



Think Piece on Children and Young People's Geographies

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Recent work by geographers on children and young people

Saturday afternoon. The Bull Ring Shopping Centre, Birmingham. Two women are catching up over a glass of wine outside a café. Across from them, on a group of steps by a statue a big group of teenagers are talking about the latest band they've discovered on MySpace, using their mobile phones to update their status on Facebook and chatting about where they're going to meet that evening. A security guard comes over and tells the group to break up or move on.

This example reveals how children and young people experience places, spaces and things in different ways to adults¹. They have their own identities and, contrary to the picture often painted by the media, they are not a homogenous group². And they can be extremely knowledgeable, thoughtful, creative and reflexive when asked about their everyday and wider worlds, what influences them and how they influence others³. Facebook, Bebo and MySpace might be alien words to many over 40s, but to many young people these virtual spaces are where they network and socialise with their friends. Unless adults engage in conversations with young people how can they possibly understand young people's own geographies?

In 1990 a geographer called Sarah James asked "Is there a place for children in geography?"⁴ This question came as response to children and young people being largely ignored in the discipline of geography. They were largely seen as invisible or as 'adults in the waiting'. Research was done to them and their opinions were ignored. However, with the raise of feminist methodologies during the late 1980s and early 1990s, geographers became increasingly aware of doing research *with* and *for* children, rather than doing research *on* or *to* children. As Gill Valentine argued at the time:

We cannot assume that adult 'proxies' are able to give valid accounts of children's lives. Young people may have different values from adults or different perspectives on their experiences (1999:142).

The views of young people began to matter and geographers began to accept that young people had social agency.

¹ Sarah James highlights this further, "Even when children share the same settings as adults, such as the home or public space, parks and shopping centres, what they expect and what they are expected to do there is likely to differ, and thus we see variations in ways in which children and adults experience the same environment. For example, in parks the children use the space for play; physical and emotional exploration and development of various kinds, whilst for the adults who accompany the children the space may perform a social function, a place to meet and talk to parents and child-minders." (1990: 279)

² For example David Balderstone states that, "the plurality of youth culture is evidenced by the fact that young people do not all listen to the same music, watch the same films or enjoy the same activities." (Balderstone, D. (2006) : 20)

³ See for example A. James et al. (1998); Valentine (1999); Matthew and Limb (2000)

⁴ James, S. (1990) 'Is there a 'place' for children in geography?' *Area*, 22(3): 278-283.

Geographers such as Gill Valentine and Tracy Skelton were forerunners of this movement, and publications such as *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Culture*⁵ and *Children's Geographies: playing, living, learning*⁶ are useful starting points here. The momentum gathered pace throughout the 1990s and children's geographies became firmly on the research agenda⁷. With this came consideration of the ethical practices of doing research with young people (for example: consent; access and structures of compliance; privacy and confidentiality, methodologies and issues of power; and dissemination and advocacy⁸). The Barnados publication, *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children*, compiled by Alderson and Morrow⁹ outlines detailed guidelines to consider as well as highlighting the rights of young people to have their voices heard and experiences recognised (see also the United Nations *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, 1989).

Publication of articles on the subject in high-profile geography journals such as *Progress in Human Geography*¹⁰ and *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*¹¹ confirmed that this was an important area of geographic research. Journals sprang up - such as *Children's Geographies* in 2003 - which were dedicated to quality research in this area. There are now several groups which promote research in this area, notably, *the Geographies of Children, Youth and Families* working group of the RGS-IBG and *The Centre for Children and Youth* at the University of Northampton. Both encourage new research and have organised events such as the 'New Directions in Children's Geographies' International Conference at the University of Northampton in 2006. Current research areas include: Rural childhoods¹²; Safety, risk, protection and fear¹³; Nature, environment and sustainability¹⁴; Social inclusions and exclusions; Education: teaching, learning and schooling; Young people's school journeys¹⁵; and Geographies of youth and childhood in developing areas¹⁶.

⁵ Valentine and Skelton (1998) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Culture*. London, Routledge.

⁶ Holloway and Valentine (2000) *Children's Geographies: playing, living, learning*. London, Routledge.

⁷ See Matthews, H. and M. Limb (1999) 'Defining an agenda for the geography of children: review and prospect.' *Progress in Human Geography* 23(1): 61-90.

⁸ Valentine (1999) lists these as the five areas of 'ethical concern' when working with young people. Valentine, G. (1999) 'Being Seen and Heard?': the ethical complexities of working with children and young people at home and at school.' *Ethics, Place and Environment* 2: 141-155.

⁹ Alderson and Morrow (2004) *Ethics, Social Research and Consulting with Children*, Ilford: Barnados.

¹⁰ Matthews, H. and M. Limb (1999). 'Defining an agenda for the geography of children: review and prospect.' *Progress in Human Geography* 23(1): 61-90.

¹¹ Matthews, H. and F. Tucker (2000). 'Consulting Children.' *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 24(2): 299-310.

¹² Matthews, H., Taylor, M., Sherwood, K., Tucker, F. and Limb, M. (2000) 'Growing up in the countryside: children and the rural idyll.' *Journal of Rural Studies* 16 (2) 141-153.

¹³ Nayak, A. (2003) 'Through children's eyes': childhood, place and the fear of crime, *Geoforum*, 34: 303-315.

¹⁴ Kraftl, P., Horton, J. and Tucker, F. (forthcoming, 2008): edited special issue of *Built Environment* on 'Environments for children'

¹⁵ Ross, N. (2007) 'My Journey to School...': Foregrounding the *Meaning* of School Journeys and Children's Engagements and Interactions in their Everyday Localities, *Children's Geographies*, 5 (4): 373-391.

¹⁶ Ansell, N. (2005) *Children, youth and development*, London: Routledge.

In parallel with this a number of geographers have begun to address how young people are taught geography and what they are taught¹⁷. Young people, it is argued should be seen as part of the process and have a say in what they are taught, with teachers having as much to learn as their pupils. Here a co-creative, co-learning model of education is advocated where hegemonic power relations between teacher and student are de-stabilised¹⁸. This work is an attempt to challenge many mainstream curricula where the knowledge, interests, concerns and understanding that children have of the world too often get marginalised. Here, knowledge is seen as co-constructed and learning is seen as an outcome and not just a mean to an ends.

How this might impact on school geography

Schools have a great opportunity to engage with and build upon the work of academic geographers and to contribute to and actively participate in shaping a geography curriculum which engages with young people's geographies. Fully engaging in a co-creative, co-learning education may not be easy at first. Classrooms are likely to be lively and noisy and teachers may have to convince colleagues that despite this real learning is taking place! It may take time for young people to have the confidence in their own opinions and to make them count. There will be several challenges, not least whether traditional forms of teaching, learning and assessment are appropriate for such an approach. The OCR pilot geography GCSE is worth looking at and provides some useful examples of what an alternative approach may look like in practice. Small steps may be necessary at first, but, as much of the work within children's geographies highlights, these steps are necessary if young people are really to engage with a geography for the future.

¹⁷ Cook, I., Evans, J., Griffiths, H., Morris, B., Wrathmell, S. et al. (2007) 'It's more than just what it is': defetishising commodities, expanding fields, mobilizing change, *Geoforum*, 38 (6): 1113-1126

¹⁸ See Le Heron, R. Baker, R. and McEwen, L. (2006) Co-learning: Re-linking research and teaching in geography, *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 30 (1): 77-87; Evans, J., Cook, I. and Griffiths, H. (2008) Creativity, group pedagogy and social action: a departure from Gough, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 40 (2): 330-345.