



Think Piece on Children and Young People's Geographies

Tracey Skelton (Loughborough University)

Written with young people in mind

One of the interesting, and I suppose contradictory, things about Young People's Geographies is that there are a lot of not-so-young people involved in them! For those of us geographers who lecture and do research in Universities (otherwise known as academia) and specifically work with young people about their geographies there is a lot of exciting stuff going on. What is important is to think about how the work that we do in universities about young people can be transferred over to young people themselves who are still working and learning at school and who are studying geography. This short piece is an attempt at doing just that. This transfer of ideas, themes, concepts, data, and theory about young people's geographies is a really important part of the Young People's Geographies Project.

So what is happening in universities in relation to Young People's Geographies? There is a lot. Many students who have finished their first degree in Geography and who got really interested in young people's and/or children's geographies are doing more studying for what is called a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy) and their thesis (a sort of book of between 80,000 and 100,000 words) is focused on a particular aspect of young people's geographical lives. Lecturers and professors employed in the universities also work to get funding to do research projects with young people. Many of these researchers work with teenagers in schools but they might be interested in non-school things such as what young people do in their spare time, what spaces and places they use and avoid, how they interact with other people who use public space (parks, streets, car parks, shopping centres). In fact lots of university level studies are about young people's uses of space and place, their spatialities, micro-geographies and social interactions. To produce this knowledge, young people have to be involved in the project, in fact young people *make* the project – so the geographies that young people experience are essential to many university level studies.

Another important area of research is based outside of the UK in parts of the world where growing up might be similar to that of Britain, such as in parts of Europe, some parts of North America, Australia and New Zealand, or in parts of the world which are very different because of the particular problems facing young people. Of course there are problems facing many young people in the so-called 'richer' parts of the globe, but in countries that we can group together as the 'Global South' there are often very extreme problems. This would include work done in parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Here a lot of work is with young people who often bear the brunt of poverty, poor quality education, limited training opportunities for employment, poor quality housing and facilities, severe health problems and so on. These young people are often struggling because of development projects and processes of globalisation that makes their lives worse than those that their parents' experienced at the same age. This work is linked to

'development geography' or, as I would call it, Geographies of the Global South, and while it shows the particular problems young people face, it also shows just how inventive, resilient and resourceful teenagers can be. Part of this work aims to inform Governments and Non-Governmental Organisations (such as Oxfam, Save the Children) about how important it is to take young people's lives and their geographies into account in their policies, planning and practice. Hence many academics working with young people are hoping to support them in changing the way the world works and particularly how it treats young people.

Another important area of work in universities that connects with young people's geographies is a focus on the methods and ethics of doing research. Working with young people demands a great deal of care. No teenagers should ever be forced to participate in research and if they do get involved they have the right to withdraw at any time. Also there is much more emphasis on trying to do research that has a benefit for young people; getting them involved in working out how the research can be done – this is a form of participatory research. This kind of research recognises that the people who know most about young people are young people themselves – so it is about working *with* them rather than *on* or *about* them. The other feature of work on research methods is trying to recognise that young people are social agents and are competent to make choices about what they do with their time and their knowledge. However, this has to be balanced with the law that requires parents give their consent for young people under 16 to be involved in research. In some cases this is hard to do especially for young people who have left home because of problems or who don't want their parents to know about the research project, if it is a project on sexuality for example. So geographers are currently trying to grapple with the contradictions of working with young people on topics that are meaningful to them – but also trying to do the right thing in connection with their families. Certainly this can make doing a research project on sensitive issues very *interesting!*

So how does this relate to school geography? Well as you are young people then you are making and doing geography all the time. So it might be useful to read about other young people's geographies in the UK to identify differences and similarities – are supermarket car parks used for the same thing at night all over the country, for example? Learning about young people's lives in other parts of the world can be an important lesson for us all. It might help us appreciate some of the good things that we have (and sometimes take for granted, abuse or waste) such as clean water, warm clothes, schools, parents who can look after us rather than the other way around (many young people in Africa are carers for their whole families because of the high death rates from HIV/AIDs), paper and books. It might also make you want to do something to try and change the inequalities in the world and so school projects and awareness- and fund-raising may be started by students of geography.

As geographers we have a great chance to turn what we *know* about the world into action for *changing* the world – and young people's geographies (as research and as lived experience) can help us achieve that.