

Empowering pupils, geography and geographers

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Simon, Paula, Sharon and Tessa suggest activities you can use with your pupils on the theme of this issue.

Primary pupils' geographies keep changing, not only because primary pupils develop but because the world nearby and 'out there' keeps changing too. At present viral geographies are a big part of this. Classrooms have been spaced out, pupils' routes in and around schools have been reorganised, and playgrounds have been divided up. What has it been like? Figure 1 offers some insight into lockdown from pupils.

Places, spaces, environments and their access and uses have changed, even though these places probably look the same. Who can do what, where and why? This situation is empowering and inhibiting: pupils discovering places, routes and views; relating to others in 'shifted' and new ways in these spaces; liking or being frustrated in what they can and cannot do where; enjoying what they notice anew; even thinking about what the new 'spatiality' of their classroom and school means to and for them. This is happening out of school too, around home and in familiar streets and places used and visited regularly, where access has changed: where to mask up, and keeping or not keeping 'distance'.

It's amazing what an invisible 'thing' can do; how we respond to it, how it shifts our lives, realigns our contacts and interactions, and so plays with our geographies. It creates difference and a real opportunity for pupils to look at how everyone uses and makes their daily spaces, how we all see our environments, the ways we relate to others, and what we feel about our places. Our geographies are not simply our own; they are collective and influenced, not always obviously. This is one way it happens. And it can be empowering.

'When I go outside there is less people around, I've noticed a lot less litter on the ground. I wonder if this is because all the campsites around me are closed? I have also noticed that when I am in the garden I can see more birds and hear them singing their songs. Due to Covid-19 I have been going out for walks more often, because I can't stay inside all day! In my opinion staying at home has made me happier, because I'm not getting as stressed as I would be getting in school, with tests and pressure. I am really missing my friends, but luckily I have managed to stay in contact with most of them. I can also be in contact with my teacher because my school has set up an online app. I prefer to do my work this way because I can do it in my own time, and have my own breaks when needed. I have also seen ducks and partridges from my window – which I have never seen here before – That's how my world has changed for me.'

Lola, aged 10, St Clements School, Leysdown

'Seasonal change, houses are being built, more lorries, more people walking. The change I would like to see is get rid of Covid and have a better football pitch in our park.'

Seb, aged 10, Oxfordshire

'Different colours on the trees and less traffic but more lorries. I would like Covid to leave.'

Lilah, aged 7, Oxfordshire

Figure 1: 'How my world has changed'.

Empowering say over space

The question is: Do our pupils have a say? They know what goes on and where. Have they been asked about how best to (re)arrange school spaces and routes? Not only what are their opinions but what are their suggestions and designs?

Go one step further: In moving out of a virus 're-spaced' school space, are there improved ways to better use and enjoy school places, spaces and environments, across the whole school site, inside and outside, for everyone? Ask the pupils. Employ their daily geographies of school to best effect. It is a whole curriculum opportunity, with (pupils') geographies leading. Remember there are adults there as well. Let their geographies in: what could work better for them, for you all? Geography can be empowering, if you look at it, think about it and use it.

Issue-based enquiry

Use issue-based geographical enquiry questions to support the pupils to investigate a local issue/matter in their neighbourhood or explore a more global concern. These questions can guide their thinking:

- What is the issue?
- Why is it an issue?
- Why is it important locally/nationally/globally?
- What groups/individuals are involved?
- What views do they hold?
- What views do you hold?
- What alternative solutions are there?
- How will a decision be made?

There are possibilities to link this work across the curriculum to write protest songs and persuasive letters, to design banners and to use drama techniques, e.g. teacher/pupils in role to simulate meetings and explore the issues further.

Going national

Why not become involved in a national campaign with your class/school? One project that is designed to engage pupils with the global issue of climate change is Lets Go Zero 2030 (see web panel). This campaign enables schools to make a public commitment to take action themselves to reduce their own climate impact.

The power of story

Stories and poetry can empower pupils to learn about their world. They can connect people with places and offer possibilities to stimulate pupils' engagement with the outdoors. Stories can also communicate ideas and geographical concepts, such as place, space, scale, interconnectedness, diversity, human and physical processes,

providing pupils with opportunities to develop their thoughts and feelings. Stories can also empower pupils through developing their geographical vocabulary, fostering their imagination and empathetic thinking. We have selected a few books below to inspire geographical learning and empower pupils to build relationships with the world.

The Lost Spells

The Lost Spells (Macfarlane and Morris, 2020) is a collection of poems that celebrates a sense of wonder and shares poetry of underappreciated animals, birds, trees, and flowers. The book may be used as an initial stimulus for a school grounds or local neighbourhood walk in which pupils are asked to look for Beech, Oak, Daisy, Silver Birch, Goldfinch etc. Challenge your class to learn the jackdaw rap and post it on twitter for @RobGMacfarlane and @JackieMorrisArt. Following a walk around their local area the pupils could write a charm to conjure the magic of the neighbourhood. You may like to consider using Heartwood as a stimulus to write a spell of protest for a place-based issue. Heartwood was written to be read for any tree anywhere that faces unjust felling, but especially for the street trees of Sheffield.

Bloom (Hope in a scary world)

Bloom (Booth and Wilson-Owen, 2020) is a wonderful tale of positivity, noticing the tiny things around us, and the power of kind words. It could be used to prompt some worthwhile discussions about how we engage with the world and treat other people and places.

Hike

Hike (Oswald, 2020) is a wordless book that empowers pupils to create the narrative and to consider the wonders of the natural world. The boy and his father head off on a hike up a mountain. The pictures illustrate the child's fascination and curiosity with a feather and a ladybug. It may provide a stimulus for the pupils in your class to venture out on local expeditions around the school grounds or local park. Perhaps the pupils could illustrate and map their journeys.

Last

Last (Davies, 2020) explores a vital issue – conservation – and considers longing for home, feeling 'out of place' and ends with a sense of hope. What stories of conservation have interested the pupils? Where are these stories located?

Migrations: Open Hearts, Open Borders

Migrations (The International Centre for the Picture Book in Society, 2019) is a collection of postcards that were shared by children's book illustrators around

the theme of migration. In the opening pages Sean Tan (2019) suggests small gestures, such as pictures and friendly messages, can make a difference through fostering creativity, provoking questions and confronting despair. This is a book of provocations for geographical lessons on departures, long journeys, arrivals, and hope for the future.

The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse

The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse by Charlie Mackesy is a magical, inspiring book with themes of empathy, compassion and thinking deeply about how we live in and with the world, and how we treat others. The images and conversations between the Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse have been shared thousands of times on social media and have inspired pupils to create their own work (see page 5). This is a book with a wide reach and appeal and could be a stimulus for many subject areas within the primary classroom.

For more inspiration for empowering geography and empowering pupils read on!

References

- Booth, A. and Wilson-Owen, R. (2020) *Bloom (Hope in a scary world)*. London: Tiny Owl Publishing.
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- Macfarlane, R. and Morris, J. (2020) *The Lost Spells*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
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- Oswald, P. (2020) *Hike*. London: Walker Books.
- The International Centre for the Picture Book in Society (2019) *Migrations: Open Hearts, Open Borders*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press.



Web Resources

Lets Go Zero 2030:
www.letsgozero.org

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