

Capturing Croydon

Deborah Myers

Deborah's experience of teaching in inner London schools over the last 20 years means she has encountered a diverse range of pupils from all backgrounds, in independent as well as state schools. Here, she explains how a novel approach to fieldwork empowered pupils to think more carefully about their home town of Croydon.

Introduction

At the time of this project, 'Capturing Croydon', I was working at All Saints C of E Primary school as the teaching and learning coach. One of my roles included being the Pupil Premium champion, taking on raising the attainment and progress of our disadvantaged pupils across the school, as well as supporting teachers and teaching assistants (TAs) in pedagogical skills for achieving the best outcomes for all pupils. After many years of underachievement and the changes in the National Curriculum, my role was vital in securing better outcomes in the entire curriculum. I mention this because the pupils who took part in this project were from the vulnerable pupil group. We chose to give these pupils the opportunity to learn a new skill: taking meaningful photographs as a way of engaging with their local area.

As the teaching and learning coach, I read numerous books (including *Outstanding Teaching: Engaging learners*; *Outstanding Teaching: Teaching backwards* (Griffin and Burns, 2012; 2014); *Talk-Less Teaching* (Wallace and Kirkman, 2014); *Inspirational Teachers, Inspirational Learners* (Ryan, 2011); and *Don't Change the Light Bulbs* (Jones and Lewis, 2014)) with every effort geared towards innovation and engagement for our pupils. 'The curriculum is designed not to cover but to uncover' – the heading of chapter 2 in *Inspirational Teachers* (Ryan, 2011) really sums up the principles of what I was trying to achieve as a coach. In essence, inspiring our pupils to engage with their learning in ways they had never encountered before. Alongside me, teachers were actively thinking about learning activities that were more appealing for our pupils. It was with great delight that we agreed to be involved in an innovative project sponsored by The



Figure 1: The Whitgift Almshouses, Croydon. Photograph by Ygor Sousa.

John Whitgift Foundation – a charity based in Croydon. The Capturing Croydon project would be a great advocate of humanities subjects, particularly geography, so I snapped up the chance of being involved in a local project to bring geography alive and give our disadvantaged pupils a new experience.

Capturing a sense of place

The idea behind 'Capturing Croydon' is for key stage 2 pupils to receive lessons from a professional photographer (in our case, Richard Chivers), and from a geographer, to find their 'sense of place' in their local area. Public perception of Croydon can be negative to say the least; however, to my delight (and unbeknown to those who refuse to visit), there is a wealth of history just waiting to be uncovered – hence my earlier quote from Will Ryan. Also, the first sentence on the National Curriculum framework came to life in this project: 'A high-quality geography education should inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives' (DfE, 2013). Who best to uncover its richness, but the pupils and staff who live and are educated in Croydon?

I thought Capturing Croydon would help me hone my teaching skills in the subjects, so I found it useful discussing the outcomes and what we wanted to achieve with them. However, when I discussed this with the pupils, their enthusiasm did not register far up the Richter scale and it was difficult for them to see the benefits of the project. For this group, experiences outside of school were few and certainly

did not venture into exploring Croydon's history. Even as a recent local myself, my knowledge of Croydon and its history was limited, so I had nothing to offer in terms of preparation.

The pupils' experiences and knowledge mirrored most people's views of Croydon: towering buildings that dominate the skyline. The idea of using cameras to help observe their surroundings raised pupil interest in the project and when I explained that they would be taught how to take, edit and evaluate their photos, I could see further flickers of interest; they had never done this before. It seemed to be a great way to teach the pupils about their local area.

Learning to look more closely

Richard led a session on learning about camera angles, framing the picture and taking unusual shots, capturing the pupils' imaginations. His personal photos inspired the pupils to ask questions about his work and travels across the world. They explored using a camera and were given prompts about looking carefully from all angles. The geographer led a discussion about a sense of place and modelled Haiku creation with geographical vocabulary.

Out and about in Croydon

After classroom preparation, we got the bus to Croydon town centre travelling to what we thought was the Whitgift Shopping centre. To our surprise, we entered an archway to the Whitgift Almshouses nearby (Figure 1). The gasps we made in unison indicated that none of us expected to see such



Figure 2: Adnam Niaz's photograph of the market was runner-up in the Croydon-wide competition.

history in the middle of Croydon: the age of the buildings, their history and the beauty of the area. Immediately, the pupils were capturing images. One pupil commented, 'This is amazing Miss. I didn't know this was next to the shopping centre'. The pupils were eager to discover what other hidden treasures Croydon held.

The paved thoroughfare caught our attention and pupils also captured the symmetries of nature. We moved on into the Grade I listed Croydon Minster, where six Archbishops of Canterbury are buried within its walls. As their cameras clicked and flashes lit up the altar, the pupils slowly gained a sense of what an amazing place Croydon was. My TA and I were similarly overwhelmed by this revelation; it made us proud to be locals. As yet none of the pupils realised that Croydon had captured them too.

Our journey took us inside the Whitgift Shopping centre where the pupils lay on the ground to find different angles to tell the story they wanted through their photos: Croydon has something to offer its residents and everyone should know about it. Surrey Street Market bustled with people oblivious to our project. The pupils captured the colours surrounding them, the busyness of the people's daily lives and the sense of community coming from shopping in the outdoor market. One pupil's image of the Market was runner-up in the overall Croydon-wide photo competition (Figure 2). The very reason why it was beneficial to this pupil in particular (and to us as a school), was that he excelled in this activity and achieved something that he had never done before.

Unveiling the richness of place

The entire day uncovered aspects of the geography and history of the pupils' hometown in a novel way. Many of the pupils have taken the bus to Croydon town centre countless times before, but this time they observed more closely the place where they lived. Richard supported the learning by focusing pupils' attention on a permanent reminder of their place within the town and on uncovering its hidden treasures (Figure 3). As the National Curriculum states, this opportunity enabled them to be curious and reconsider their (often) negative views about Croydon.



Figure 3: With close observation, pupils found beauty and interest around every corner. Photo © Paula Owens.

An amazing way to teach geography

'Miss, I enjoyed today. I'm glad we were able to do something fun.'

'Miss, I can take good pictures now.'

As these pupil comments show, this type of fieldwork benefitted the pupils enormously; it helped them to feel proud of their culture and opened their eyes to sights that they would not have encountered had we not joined the project. It captured Croydon, pupils' imaginations and developed their observation skills through photography – skills that will prove valuable throughout their lives. What an amazing way to teach geography.

Acknowledgment

Thanks to the pupils at All Saints Church of England Primary School, Croydon; the John Whitgift Foundation and Kallaway for the Capturing Croydon Project, and to the project photographer, Richard Chivers, and geographer, Paula Owens.

References

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Web Resources

Download NC links to the activities:
www.geography.org.uk/Journals/Primary-Geography
 Capturing Croydon John Whitgift Foundation: www.johnwhitgiftfoundation.org/community/capturing-croydon/

Deborah Myers is an independent teaching and learning coach who models aspects of teaching and assessment to teachers to achieve the best outcomes for all pupils.