

The Young People's Geographies Project



Context and rationale

The Young People's Geographies project is a curriculum development and research project exploring questions of educational/curriculum change. The project starts from the assumption that sustainable change in schools happens through the principled thinking and practices of teachers rather than through the imposition of external models, and when students take more responsibility for the development of the curriculum and the processes and outcomes of their geographical learning. The project aims are set within broader social, economic and cultural contexts, as well as theoretical and education policy contexts.

The geographies of children, youth and families (an RGS-IBG working group¹) now constitute a distinct research, teaching and practice agenda within the discipline of geography. This development emerged from the realisation that until recently geography had largely ignored the social, spatial and environmental aspects of the lives, needs and desires of young people who form a significant section of society, who are active social agents in their own right and who may experience the world in very different ways.

This work, for example, has considered the way in which childhood and youth are historically and spatially specific social constructions; how childhood and youth are understood and experienced in different places and spaces: 'public spaces', 'institutional spaces', 'the home', 'the body', 'the rural', 'the city street'; how these everyday spaces and places control and regulate young people, as well as the social agency of young people.

These are neglected geographies in the school curriculum, along with other more recent developments in the academic discipline. In this sense, we believe that school geography is in danger of becoming epistemologically and socially irrelevant (Fien, 1999). The project is providing the opportunity for school students and their geography teachers to work alongside academic geographers and teacher educators to respond to the question: what can and should be the contribution of young people's geographies to the school curriculum?

The project starts from the view that students bring to school valid and important knowledge based on their interests and needs, and that bringing together students' own 'lived geographies' and developments taking place in the academic discipline, provides students with opportunities for agency in terms of curriculum development and a deeper engagement in learning. For teachers, the Young People's Geographies project offers the opportunity for professional

¹ Information about the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers Working Group can be found at: <http://www.gcyf.org.uk/events.html>

development through curriculum conversations with other project members and the possibility of an extended view of their professional work as they find ways to respond thoughtfully and practically to student's lives, developments in the academic discipline and school geography.

Young People's Geographies is being developed at a time when the centralised and prescriptive nature of the school curriculum is being lessened, but where the quality of geography in schools continues to be questioned (OfSTED, 2008), and where there is heightened debate about the organisation and structure of the school curriculum (White, 2003), the nature of knowledge and its acquisition in schools (Firth, 2007; Hugo, 2005; Moore, 2000; Morgan & Lambert, 2005; Muller, 2000; White, 2003; Young, 2003; Young, 2005, 2008) and the 'voice' of young people in educational settings (Fielding, 2007a&b, 2004; Fielding & Ruddock, 2002; Flutter & Ruddock, 2004). The literature raises questions of critical interest for theoretical debate as well as for education policy and practice.

Key ideas

- Centralised and prescriptive nature of the school curriculum is being lessened
- Since late 1980s school geography has had little real connection with the academic discipline
- School geography is in danger of becoming socially and epistemologically irrelevant (Fien, 1999)
- Curriculum development is a new responsibility, opportunity and challenge for teachers
- Students have little real say in what they learn or how they learn
- Students are people who matter in schools. Whose school is it?
- Students/young people have rights and responsibilities now enshrined in international law
- If students are not allowed to change what they do, then we will never effectively transform curricula and learning
- At the same time we are problematising the whole idea of the authenticity of student perspectives about learning and the school community.

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