

## Connecting with children's geographies in education

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*"Don't wait for extraordinary opportunities. Seize common occasions and make them great" (Orison Swett Marden, 1917, p.5)*

The premise for this article is a reworking of these sentiments from Marden, one of the leading proponents of 19<sup>th</sup> Century New Thought Philosophy. The extraordinary circumstances surrounding the coronavirus crisis present an opportunity for school geography to reconsider the relationships between a child's everyday life and their education. In this article, we examine the value of supporting children to engage with their everyday neighbourhood geographies through disciplinary thought.

To the trained eye, the coronavirus crisis has confirmed the necessity of geographical analysis. For example, there has been much concern with the *diffusion* of the virus, with *geographical variation* in incidence and mortality, with the *environmental impact* on our cities due to our changing patterns of behaviour, and on the micro-geographies of maintaining 2m (or 1m) of *personal space* in public. The public response to the pandemic has also impacted on children's everyday lives in ways which challenge thinking that prevailed beforehand. Most significantly, the majority of children temporarily lost access to schools, community centres, streets, playgrounds and other social spaces that were central to their everyday lives and identities.

For some time, contrasting concerns have been raised about children's presence in public spaces. On one hand, there are those who lament children's withdrawal from public space, citing concerns for public health given children's increasingly sedentary and home-based leisure, and observing an impoverishment of community life that comes with the absence of children's presence. On the other hand, there are those who express concerns at the

behaviour of groups of children who occupy public space, sometimes looking to enforce their withdrawal and curtail their presence. During the coronavirus times, these concerns have been transformed. Concern over children's over-use of screen-based technology in their leisure time have dissipated, as home learning through technology is promoted, and the driver for restricting children in public has been to protect children, rather than protect others from children. These everyday geographies have relevance that extend beyond concerns for children's wellbeing.

School geography can contribute to helping children and young people understand and recover from this crisis. Critical examination of the crisis' core geographical issues can support children in better understanding the world in which they live and contribute to. The pandemic also offers an opportunity to consider the value of everyday geographical citizenship to school geography - through considering children's relationships to places and spaces – and how these relationships have changed through the coronavirus crisis. Drawing on the work of Anderson et al. (2008), we acknowledge that citizenship is a complex and contested idea which extends beyond political constructions and identities related to the nation state. Citizenship is 'constructed, embodied, experienced, performed and understood' (p35) in different spaces and places, and at different scales (Ibid.). In this article, we focus on children's experiences of, and right to, public space - specifically in urban areas – considering how school geography can be used as an exploratory and explanatory tool to enable children to critically engage with their everyday geographies.

## The power of schools

Children shape, and are shaped by, the spaces and places they inhabit. Exploring children's rich and varied geographies, and enabling children to share their experiences of, and perspectives on, the world has been a significant area of research in geography since the 1970s (McKendrick, 2000, 2003). This potential of children's geographies for schools is acknowledged, although not necessarily embraced and utilized, as we have explored in a recent paper in *Geography* (Hammond and McKendrick, 2020).

Outside lockdown and during term-time, school is an institution in which children spend a significant proportion of their time (Aitken, 1994). In considering how education and its' institutions and discourses, shape children's lives and geographies, it is significant to note that schools are not neutral spaces and education is a political activity, which exists as part of, and inducts children into, values systems (Catling, 2014). Educational systems can, and do, (re)produce social and economic inequality and divisions - for example, through parallel or selective systems that confer advantage on some groups (Dorling and Tomlinson, 2019); through centrally controlled syllabi that promote narrow agendas; and through teachers daily decision-making as to 'whose geography?' (Massey, 2008) is represented and explored, and how and why in the classroom.

For some children attending school can be a liberating and empowering experience, whereas for others it can be oppressive and represent a place where they are pushed to conform and comply (Aitken, 1994). As Catling (2014: 352) states:

'We can recognize in society and schooling a dominant yet implicit approach which *subordinates* children... schooling is to be their salvation – done *to* them, perhaps *for* them – where they are expected to compliant, complicit and comforted by it.'

Whilst recognizing the policy context in England, in which the government often focuses on knowledge to be learnt, Catling raises a challenge for his readers - to bring children back-in '*as co-learner participants working with, not working to, their teachers*' (2014: 351).

Thus, school geography should recognize children as 'not simply beings or becomings... (but) more significantly doings (who) have the potential to become and do something different, something yet unimaginable' (Aitken, 2018: 11). If children are to be truly recognized not only as beings (who are aware and self-conscious in the world), but also doings (agents of change, forces for the common good and social actors able to contribute to debates), then their perspectives and experiences should be valued in the classroom. Geography has a critical role in realizing this potential. We now move on to look with a wide-lens view at how

these ideas – which have children’s rights at the heart – have been researched in the academy and considered in policy.

## Progressing children’s rights through participatory practice

Table 1 suggests ten freely and readily available resources that can be used in schools to explore children’s school and neighbourhood geographies. Although this list is drawn from Scotland, its relevance is not limited to it, and equivalent resources are generally available for others parts of the UK and beyond. Specific resources are highlighted, all of which share what concerns children in everyday spaces on everyday issues. Some of these resources will likely be familiar to teachers (e.g. Rights Respecting Schools), others perhaps not. The impetus for developing many of these resources is a commitment to uphold the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and, in particular Article 31, which asserts children’s right to express their opinion on matters that concern them.

These resources can be used alone, or as a means to encourage discussion of local experiences. Of particular value to considering how, and why, it is important for children to share their geographies in the classroom, is the ‘evidence bank’ generated by Children in Scotland, a national children’s organization with the mission of enabling all children to flourish. In 2019, Children in Scotland launched this open access resource aiming ‘to capture the voices of children and young people on a diverse range of subjects. One strand of their research, which is of particular interest to this article, is entitled *‘Your space or mine? The role of public space in the lives of young people’*, which we draw upon in the case studies in the penultimate section of this article. Beforehand, we further examine how, and why, public space is an important area of consideration in geography.

**(insert Table 1 about here)**

## Children and public space

Public spaces are spaces that are open to all – they include connecting spaces through which people travel e.g. pavements and streets, as well as places such as parks or town squares which people visit to exercise, play and/or socialise. When critically considering the nature of public spaces and how they are experienced, it is helpful to first consider social space as a social product (Lefebvre, 1991). Put another way, a public space is not merely a point on the Earth's surface that a person might visit, but also a social space that is produced, sustained and evolves.

If we consider Lefebvre's argument on social space in relation to public spaces, then it is of critical importance to recognise that public spaces *"have always been a matter of state power and public administration"* (Harvey, 2013: 72). In making this point, Harvey asserts that just by having public spaces within a society *"does not necessarily a commons make"*. In considering the right to the city, Harvey uses the idea of commons to reflect social and spatial practices that are open to, and created by, all – these commons often give places their unique character. However, whilst public spaces such as the street are in theory open to all, in practice they are often subject to (explicit and implicit) social rules and expectations, regulation and policing, and they are sometimes privately managed (Ibid.) – they are political and contested spaces.

Young people have sometimes been represented negatively in their use of public spaces and even portrayed as 'apart from the urban realm' (Bourke, 2017: 93). The value of exploring children's experiences of public space in school geography lies in enabling them to use geographical thought to situate and explore their own geographies, and supporting children to critically consider the type of spaces and places (including in schools, neighbourhoods and beyond) that they would like, and enabling them to make informed contributions to debates and shaping the worlds they live within both today and in the future. We now move on to suggest three activities that can be used by teachers in this regard. Each of these activities can be used as independently (for example, within a sequence of lessons on urban geographies or changing places), or could be sequenced as part of a larger examination of children geographies, perhaps drawing on some of the other resources that were

introduced in Table 1. These activities can be readily adapted for children of different ages – for example, through changing the wording of the suggested geographical questions.

## Challenging geographies for children: Three activities for school children

### Activity one: Control over children's use of space

Bringing children in through pedagogy (Catling, 2014), can enable them to share their experiences and imaginations of urban and public spaces. Roberts' (2013) examination of how geographical knowledge is constructed through questions geographers ask when shaping their research is helpful here. Drawing on Neighbour (1992) Roberts explains the importance of exploring 'the nature of geographical knowledge and how the scope of the subject is changed by the questions asked' (pp17), arguing that considering this with children, can support them in understanding both that knowledge is not neutral, and enhancing their understanding of the procedures through which knowledge is produced.

Asking geographical questions about public space, can enable children to explore how space is produced and the power relations that exist within it. Using the example of two neighbourhood playgrounds from central Scotland (Figure 1) we show how teachers could draw on the work of Roberts (2013) to encourage a critical discussion about the ways in which, extent to which, and validity of, adults controlling children and young people's use of neighbourhood space. These images show how behaviour is formally controlled (through direct instruction and physical barriers in Figure 1a) and informally controlled (through not maintaining the space in Figure 1b). Although we suggest the use of a photograph, this technique might also be considered in relation to an immersive experience in fieldwork, or by engaging in participatory approaches with children (e.g. by encouraging them to map or photograph spaces and places in their local area they feel included). This type of participatory approach is often used in children's geographies to enable children to share their perspectives.

**Insert figure1 about here with questions below**

**Geographical questions that might be asked include:**

- How is the place represented in this image?
- Might the place change at different times of the day (e.g. at night or school pick up time)? What impacts might time have on how this place is used and by whom?
- How, and why, might different people use or view this place differently? Try to give three examples – you might consider social categories such as age, gender, class, ethnicity and (dis)ability in your response
- Might some people feel more included or excluded here? If so, how and why?
- Would you use this place? If so, how?
- What rules do you think exist in this place? Who makes these rules and why?
- Would these rules impact on how you use this space? Explain your perspective
- Would you change this place? If so, how and why?
- How and why might lockdown have affected how different people access and use this place? What impacts might changes in access have had on different people?
- Considering the example of public space, how do the concepts of place and space help us to better understand people's lives and geographies? Is this important – if so, why and to whom?

### **Activity two: What children value in their neighbourhood**

The Place Standard (Table 1 and Figure 1) is a tool that can allow classroom exploration of (i) what children want from their neighbourhood; and (ii) how well their neighbourhood delivers what they want. Encouraging young people to rank their neighbourhood (or school, town, city, etc.) across fourteen domains, each on a seven-point scale generates a visual summary of children's perspectives. This exercise could be time-bound to focus on their neighbourhood experiences during the coronavirus crisis. Comparative geography can be facilitated either by asking children to rate neighbourhoods from other parts of the world (using film and/or imagery), or by finding ways to have their own neighbourhood rated by

other groups (carers/parents, for example), or by comparing pre, during, and post coronavirus crisis.

**Insert figure 2 about here**

**Geographical questions that might be asked include:**

- What is a neighbourhood?
- Are neighbourhood's important? If so, how and why, and to whom?
- Can you describe your neighbourhood and how you feel about it?
- What public spaces exist in your neighbourhood? How are they used and by whom?
- Are there any inequalities in your neighbourhood? If so, why do you think they exist and how do they impact on different people?
- What do you like best about your neighbourhood and why?
- What, if anything, would you like to change about your neighbourhood, and why?
- In what ways can you contribute to change in your neighbourhood? Are there any challenges to making changes – if so, how might these be overcome?

**Activity three: Experiencing public space**

Finally, Children in Scotland's evidence bank can be used as a case study to consider young people's experiences and imaginations of public space in Scotland. For example, their research shows how young people felt they were expected to behave in the 'correct' way in public spaces; that young people perceived they were seen as a homogenous group and were portrayed as a problem; but also that public space was a site of positive interactions (including between adults and children) and socialising. The young people's perspectives could be used to stimulate discussions as to if, and how, the experiences of the young people in the research relate to those of the children in the classroom.



**Geographical questions that might be asked include:**

- How and why do young people's experiences of public space matter, and to whom?
- Is it of value to examine how different people use, and experience, public space in geography? Explain your perspective.
- What did the research find out about young people's experiences of, and perceptions on, public spaces in Scotland?
- What do you think are the reasons for the young people's experiences of public space?
- Are your experiences of public space similar / different to those in the study? Explain your response.
- How and why has young people's use of public space changed during coronavirus? What impacts have these changes had on young people and other sectors of society?

## Conclusion

Harvey (2017: 4) argues that the right to the city is both individual and collective, and is not only about accessing it's spaces and resources - it is also *"a right to change and reinvent the city more after our hearts desires"*. For Harvey, the right to *"make and remake ourselves and our cities... one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights"*. In light of this, we argue that if we are to truly recognise and empower children not simply as beings and becomings, but also as doings (Aitken, 2018), then it is of critical importance that this is considered in school geography. Through using the example of public space and considering the context of the coronavirus crisis, we have argued that if children are respected as social actors in schools and classrooms, with their voices and geographies valued and explored, then geography teachers can not only support children in better understanding their own geographies and the geographies of others, but in thinking about the future and how they want to live their lives and the places and spaces they (co)create.

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Table 1: Geographical Resources from Scotland to Promote a Everyday Geographical Citizenship

Organisation Authoring Resource	Description of Resource	Access
Rights Respecting Schools	<b>Rights Respecting Classroom.</b> Among the RRS resources is a poster outlining the features of a rights respecting classroom.	<a href="https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/06/Rights-Respecting-Classroom-Features.pdf">https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/06/Rights-Respecting-Classroom-Features.pdf</a>
Children in Scotland	<b>The evidence bank</b> is a collection of direct quotes from children in Scotland on eleven themes, including ‘places and spaces’ and ‘education and learning’	<a href="https://evidencebank.org.uk/evidence/">https://evidencebank.org.uk/evidence/</a>
CPAG Scotland	<b>Cost of the School Day project.</b> A series of short films from young people in school around Scotland, explaining ways in which their school is tackling the hidden costs of schooling.	<a href="https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/resources">https://cpag.org.uk/scotland/CoSD/resources</a>
Children and Young People’s Commissioner	<b>Children’s right to play, culture and the Arts.</b> A report, published in 2014, written for children and young people.	<a href="https://cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Right-to-Play.pdf">https://cypcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Right-to-Play.pdf</a>
Scottish Youth Parliament	<b>Transport in Scotland.</b> The SYP report from a discussion in 2019 to discuss the future of the transport system in Scotland.	<a href="https://syp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SYP-Discussion-Day-on-NTS2.pdf">https://syp.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/SYP-Discussion-Day-on-NTS2.pdf</a>
Children’s Parliament (Scotland)	<b>Coronavirus Crisis Experiences.</b> A report on how almost 4000 children in Scotland are managing the coronavirus crisis.	<a href="https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/How_are_you_doing_Results_April_May_2020_Childrens_Parliament-Updated.pdf">https://www.childrensparliament.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/How_are_you_doing_Results_April_May_2020_Childrens_Parliament-Updated.pdf</a>

Children's Neighbourhood Scotland	<b>Children's Neighbourhood Scotland Walkabouts.</b> This describes and provides resources for neighbourhood walkabouts, through which children share their experiences of using their neighbourhood.	<a href="https://childrensneighbourhoods.scot/2019/06/14/walkabouts/">https://childrensneighbourhoods.scot/2019/06/14/walkabouts/</a>
Play Scotland	<b>The Good School Grounds Guide.</b> A Learning Through Landscapes report on good practice in designing and using school grounds.	<a href="https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/the-good-school-playground-guide-1.pdf">https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/the-good-school-playground-guide-1.pdf</a>
Having A Say At School Project	<b>Characteristics of Pupil Councils.</b> One of five briefings from a research project (2010), which reviewed the work of pupil councils in Scotland.	<a href="https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/31081018/HASAS_Research_Briefing_2_April_2010.pdf">https://www.research.ed.ac.uk/portal/files/31081018/HASAS_Research_Briefing_2_April_2010.pdf</a>
Scottish Government	<b>The Place Standard.</b> This is a tool is a simple tool to structure conversations about places. <b>Play Scotland</b> also has a version of the tool that facilitates a conversation about play-in-place.	<a href="https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/The-place-standard.pdf?plsctml_id=18570/">https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/The-place-standard.pdf?plsctml_id=18570/</a> <a href="https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/The-place-standard">https://www.playscotland.org/resources/print/The-place-standard</a>

**Figure 1: Formal and Informal Discouragement of neighbourhood play in Scotland**

**1a: Plains Primary School, North Lanarkshire.** Access to the all weather sports pitch is restricted out of school hours with the grounds being 'protected' by two high fences, one which prevents access to the school grounds, and one which prevents access to the sports pitch within the school grounds.

**1b Plains Community Pitches and Playground, North Lanarkshire.** During the coronavirus crisis, the playground and open access pitches were not maintained, allowing the grass to grow to discourage the community from using these community resources.



Figure 2: The Place Standard Tool

