

Editorial

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Empowering geography

Introduction

Welcome to 'Empowering Geography'; an issue of *Primary Geography* that we have felt empowered to co-produce and one that has given us the chance as an editorial team to take a moment, reflect and (re) affirm what really matters in *Primary Geography*. As this goes to press we have just witnessed democracy in action with the election of Joe Biden as the 46th President of the United States and Kamala Harris, the first female vice-president, reminding us all that: 'We, the people, have the power to build a better future'.

We find ourselves in critical times. We continue to live within a time of crises but also opportunity: climate, biodiversity, economic, environmental, social justice and a pandemic, all of which are entangled, interlinked and complex. Children are growing up in a world that may not seem full of awe and wonder, but rather inexplicably full of danger and uncertainties. As educators we bear a responsibility to temper pupils' fears by challenging misconceptions and providing access to factual knowledge and alternative points of view; to banish apathy by enabling access to tools of enquiry and critical thinking; to counter despair with hope by teaching through the possibilities of many stories and narratives rather than through a single story; and to empower through opportunities for genuine participation and agency.

Geography has power

Geography is the subject that can help pupils and adults think about and make better sense of complex issues. These are times that require us all to seek and know key facts about the world, consider what and whose knowledge matters, develop empathic viewpoints and think critically, as well as holistically, across a range of scales. In needing to connect local and global issues and events, we need, in short, to think like geographers.

Our teaching and learning of geography needs to be broad, expansive, messy and innovative, while also having a clear curriculum vision, purposeful and effective teaching, and sound strategies for assessing impact. If that were not challenging enough, we also need, more than ever, to nurture hope and fan the flames of purpose among our pupils by giving them the tools and knowledge they need to make decisions and take action. Empowerment in this context seems a most desirable ambition.



Guest Editors, Paula, Sharon and Tessa, with Chair of the PG Editorial Board, Steve Rawlinson.

Empowering geography

Empower is a word most often used to describe the act of giving someone confidence or control. The term empower has been carefully chosen as it suggests notions of freedom, positivity, and strength, all desirable qualities, but we acknowledge and argue that the term 'empowerment' comes with a warning. Confidence to act without knowledge or awareness of others' values and ways of knowing is hollow and lacks authenticity. What are the implications for empowering geography then?

Around the country, pupils have been campaigning for climate change action, taking their own action for changes they believe are needed. We hope that we can give pupils the safe spaces they need to feel that they can enact agency, in everyday seemingly small matters as well as those concerning the bigger and more pressing issues of the day. However, we also argue that to have authenticity, agency needs to be underpinned with core knowledge and empathic understanding. In the case of pupils campaigning to raise awareness of the climate crisis for example, we would hope that they have been empowered by being able to appropriately use climate and weather vocabulary, explain the difference between weather and climate, and reasons why climate might change over time, and also be aware of how the climate crisis is caused by and impacting on, human activities around the world.

Agency without relevant knowledge and understanding is not empowering, it is just hope-inspired action fuelled by shallow conviction. Conversely, factual,

encyclopaedic geographical knowledge on its own lacks the necessary empathic understanding pupils need to engage in meaningful problem solving where they need to better understand the importance of differing perspectives. Empowering geography needs it all: factual knowledge, empathic knowledge, critical thinking, and agency (Figure 1).

Primary geography matters

For more than 20 years, the Charney Primary Conference has been a place where evidence-led teaching and learning has provided powerful discussions and CPD for primary geography, empowering primary educators through its recognition that we teach pupils in uniquely different settings and contexts from secondary schools (Figure 2). We cannot water down secondary requirements and approaches to make them fit the primary context – we need distinct pedagogical approaches and geography subject knowledge that build on the foundations of the Early Years in a bottom up approach as opposed to a top down model.

- Naturally curious
- Spatially aware
- Deeply concerned
- Globally connected
- Critically engaged

Figure 1: What are we empowering our young geographers to be?

'As a group of over 30 primary teachers and educators with extensive experience in both formal and informal settings, from the UK and abroad, we re-affirm the essential contribution that geography makes to pupils' education. Not only does geography develop pupils' sense of belonging and place knowledge, it makes a unique contribution to their understanding of the world and how it is changing. At a time of growing planetary crisis, we believe a deep understanding of the reciprocal relationship between people and their environment is ever more important for primary age pupils and that geographical concepts and spatial awareness provide a unique and essential perspective on current realities. More specifically:

- we believe that geography contributes to children's health and well-being as well as their cognitive and social development
- we value and seek more effectively to include the contributions that children bring and make to their geographical education
- we recognise that the geography curriculum has changed remarkably little over the last century and that there is now a need for new thinking and different strategies
- we see an on-going need to decolonise global learning and international understanding
- we reaffirm the importance of signature pedagogies, such as fieldwork, mapwork and enquiry, that have stood the test of time and are the hallmark of effective, high-quality geography
- we believe there is significant potential for new approaches in geography that embrace notions such as divergence, disruption, enchantment, hope, imagination, creativity, criticality, humility and confident uncertainty
- we appreciate the significance and importance of progression and assessment in the primary geography curriculum that will benefit from continuing reflection and deeper, sharper definition and shaping.'

Figure 2: Comment from the Charney Manor Primary Geography Conference February 2020.

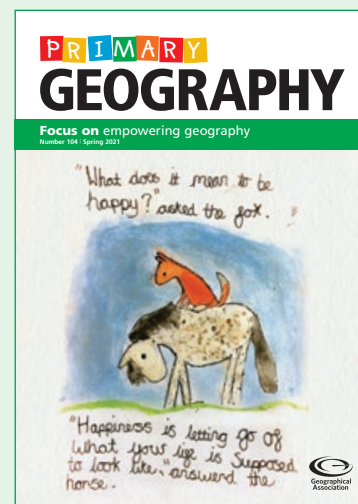
Using the front cover in the classroom

The cover of this issue takes inspiration from the book *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* by Charlie Mackesy, (see page 7). This magical inspiring book has themes of empathy, compassion and thinking deeply about how we live in and with the world, and how we treat others. The artwork here and in the linked PowerPoint (see web panel) was produced by Oak Class at Redfield Edge Primary School, Bristol, as part of their Recovery Curriculum. They were challenged to create a new page for the book including their own inspirational quote or message.

The book offers a way of opening conversations with pupils to consider what really matters in the world. Geography is about taking a different view and Charlie Mackesy has created a world where acceptance, peace and kindness are key. Try exploring the following questions with your pupils:

- What kind of world would they want to live in?
- What are the values that might be important in their new world?
- What would matter in their world? What are the issues they would like to address?
- Can they suggest actions to move towards this new world?

Download further ideas for geographical inspiration (see web panel).



Empowering teachers and learners

The coming together of a community of practice is an empowering act, and the primary geography community has historically been especially empowering as we have long shared our expertise and wisdom – not least through the pages of this journal. In this issue for example, Stephen Scoffham discusses the importance of hopeful geographies and the need to put hope at the forefront of our geography at a time of crisis, reminding us of the affective dimension. The article from Julia Tanner seeks to enable teachers to address the fieldwork requirements of the National Curriculum by empowering them with a practical progression document, highlighting that careful planning and teachers' subject knowledge matter. Our interview shares the stories of two sisters, Amy and Ella Meek, who are taking action against plastic pollution, illustrating the power of informed agency. All of the content in this issue underpins our belief in the unique capacity of geography to inspire and empower us.

Uncertainty in times of crisis can create worry and anxiety, but it can also reveal new possibilities, offering opportunities to think, do and be differently. As teachers, we may need to follow a set curriculum, but we can populate it with precise content of our choosing and teach it according to the context and needs of our pupils.

We feel it is important to celebrate and share the power that we have as a primary geography community to inspire, support and guide each other. We hope you will find these strengths apparent within the pages of this issue.

Web Resources

View this issue, its online extras, and all issues of PG back to 2004 online: www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Primary-Geography
Download ideas for using the front cover: www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Primary-Geography

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