This book’s rubbish (key stages 3, 4 and 5)

What the photos say
These unsettling images, from the Payatas Garbage Dump, Quezon City, Philippines, simply can’t be ignored. They show children in unpleasant, dangerous situations and suggest much about their lives and personal experiences: the stark contrast with the lives and opportunities of your students will strongly stimulate their ‘need to know more’. They powerfully demonstrate how geography’s concern with contemporary challenges really does matter. These images can be used to help students thoughtfully consider the lives of others and their role as responsible global citizens.

Lesson idea
These images could be used during a unit on uneven development or consumption. They give us a glimpse of the ‘human face’ of pollution, unsustainable development or child labour. Take care! As teachers we must be well informed of the story behind the images and avoid sentimentality, stereotyping and a pitying view. Some litter pickers may earn the cash to pay for their schooling, others may not … We must encourage students to explore. Expect varying depths of exploration from the different age groups.

Other resources
- an internet connection
- PC, digital projector and screen/IWB
- hard copies of images

Suggested activities
These focus on asking students to empathise, ‘see with the child’s eyes’, and consider the interconnected factors that have led these boys to the landfill.
Show the images and give quiet thinking time, then ask students to discuss their personal response to the images. What would they say to the boys if they met them? What would they ask?

Ask students to build a profile of the children from the evidence in the images. What can they reasonably deduce about their lives? The profile could include age, family, interests, location, home life. Use this to discuss stereotyping.

Students could imagine the boys’ lives leading up to, and after, the moment when the photos were taken. They could create, act or write storyboards of their ideas.

They could then research the lives of rubbish pickers to see how accurate their storyboards were and adjust them accordingly. Students could contrast their own lives with the boys’ and identify ways in which they might be linked. How does their ‘personal geography’ compare with the litter pickers’?

Ask some specific questions about the image of the boy reading:

- What is he reading? Where did he get it? Why is he reading it? Is he ‘allowed’? What is he supposed to be doing? Should he be working? Why? Where are his parents? What happens to him next? Where does the rubbish come from? Where is this place? What will he be doing in 20 years’ time? What does the title – ‘This book’s rubbish’ – mean?

Finally, ask students ‘Why do these images matter?’ and ‘What have these images got to do with us?’

**Additional learning benefit**

These images are a powerful way of helping our students become knowledgeable citizens who are aware of the challenges facing the world today, and hopefully inspire them to take appropriate responsible actions during their lives to change and improve the lives of others.

Chartered Geographer Paula Cooper teaches at King Edward VI Five Ways School, Birmingham, a Secondary Geography Quality Mark Centre of Excellence, and is Regional Advisor for the CfBT Project.