

NAMING OUR PLACES

ANNE DOLAN

In this article, Anne uses an Irish perspective to explore the relationship between place names and identity, and how this is dealt with within the Irish Curriculum (these strategies can be adapted to the geography curriculum in England).

Introduction

Until 2015, Ireland was the only EU country that did not have a postal code system. This year the Government of Ireland implemented a system called 'Eircode' (see web panel). However, critics claim that the Irish versions of many addresses are not linked to their new Eircode. Furthermore, while the introduction of Eircode offers pupils a range of geography learning opportunities it raises questions about the importance and value of place names. In Ireland, the significance of landscape is recorded in Irish place names, many of which refer to physical or natural features. Examples of toponyms include 'carraig' (rock), 'doire' (oak wood), loch (lake), and inis (island). An objective system to classify places, such as Eircode, can divorce names from their rich cultural, geographical and

historical heritage. As the threat of cultural erosion is significant, this article looks at Irish place names in the context of place-based education and identity development, and includes examples of children's work.

Place names

In Ireland, as in many places, pupils develop a sense of place within the context of their Irish culture, traditions and language. A place name may denote an area as small as a field, or as large as a town or city, in their locality, and form part of their identity and cultural heritage experienced. Place names are recorded bilingually on Irish road signs, with the Irish language version often in italics followed by the English version in Roman font (Figure 1). Several rugged physical features of the landscape are recorded in the Irish version of place names (see Figure 2).

Many modern place names in Ireland are anglicised versions of how the original Irish (or Gaelic) names were originally pronounced. In some cases, the official English (or anglicised) name is completely different from the official Irish language name. For example, off the West Coast of Ireland, the Aran Islands: Inis Oírr, Inis Meáin and Árainn are more commonly known by their anglicised versions (Inisheer, Inishmaan

and Inishmore). Tim Robinson recorded the original Irish versions of place names of Connemara and the Aran Islands, in research that began as a mapping exercise and has continued as a series of books (see Robinson, 1990; 2001; 2007; 2009).

Since the enactment of the Official Languages Act 2003 and the introduction of Irish as an official and working language of the European Union in January 2007, demand for official Irish forms of place names has increased. The Place names Database of Ireland (see Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann in web panel) provides the official Irish language names of almost 100,000 towns, streets and post offices throughout the country.

Sense of place

A study of place names can contribute to pupils' developing sense of place. In an increasingly globalised world, a sense of place is fundamental for their identity and understanding about themselves and others. As young people mature in, and interact with, an area, they develop their own unique sense of place and identity. This can occur both consciously (through walks, adventures, explorations, conversations, observations) and unconsciously (through a variety of sensual experiences). Through place-based educational initiatives geography can support this process of identity development.

While commentators, such as Robinson (2009) and MacFarlane (2015), have noted the loss of place names, new ones are constantly being created. This reflects the dynamic nature of place, language, landscape and geography. For example, during the building boom several new housing estates were developed in the west of Ireland. Many of these estates have Irish names that maintain a connection with the landscape. For example, the word 'Ros' has two meanings: (i) a wooded area and (ii) a promontory. The name of a housing estate 'Roscaoin', thus means both the pleasant wooded area and the pleasant headland. It is situated on a small headland and this 'geographical' name also refers to its previous existence as a small woodland.

Place names in the primary curriculum

Links between pupils developing a sense of place and their self-identity are clearly acknowledged in the Irish primary geography curriculum (NCCA/



Figure 1: Place names are recorded bilingually on Irish road signs.
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Irish term	Meaning	Examples of place names in Ireland
Cnoc	hill	Knock, Knockroe, Knocktopher
Lios	ring fort	Lismore, Listowel
Loch	lake	Lough, Loughbeg, Loughrea
Mám	mountain pass	Maum, Maumtrasna, Maumturk
Ráth	circular fort, earth mound	Raheen, Raheny, Rathkeale, Rathmore
Sliabh	mountain	Slemish, Slievenamon, Slievenamuck, Slieveroe
Trá	strand	Tralee, Tramore

Figure 2: Landscape features in Irish place names.

DES, 1999a), and fostering local, national and European identity is an important focus of this curriculum. It occurs through pupils learning to appreciate the unique features of their own and other places. The curriculum describes how 'the child's sense of place is first developed in the home and locality and is then extended as he/she explores a balanced range of human and natural environments in local, national and international contexts' (NCCA/DES, 1999b). Figure 3 indicates how the study of place names features prominently in the Irish primary geography curriculum.

While this detail is not present in the English National Curriculum, teachers in England could design learning in relation to these themes in a contextually-relevant manner – see ideas from Stephen Scoffham (pages 6-7 of this issue).

Children as curators of place names

Irish place names in the Irish language (Gaeilge) are an integral part of the cultural heritage of Ireland. However, much of the

history, geography, folklore and genealogy are becoming lost in translation. According to Robinson, 'Irish place names dry out when Anglicized, like twigs snapped off from a tree. And frequently the places too are degraded, left open to exploitation, for lack of a comprehensible name to point out their natures or recall their histories' (Robinson, 2007).

As curators of place names pupils can make a valuable contribution to local studies in their area. This can be done by the collection, preservation and documentation of the traditions and folklore of their local area through a collection of place names. In rural Ireland, many fields have unique names and often stories attached to them, both of which are in danger of being lost. By recording the field names and their stories, pupils can revitalise their local heritage.

Pupils in Gaelscoil de hÍde (an Irish language primary school in Oranmore, County Galway) are currently undertaking a study of place names using online and print images and descriptions. The pupils

were given the role of curators of local place names and went out with cameras to video record images of their immediate environment. These included 'favourite' places, records of place names and any stories behind local place names. Follow-on activities included:

- creating a class map of your local area to include the place names of all pupils' home areas
- collecting interesting stories based on these names
- selecting two or three local areas and asking the children to generate alternative place names – each with a clear rationale
- using images to establish the link between local places and their names
- inviting local historians to share place name stories.

Conclusion

The study of place names can make a valuable contribution to place-based education and local geography. Through enquiry-based learning pupils can research local place names, interview local people and take photos of related physical features. This approach casts pupils in the role of knowledge makers and they will become experts as they bring the story of their place names to the school.

References

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- NCCA/DES (1999a) *Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.
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Natural Environment		Human Environment	
Local natural environment	County regional and national centres	Natural environmental features and people	Settlement: homes and other buildings
The child should be enabled to... investigate and learn about the main natural features in the locality and county aspects such as names and their origins	The child should be enabled to... become aware of the location of the counties of Ireland, some of their towns and cities; the origins and geographical significance of their place names	The child will... become aware of the natural features in the locality and in a contrasting part of Ireland and their relationship to the lives of people living in these places Prominent natural features (e.g. river, hill, sea) flora and fauna interrelationships of natural features and the lives of people place-names and their origins in natural features	origins of the settlement place names

Figure 3: Place names in the Irish primary geography curriculum. Source: NCCA/DES, 1999b.

WEB RESOURCES

Bunachar Logainmneacha na hÉireann:
www.logainm.ie
Eircode: www.eircode.ie

Dr Anne Dolan is a lecturer in primary geography in Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick, Ireland (email: anne.dolan@mic.ul.ie).