becomes accessible only to some through GCSE and/or A-level 'choices', which may be affected by student attainment and school context, children's (and their parents/carers) desires for their future as well as other socio-economic factors. As such, those who work in schools, or who are teacher educators, may well use both children and young people to describe those they teach. Throughout this paper, we draw primarily on the English policy context to reflect the setting in which the research was conducted, and in which most of the participants who took part in the research work. However, we acknowledge that different countries, educational policy and cultural contexts construct the child, and value children's geographies, in different ways.

What are children's geographies and what is their 'place' in school geography?

Although geographers in both schools and universities often spend a significant proportion of their time teaching children and young people (Yarwood and Tyrell, 2012), children's geographies were 'conspicuously absent' as an area of research and subject matter for much of geography's early development as a discipline (Freeman and Tranter, 2015). Children's 'everyday' experiences and imaginations of the world have also often been under-considered in school geography (Biddulph, 2011). This concern is echoed by Catling (2011:25), who argues governments tend to 'promote a view of the geography about which children should learn', as opposed to recognising and empowering children as 'active agents in and of their own geographical learning' (p27). Here, Catling suggests that there is often a lack of recognition by key decision-makers of the reciprocal relationships between the child's everyday life and their geographical education. This reciprocity refers to how children connect knowledge that they learn in school to what they already know as they make meaning (Catling and Martin, 2011; Roberts, 2017), and how, and why, children draw upon geographical knowledge to inform and empower them in their everyday lives and futures.

Research into children's geographies began in the 1970s and initially focussed on the spatial oppression of children, as well as their access to, and use of, space (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Aitken, 2001; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). Geography's developing interest in children, and recognition of them, can be seen to have been part of a wider movement in the discipline at this time – to consider, study and represent the geographies of all people(s); including women, young people and 'ethnic minority' communities (Peet, 2013). As the preferred pluralisation denotes, since its emergence in the 1970s, children's geographies has developed into a diverse sub discipline (Holloway and Pilmott-Wilson, 2011; Aitken, 2018) with strong international and interdisciplinary links both within, and beyond, the academy.

Although recognising the contested nature of childhood, and the complex and varied nature of the research that occurs in the sub discipline, Freeman and Tranter (2015: 491) offer a 'simple relational definition' of children's geographies stating – (it) 'is the study of the relationship between children and space'. Yarwood and Tyrell (2012: 123) draw on van Blerk and Kesby (2008) to explain that children's geographies is 'characterised by studies that seek to explore different places and spaces from children's perspectives, often using participatory methods that aim to empower young people'. Put another way, children's geographies often seeks to position children as active participants in the research and to explore their experiences and imaginations of the world. As adult perspectives often dominate representations of the world (Hörschelmann and van Blerk, 2012), and children have sometimes been sub-ordinated in different spaces (including in education (see Aitken, 2001; Giddens, 1986)), the sub discipline seeks to better understand how children and young people both shape, and are shaped by, the world, and to enable them to become agents in it (Freeman and Tranter, 2015).

The value of children's geographies to (geography) education in schools has been recognised, not least because 'everyday life' is a focus of study in the academic discipline of geography (Tani, 2011; Catling and Martin, 2011; Roberts, 2014; 2017) and because children are who we teach in schools. Notably, the 'Young People's Geographies Project', which ran from 2006 to 2011, aimed to:

1. Establish conversations about young people's geographies between students, geography teachers, academic geographers and teacher educators that will inform a dynamic process of curriculum making;
2. Explore the ways in which students and teachers collaboratively can use the lived experiences of young people to inform the process of curriculum making in school geography;
3. Develop pedagogies through which young people can use their lived experiences to develop their geographical understanding' (Biddulph, 2012: 156).

However, whilst the project was praised in evaluations for its work with geography teachers, schools and children, it struggled to engage academic geographers in the discussions (Hopwood, 2007; 2008).

Since the project ended, debate has continued over the place of children's geographies in school geography (Butt, 2020). Roberts' (2013; 2014; 2017) work is of particular interest in this regard, as she has examined the place of everyday knowledge and geographies (including those of children) in research, policy and practice in (geography) education. In doing so, Roberts has demonstrated the importance of children's geographies to school geography – as an area of the curriculum, in informing teachers' pedagogical choices, and also in respecting children and their experiences and imaginations of the world. However, Roberts (2014) also highlights barriers to be overcome if children's geographies are to be included in school geography; she suggests that one of the most significant barriers is governmental educational policy, arguing the most recent national programmes of study in England (DfE, 2013; 2014), do 'not seem to have been influenced by any recent academic thinking in the subject' (p202). Here, Roberts refers specifically to research (including the Young People's Geographies project) that has consciously sought to draw upon academic debate to enhance school geography. The Department for Education's lack of recognition of these debates in policy appears, for Roberts, a significant concern as she highlights that 'teachers are likely to take pupils' knowledge seriously only if they are guided to do so by curriculum documents and projects (p194).

We include Roberts' argument here to highlight the contested and, at times, 'socially selective' (Lambert and Morgan, 2010) nature of school geography, and to foreground that school teaching can be heavily influenced by governmental policy. However, if children's geographies are omitted from debates about geographical education, then we risk compromising pedagogy (through not building on what children know), failing to keep abreast of developments in academic knowledge and debate about (children's) everyday geographies, and failing to respect children as active agents who shape, and are shaped by, the world in which they live. In this paper, we contribute to these debates by examining

geography teacher educators' perspectives on the place of children's geographies in school geography.

Introducing the research and its findings

The research builds on Hammond's (2020) argument that there is value to examining relationships and 'borders' between different spaces of geographical thought (everyday life, geography as an academic discipline and geography as a school subject), to seek to understand how children's geographies - as an area of academic thought and shared by children themselves - can enrich school geography. Castree, Lambert and Fuller's (2007) notion of borders is helpful here, as it enables critical consideration as to if, how, and why, personal and systemic constraints have hampered the development of relationships between school and university geography that would benefit both communities.

The research was conducted at the annual Geography Teacher Educator (GTE) conference, which, in 2019, took place in Bristol, England. Each January, colleagues interested in geography teacher education, and geography education more broadly, come together to engage in knowledge exchange about research, policy and practice in areas related to these fields (Healy, 2019; Hammond, forthcoming). Geography teacher educators were chosen as the participants in the research as, for many, their roles can be conceptualised as occupying a 'middle space' between universities and schools, with colleagues involved in teacher education often spending a proportion of their time working with geography educators in both environments.

Despite the increasingly fragmented nature of initial teacher education in England, which has occurred in contrast to other national regions in the UK (Whiting et al., 2018), delegates at the GTE conference are primarily drawn from Higher Education (HE). In 2019, of the forty-eight delegates who attended the conference, forty-one had an HE affiliation (two of whom were retired). Of the remainder, one delegate was affiliated to learned society, two to

subject associations, one to the Field Studies Council, and three people choose not to share any affiliation. Most of those who attended the conference were based in a HEI in England, one delegate in Scotland, two in the Republic of Ireland, one in Belgium and two in the Netherlands¹. This information is shared here to highlight that the research that took place does not purport to be representative of all people involved in geography teacher education, even within England where the majority of participants were based – for example, no school based teacher educators (e.g. School Centred Initial Teacher Education (SCITT) leaders) were in attendance

At the conference, we led a workshop in which delegates were invited to engage in a reflective group discussion focused on their philosophies on, and experiences of, children's geographies in ITE and school geography (Hammond and McKendrick, 2019). As part of the workshop, delegates were offered the opportunity to opt-in to the research by sharing a written response with the researchers. Sixteen geography teacher educators chose to participate in the study - fourteen of whom were HEI based teacher educators, one a PhD student, while one did not disclose their affiliation. Of the delegates who shared their affiliation - twelve were based in England, one in the Republic of Ireland and two others in The Netherlands.

Following the conference, participants' responses were inductively coded, and we now share the key findings from the research in two sections:

- Firstly, we examine the philosophies and experiences of the teacher educators, drawing on their responses to illuminate discussions;
- Secondly, we consider the borders to exploring children's geographies in the classroom identified by research participants.

We conclude by considering how these borders might be crossed.

¹ Data provided by the Geographical Association who support with the organization of the GTE conference.

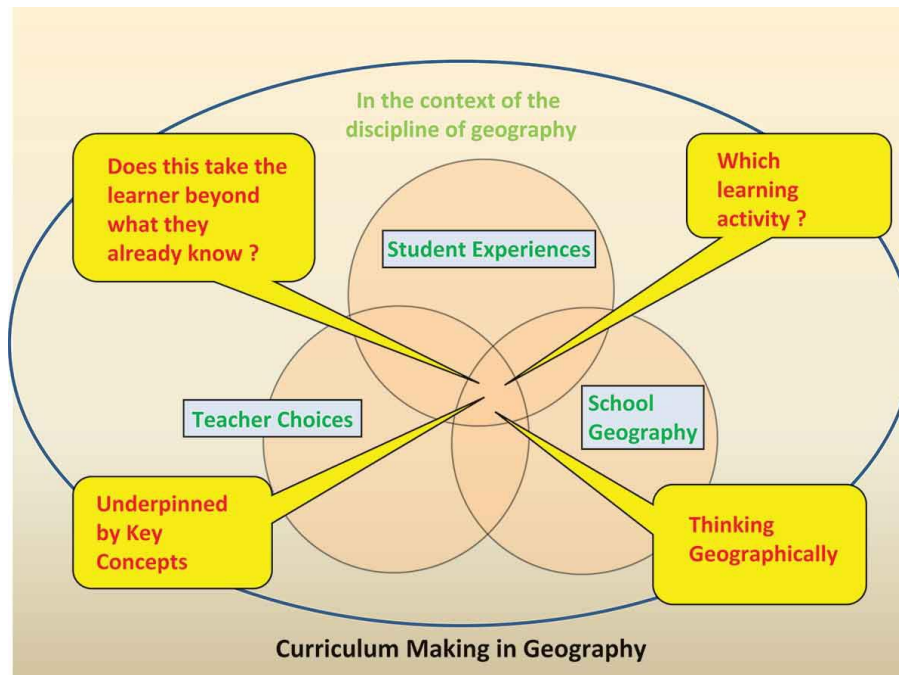
Philosophies on, and experiences of, children's geographies

Three quarters of the geography teacher educators' who participated in this research positioned children's geographies as pivotal to teaching geography. For example, one participant commented; (children are) '*central to the whole learning process*', before going on to note that geography education involves '*building on the known world of the child*'. They perceived that there were several benefits of considering children's geographies in schools, including; engaging young people in lessons; valuing children's experiences and ideas; and using geography as a '*disciplinary framework*' to help children to make sense of their own lives and experiences. In addition, three participants echoed Roberts' (2017) argument, in which she draws on Vygotsky (1962), to assert that connecting (geographical) knowledge to what children already know is integral to the process of meaning making.

Embedded in one quarter of the responses were references to theories and models about teaching (geography). These included three references to Lambert and Morgan's (2010) 'Curriculum Making' model (Figure one), which represents how 'the curriculum comes in to being via the day-to-day interactions between teachers, their students and the subject discipline' (Lambert and Biddulph, 2014: 215), and positions the teacher as being central to this process. These responses can be interpreted as the participants' perceiving that children's experiences and imaginations are included in recognised models about teaching geography, and are thus already considered in geography education. However, in reality there is likely a range of philosophies about the place of children's geographies in schools, not all of which would accord a central position to children's geographies. Furthermore, the curriculum making model is not without its limitations; it represents the child as student and not the child as being. For example, if we do not consider the child as being aware and (self) conscious in the world, then we are not considering the child as a whole or how they shape,

and are shaped by, the spaces and places they exist within and contribute to (Hammond, 2020).

Figure One: The Curriculum Making Model



Source: Lambert and Biddulph (2014)

Three geography teacher educators identified potential issues about how children's geographies might be considered in the school subject. These can be read as a concern about unbalancing curriculum making by over-emphasising children's geographies (which might be only one of several elements in the 'student experiences' section of the model). One of these participants expressed that *'it's only one part of a large discipline'*, with another delivering a warning that, *'children shouldn't be trapped in today'*. The first comment can be interpreted as recognition that, although the sub-discipline of children's geographies has value to school geography, it should not be the sole focus of curriculum or pedagogy. The second reflection raises more complex concerns. It acknowledges the role of formal (geographical) education in supporting young people to consider the world in new ways through providing them with access to 'powerful knowledge' which takes them beyond their everyday lives (Young, 2008; Young and Muller, 2010; Young et al., 2014). The concern

is that a focus on children's geographies would limit horizons, falling short of what a geographical education should offer. In contrast, we argue that providing children with opportunities to draw upon, and consider, (their own) geographies through both curriculum and pedagogy can ultimately support their development as informed social actors, leaving them better placed to make sense of, and engage in debates about, the world in which they live. This thinking is integral to children's geographies (see for example, van Blerk et al., 2009).

Interestingly, only one participant expressed the opinion that embracing children's geographies in school geography offers the '*unique*' potential '*to enable young people to achieve the broader aims of geography education, e.g. to 'think with a different view' in their everyday lives.*' This teacher educator can be seen to be drawing on the Geographical Association's (2009) manifesto, which highlights the potential for geography education to give young people power in, and over, their lives. As outlined in the manifesto, 'thinking and decision making with geography helps us to live our lives as knowledgeable *citizens*, aware of our own communities in a global setting' (p5). Whilst agreeing with this teacher educator, and the 'A Different View' manifesto, we also argue that drawing on academic literature in children's geographies, and being familiar with (international) policies designed to empower, and enable, children (such as the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989)), are also necessary to enable teachers to fully understand the power, and potential, of drawing on children's geographies to enhance geography education. The absence of reference to these literatures by geography teacher educators in this research, is suggestive of the wider existence of 'gated communities' (Horton, Kraftl and Tucker, 2008; Evans and Holt, 2011), restricting the range and terms of debate, inadvertently restricting access and interactions between communities, even when they have a shared (research) interest of mutual benefit.

Building on the idea that there are 'borders' compromising the ability of teachers to incorporate children's geographies in schools, we now move on to examine the borders that geography teacher educators identified.

Borders that prevent and/or limit the inclusion of children's geographies in school geography

The geography teacher educators who took part in this research identified three types of border that they perceive are preventing the inclusion of children's geographies in school geography.

Firstly, one half of the participants identified curriculum prescription and limited time as an issue. In the context of ITE, participants' noted that on some routes into teaching (notably, Teach First) there are often prescriptive curricula that restrict what is taught, when and how. In addition, another teacher educator noted that there are only five days of subject specialist university-led teaching on the SCITT programme to which they contributed. This participant expressed, *'I would love to include this (referring to children's geographies) in the SCITT programme, but time is a factor here'*. This can be interpreted as being representative of the socio-political landscape of teacher education in England, where there has been a diversification of routes into teaching (Geographical Association, 2015; Whiting et al., 2018), resulting in teacher educators making decisions to omit areas of knowledge, which they acknowledge to be of value, and which they otherwise would have incorporated in teacher education.

Secondly, as expounded by Catling (2011) and Biddulph (2011), many participants expressed that as children's geographies are not included in (national) examinations, they are given less focus in school geography. The marginalisation of children's geographies in school geography might be understood as an unintended consequence of the culture of accountability and performativity that pervades education in England. The participants' responses suggest that they perceive that this landscape influences teachers decisions on what is taught, how it is taught and why it is taught. Furthermore, echoing Roberts' (2014)

argument, the teacher educators also indicated that the lack of recognition of children's geographies in educational policy is also likely to dissuade teachers from learning more about these geographies, given the often limited time that they have available for professional development.

Finally, deficits in student teachers' and teacher educators' knowledge of children's geographies were reported. Two geography teacher educators perceived that they did not have an adequate understanding of children's geographies, although both suggested that this was an area that they would like to develop. More generally, six of the participants considered that student teachers needed to have both a strong knowledge of children's geographies and the confidence to explore them in the classroom. Two of these participants stressed that this concern was especially pertinent as children's geographies can cover material that is sensitive and emotional.

What steps can we take to cross these borders?

Through examining geography teacher educators' philosophies on, and experiences of, children's geographies, this research has highlighted both the value of children's geographies to school geography and the challenges that must be overcome and 'borders' that must be breached, if they are to be explored in the classroom. With a focus on moving these debates forward, and to facilitate impact on school geography as well as contributing to academic debate, we now propose three actions.

Firstly, there should be increased dialogue between the children's geographies and geography education communities focussed not only on research sharing, but also on knowledge-exchange. We are not proposing a didactic transfer of knowledge from higher education to those involved in school education. Rather, the rich dialogue that we envisage would be of mutual benefit, informing future research agendas by drawing on the experiences of those working closely with children and young people, and exploring how the

ideas and methodologies of children's geographies are of value to teaching and learning in schools, and to (geography) teacher education.

Secondly, we suggest there is a need to give greater consideration of how, and why, (international) policy designed to empower and enable the child - such as the UNCRC - might be of value to those interested in geography education (Skelton, 2007). For geography education to be enabling (Maude, 2016) to a child in their life and future, then (international) legislation - both within and beyond education - which asserts the rights of the child, and positions the child as an active agent, with capacity to make informed judgements on matters to them is key. The ethos of rights respecting schools (Sebba and Robinson, 2010) should be extended to think critically about how the child is constructed in, and empowered through, their (geographical) education;

Thirdly, with Lambert and Morgan (2010), we strongly believe that geography teachers should be empowered and enabled as 'curriculum makers', and that it is the classroom where geography comes into being for children. As such geography teachers also have a profound role to play in crossing these borders, for example through reflecting on how, and why, it is of value to make connections between the geography they are teaching and children's everyday lives. As geography teacher educators have a significant role in the development of (student) teachers, they can also play an important role by supporting teachers to draw from the branches of knowledge that are geography and education to inform decisions as to how, and why, they consider and explore children's geographies in their 'curriculum making'. However, as has been acknowledged in this research, the fragmentation of ITE in England, along with geography teacher educators who work in HEIs often being located in education, rather than geography, departments (Butt, 2020) raises further challenges in facilitating discourse between, and across, communities as per our first suggestion.

As such, in making suggestions as to next steps in 'crossing borders' in children's geographies, we acknowledge that more research and work is needed to critically consider

both the value of children's geographies to geography education in schools, and how children's geographies might be further explored in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this article we have shown that the geography teacher educators understand the value of considering, and exploring, children's geographies in school geography. Multiple benefits of this were highlighted by research participants, with the following being advocated - connecting 'powerful knowledge' to what children already know; engaging young people in their learning; supporting children in using disciplinary thought to better understand (their own) lives and geographies; and enabling children to take a more active role in issues that shape their lives. However, borders presently exist which influence if, how and why, children's geographies are included and explored school geography. To cross these borders we have called for greater consideration of the child by geography teachers, teacher educators, and at the point at which educational policy is being formulated. In addition, we call for increased research sharing between the fields of geography that have the greatest interest in children and young people; geography education and children's geographies.

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