

Pupils' Perceptions of Geography: KS2/3 transfer issues

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Introduction: Why is geography in a poor state of health?

In *Changing the Subject: The impact of national policy on school geography 1980-2000*, Rawling (2001) uses Ofsted data on 'progress and achievement of pupils' and 'quality of teaching', to exemplify the status of geography in comparison with other subjects. During the period 1993-1997 it is noted that for geography,

in KS1 and 2, teaching is now good in one third of schools and satisfactory in most of the rest; a steady improvement in recent years. (cited in Rawling, 2001, 93)

However, these positive trends take a turn for the worse during the 1998-2000 period of inspections,

much work in geography is satisfactory but not enough is good or very good. (Ibid.)

The requirement to teach the geography programmes of study was suspended, alongside all the other foundation subjects, in the primary sector from 1998 to 2000 to create space for the government's initiatives to improve the standards of literacy and numeracy in primary schools. Although the programmes of study returned as statutory requirements in the primary sector in Curriculum 2000 (DfES/QCA, 1999a) geography and the other foundation subjects have found themselves marginalised by the emphasis on literacy and numeracy ever since.

The debate about provision for geography in schools continues to influence teaching and learning at all levels. The impact of National Curriculum Geography across the primary phase has resulted in curriculum delivery that has been described as descriptive and outdated. The recent debate led by Brown (2002), Huckle (2002) and Stannard (2002) echoed a similar situation at Key Stage 3 and 4. Indeed, Huckle reports that

too many pupils are left alienated, bored and disenchanted by geography lessons that do not answer their need to understand their present and likely future place in the world. (Huckle, 2002, 71).

Stannard was concerned that geography is losing its 'centrality' in education and describes the subject as being in a state of 'crisis'. The nature of this crisis, however, is seen to focus 'chiefly on secondary schools' (Stannard, 2002, p.73). A recent Chief HMI's Annual Report (Ofsted, 2003), however, suggests that a similar 'crisis' is evident in primary schools as well. The report indicates that a gulf exists in the quality of teaching in the core subjects and the foundation subjects and states that

in two thirds of schools....the teaching of English and mathematics is good or better whereas in under half of schools, the teaching of geography was good or better. (Ofsted, 2003)

The report goes on to argue that in primary schools:

- teaching often fails to enthuse or challenge pupils;
- weaknesses exist in teachers' long term planning with insignificant recognition of what pupils have already learned;
- particular time pressure exists for geography and history (Ofsted, 2003)

There is a suggestion from Ofsted, however, that the situation is improving and there is evidence that pupils can experience a broader, more balanced timetable. Some schools are able to combine high standards in both the core and foundation subjects and are characterised by:

- a curriculum planned and taught as discrete subjects, yet with effective links across subjects that facilitate coherence;
- good use of first hand experience;
- curriculum design and timetabling that embraces high quality teaching and pupil motivation (Ofsted, 2003)

Recent emphasis on the development of creativity (Scoffham, 2002) and thinking skills through geography (Parry, 2002) support the need for teachers to develop innovative practice. This might involve teachers discarding the 'notion of the curriculum as a course to be run and think of it as a network of ideas to be expanded' (Prawatt, 1992, cited in Parry, 2002, 128).

Previous research into pupils' perceptions of geography

This small research project explores pupils' perceptions of geography and is intended to provide an insight into their views about the subject from key stage 2 to key stage 3. It contributes to the debate about the development of geography and emphasises the need for good geographical provision within and across key stages.

It was surprising to find that very little research has been carried out with regard to pupils' perceptions on the way that they learn in geography. Dowgill (1998) notes studies by Scarfe in 1949, Long in 1964, Naish in 1972, and Corney in 1987, all of which included some reference to pupils' attitudes towards geography. But Lidstone, also quoted in Dowgill (1998), said, in terms of all of these research projects, that the research

has not made major contributions to the improvement of either geography as taught in schools or of education systems in general. (Lidstone 1988, in Dowgill 1998, 56)

Dowgill's work focused on the pupils' perspective of learning geography through what was then the new Geography National Curriculum. He examined pupils' perceptions as they studied geography in key stage 3 during the period from 1991 to 1993. He noted:

Interestingly, although perhaps not a surprise, the one major group rarely considered during the discussions surrounding the National Curriculum and geography in particular was the pupils. Little reference was made to their experiences and the Geography Working Group consciously made a decision 'against undertaking a substantial programme of visits; (DES, 1990, 1)'. Thus the research undertaken on pupils' experiences of geography, it seems, had little impact on the development of the Geography National Curriculum. (Dowgill 1998, 5)

The fact geography finds itself in a crisis has generated debate and discussion about the future of the subject. The discussion was initiated after an article entitled *The Erosion of Geography* was published in the *Education Guardian* on November 20th 2001.

According to the government, the point of education is to develop our critical faculties. – But the government seems to have lost sight of its own objectives. With the emphasis on core subjects, the one that is most help in getting to grips with the important issues of the day – geography – is being squeezed. So much so that geographers everywhere are alarmed that this vital discipline is under attack, not as a deliberate policy, but by default, because the government's priorities are elsewhere. (Brown, 2001)

Contributions to the debate have been published in *Geography*, the academic journal of the Geographical Association. However, in the column inches generated there is only one direct reference to the pupils themselves. Grimwade writes (2002):

We will never know what 'relevant geography' is to the lives of young people unless we ask them.

The research project

The research reported here is part of a larger project on secondary school pupils' perceptions of geography. As a key part of the study, evidence of their views was sought from Year 7 pupils about their primary geography experience.

The framework

The research was undertaken through a survey of a large number of pupils to gain an overall idea of pupils' perception of school geography. Noting trends from the survey, interviews were planned with a sample of pupils to refine further their ideas on the positives and negatives of school geography. The aim was to find out from the pupils themselves what they liked and disliked about geography.

Research methodology

The research was conducted in secondary schools within Brighton and Hove. Of the research strategies suggested by Denscombe (1998), a survey seemed the most appropriate. Obtaining a viable number of responses from key stage 3 pupils in a number of schools could only be achieved manageably through a survey.

Denscombe (1998) notes that social science researchers frequently face the problem that they cannot collect data from everyone, so sampling techniques have to be adopted. The sample needs to be carefully selected, as it cannot be assumed that the sample will reflect the opinions of the whole population. This sample fell into the category of probability sampling, since the pupils surveyed were likely to be a representative cross-section of the key stage 3 populations within the Brighton and Hove area and generally representative of key stage 3 pupils in similarly sized urban areas in the south-east of England.

The approach to probability sampling used here involved multi-stage sampling (Denscombe, 1998). Following the initial survey, a further sample from within the original sample was targeted for more in-depth research. The sampling frame was pre-determined since the research set out to focus on a group of key stage 3 pupils. The response rate was not a matter of concern as the pupils were required to respond by their teachers during lesson time, and a 100% response was achieved. The size of the sample was not an issue in this research project since the pupils were required by their teachers to undertake a response. The sample size was dependent upon the number of pupils required to participate, in this case 1172 across years 7, 8 and 9. This is over the suggested size for a small-scale research project but not sufficiently large to be called any thing other than small-scale.

Although Denscombe (1998, 25-27) suggests that qualitative research tends to use non-probability sampling techniques, this was not the case with this research. The methods adopted allowed the

collection of quantitative and qualitative data which although cumbersome to analyse, gave a balance to the results. However, the second stage of the research, which focused on qualitative data from a small sample of key stage 3 pupils, is more in line with expectations for qualitative research.

The questionnaires

Denscombe (1998) suggests that certain research strategies tend to be associated with particular research methods; for example, surveys tending to be linked with questionnaires. However, all research methods have advantages and disadvantages, none necessarily being better or worse than another. The researcher needs to be aware of the strengths and weaknesses of the selected approach before finally deciding upon the method to be used. It is also recommended that more than one method might be adopted to corroborate or question the data produced by using different methods. In order to achieve this, having analysed the questionnaires, interviews were conducted with a selection of pupils.

The questionnaire was designed to be as simple as possible to be answered by mixed-ability pupils across key stage 3. The selection of words to convey intended meaning was difficult to achieve and not entirely successful despite best efforts. Some questions sought straightforward answers that could easily be quantified. Other questions asked pupils to give their thoughts and opinions about the subject of geography. Hence, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected.

The length of the questionnaire was kept to a double side of A4, so that pupils did not feel daunted by the prospect of completing it. Several designs were constructed before deciding upon the final version. The questionnaire was piloted in a local school outside the research area. This was a valuable exercise and the design and the wording were altered as a result of this pilot. The questionnaires were distributed to the schools and collected after half a term had elapsed.

The heads of department had made the necessary arrangements within their schools with regard to obtaining permission for the questionnaires to be completed. Although pupils were asked to write their names on the sheets and the name of the school, this was purely for purposes of identification for follow-up interviews. A covering letter addressed to the pupils was read out by class teachers so that the pupils were aware of the purpose of what they were being asked to do.

The interviews

Later in the same year a group of pupils who had said they would be willing to talk in further depth about their responses to the questionnaire, were interviewed. An interview was a logical progression from the questionnaire in that 'it lends itself to being used to follow-up a questionnaire' (Denscombe 1998, 112). However, the interviews targeted year 9 pupils so are not reported on in this chapter in

which the focus is on some of the year 7 responses to the questionnaire (but see Norman & Harrison, 2004).

Results

No analysis was planned based on the sex of the pupils. Pupil perceptions of school geography were sought from a general pupil perspective, and there were no single sex schools in the survey. However, it is worth noting that the 450 responses from year 7 pupils were split, with 215 from males and 227 from females. Eight respondents did not write their name or sex on their questionnaires.

The pupils were invited to give their views about school geography. They were asked to respond to a range of questions. Within the overall questionnaire, the questions listed in Figure 1 were used as the basis for this investigation.

1. Please underline a) b) c) or d) to show your interest in school geography:

a) very interested

b) interested

c) not very interested

d) not at all interested

Now write a few words to describe why you have underlined the words(s) you have.

3. What types of things do you like that you do in geography lessons?

4. What types of things that you do in geography do you dislike?

7. If you can remember, please write down anything you learned about geography when you were at primary school.

Figure 1: The questions used in the questionnaire for the perception of geography study

The responses to these questions were analysed to establish:

- levels of interest in the subject;
- justification for levels of interest;
- geographical likes and dislikes;
- geographical experiences gained at Key Stage 2.

The following discussion explores the relationship between the pupils' levels of interest, experiences at Key Stage 2, and their overall views about the subject. In order for some comparisons of responses to be made, the questionnaires were analysed according to pupil responses to question seven. The pupils' responses were grouped into the following categories:

Response Category One

Pupils who did not respond to question seven.

Response Category Two

Pupils who either could not remember doing any geography or who stated that the subject had not been studied at primary school.

Response Category Three

Pupils who could recall studying a range of isolated geographical experiences, normally related to a specific concept or aspect of the subject. For example, 'natural disasters', 'maps', and 'drawing charts, graphs and diagrams'.

Response Category Four

Pupils able to contextualise their experiences or link geographical concepts. For example, 'we learnt about the differences between hot and cold climates and the way people live in them', and 'we learnt about regions of Wales and London, we had to compare it to each other'.

Perceptions of Geography at Key Stage Two

Figure 2 provides an overview of pupil perceptions of geography according to response category and school. It is interesting to note that an average of 43% of all pupils either did not respond or perceived that they had not experienced geography at Key Stage 2. An average of 57% of pupils was able to recall some geographical experiences. Of these only a small proportion of pupils could place these experiences within a wider geographical context.

Pupil responses across schools are similar, apart from those in school D which has a high proportion of pupils who did not respond to question seven. These pupils were, therefore, not able to draw from their primary school experiences.

School	Pupil Perceptions [Categorized]			
	1 No Response	2 No Recollection or Experiences	3 Isolated Experiences and/or Concepts	4 Linked Experiences and/or Concepts
A	15%	17%	63%	5%
B	13%	17%	58%	12%
C	15%	26%	57%	2%
D	43%	24%	31%	2%
Average %	22%	21%	52%	5%

Figure 2: Overall Percentage of Pupils Perceptions of Geography at Key Stage Two

Levels of interest in geography at key stage 3 compared with pupil perceptions at key stage 2

Figures 3, 4, 5 and 6 compare response categories, schools and levels of interest in geography. An interesting relationship exists between these response categories and levels of pupil interest.

Those pupils who were unable to recall any geographical experiences from Key Stage 2 have the highest proportion of responses indicating disinterest in the subject. Many of these pupils reported that the subject was 'boring' or could not cite a geographical reason to justify their views. Very few pupils in this category identified geography as interesting.

Those pupils from response category two have the highest proportion of responses in the interested category. This group was able to justify their views, and some of their ideas linked the subject matter with a level of understanding about places within the wider world and the environment. Typical responses here were: 'I am interested in geography because you can learn about the world around us and different places', and 'You learn about your surroundings. It's different from any other subject. There are lots of different types of geography.'

Less sophisticated responses indicated the individual's ability to connect with specific tasks, learning experiences or their desire to learn. Typical responses included, 'I'm not amazing at geography but I'm interested so I can get better. I like it when we draw pictures', 'I like geography but I don't like drawing all the maps and things like that', and 'Because it's interesting in some ways but some of the work is either quite hard or a bit dull.'

School	Levels of Interest [No Response]			
	Very Interested	Interested	Not Very Interested	Not At All Interested
A	9%	55%	27%	9%
B	12%	47%	29%	12%
C	0%	42%	42%	16%
D	4%	38%	41%	17%

Figure 3: Levels of current (key stage 3) interest in geography (expressed in percentages) from those pupils in response category one

School	Levels of Interest [No Recollection and/or Experiences]			
	Very Interested	Interested	Not Very Interested	Not At All Interested
A	8%	23%	54%	15%
B	4%	35%	48%	13%
C	18%	39%	36%	7%
D	0%	13%	56%	31%

Figure 4: Levels of current (key stage 3) interest in geography (expressed in percentages) from those pupils in response category two

School	Levels of Interest [Isolated Experiences/Concepts]			
	Very Interested	Interested	Not Very Interested	Not At All Interested
A	2%	54%	44%	0%
B	9%	54%	30%	7%
C	10%	60%	23%	7%
D	14%	48%	33%	5%

Figure 5: Levels of current (key stage 3) interest in geography (expressed in percentages) from those pupils in response category three

School	Levels of Interest [Linked Experiences/Concepts]			
	Very Interested	Interested	Not Very Interested	Not At All Interested
A	0	1	3	0
B	1	9	5	2
C	0	2	1	0
D	0	1	0	0

Figure 6: Levels of current (key stage 3) interest in geography (expressed as raw data) from those pupils in response category four

Pupil likes and dislikes of geography at key stage 3 compared with pupil perceptions at key stage 2

Figures 7 and 8 reveal a broad picture of likes and dislikes. Significant findings here are:

- the overwhelming number of references to map-work, associated with both likes and dislikes;
- a significant dislike of writing in response categories one and two;
- references related to learning about the world/other countries and cultures appear only in response categories three and four.

School	Likes			
	1 No Response	2 No Recollection or Experiences	3 Isolated Experiences and/or Concepts	4 Linked Experiences and/or Concepts
A	Mapwork	Mapwork	Mapwork	Making maps
B	Map/Atlas work	Map/Atlas work	Learning about other countries & world events	Learning about other countries & world events; Mapwork
C	Mapwork	Mapwork	Mapwork	Mapwork
D	Mapwork	Mapwork	Learning about other cultures & countries	Learning about other cultures & countries

Figure 7: Top geography likes

School	Dislikes			
	1 No Response	2 No Recollection or Experiences	3 Isolated Experiences and/or Concepts	4 Linked Experiences and/or Concepts
A	Written work	Everything	Mapwork	Mapwork
B	Writing	Writing	Mapwork	Mapwork
C	Mapwork	Mapwork	Mapwork	Looking things up about other countries; Mapwork
D	Writing	Writing	Mapwork	Weather

Figure 8: Top geography dislikes

Significant differences in responses were noted between schools. For example, those pupils in response categories one and two from school C made comparative judgements about the same concept related to both likes and dislikes. Some pupils liked drawing maps, yet disliked six figure grid references, whilst others liked six figure grid references yet disliked scale. It is possible that their preferences could be linked to levels of challenge and that these views represented an inability to place their experiences within a wider geographical context. Indeed, the majority of responses from this school referred exclusively to map-work!

Pupils in response categories one and two from school B frequently expressed their pleasure in 'drawing maps' as opposed to their dislike of 'doing' map work. This may indicate a more interactive level of engagement here. Some references were also made to undertaking local fieldwork and learning about geographical patterns and processes. The overwhelming dislike among pupils in this school was writing. The pupils did not offer specific examples here but their views might relate to preferred learning styles or a particular kind of teaching and learning strategy.

Pupils in response categories three and four from schools B and D could identify a range of likes and dislikes with generally more references made to likes than dislikes. Typical responses here are: 'Compass points, physical geography (likes)... drawing, because I'm not talented at drawing (dislike),' 'Going outside and seeing what things are human or physical (like) ...writing (dislike)', and 'I like looking at places and things about them, also I like looking through atlases. I like finding out why things happen e.g. volcanoes, earthquakes (likes)... none (dislike).' A more sophisticated view of the nature of the subject is beginning to emerge here. Pupils seem to be drawing on previous experiences to build an increasingly complex and accurate geographical understanding.

In a few cases, pupils were beginning to make links between experiences/activities and could identify the geographical purpose for their work. For example, one pupil stated, 'I like to know about the environment, how people react to things and why they do things. I like looking up information in books and atlases.' This pupil had already begun to make links at primary school and identified the following experiences: 'where countries are and names of continents, the link between people, pollution and environment.'

Conclusions

This investigation has provided some understanding of pupils' views about geography and identifies a clear link between perceptions at Key Stage 2 and the ability to make sense of and enjoy geography at Key Stage 3. It also reveals a discernible difference between the range and nature of perceptions between schools. Those pupils in response categories three and four in schools B and D were able to identify and justify their likes and make links with prior experiences. This may reflect the breadth and variety of the curriculum provision experienced by these pupils.

There is no doubt that the quality of geographical opportunities afforded to pupils are vital at both key stage 2 and key stage 3 if they are to be given opportunities to develop a secure understanding of geography's subject matter. This will enable them to make sense of those characteristics that define and distinguish the subject as a 'vital component of the present curriculum' (Stannard, 2002, 81).

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