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## **Personal Geographies – who decides the boundaries?**

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### **Background**

The 2010 educational climate, through 'Every Child Matters' and the personalisation agenda, promotes relevance to the learner. Within this context, the boundaries of Geography have been expanded by policy-makers to now include 'Personal Geography' as a new addition to the National Curriculum. This prompts teachers to make their curriculum area of direct personal relevance to the child. Indeed, the 'Every Child Matters' agenda stipulates that learning should connect with the child's social, community and physical environment (DfES, 2004). There appears to be an unquestioned assumption that such explorations in the classroom will be beneficial to pupils.

However, Personal Geography has appeared in the twenty-first century curriculum guidance without exemplification or training for existing teachers. There appears to be confusion and contestation about the way in which 'personal' geography is defined in relation to the boundaries of existing curricular aspects such as local geography. Moreover, there is also a lack of clarity about the way in which Personal Geography connects with children's life experiences, and where boundaries could or should be drawn in this regard. There is a need to investigate how this policy and curriculum is being enacted within the subject discipline boundaries of geography, within the physical (and public) boundaries of the classroom, and within the boundaries of personal agency on the part of both teachers and children.

### **Research Questions**

This paper will deconstruct some of the boundaries: personal/non-personal geography; personal/local scale; personal geography/information; personal geography within educational settings/beyond the school gates; personal geographies to share/to silence. It is also important to ask: how dynamic are these boundaries?

There are questions to be posed about the implications of this new subject area for teaching and the training of teachers. How is the concept 'personal' mobilised within Geography? What are personal geographies? How are they constructed? Who has decided that the 'personal' is a good thing to include in Geography? Could learners be damaged by teachers grappling to embrace this new area of geography?

Thirdly, what are the responses of children and of teachers to engaging with 'personal geographies' in the classroom? Are there 'permitted' and 'censored' personal geographies? What factors affect the use of personal geographies in the classroom? Is a teacher more effective at building on pupils' personal geographies if they themselves can detach their 'geography' persona from their 'teaching' persona? What if a child wants to escape their own or other children's personal experiences, and focus instead on possible futures rather than the present?

### **Methods**

Data for this paper are taken from a PhD study of Personal Geographies including interviews with Geography PGCE trainees and groups of pupils. My own position is not only as a researcher, but also as a teacher-educator in Geography. Since personal geographies could be seen as the accumulation of years of sensory exposure, the research methods need to be sensitive and open to cultural and sensory dimensions – hence the strong push to multimodal data, allowing the expression of thoughts and views through a variety of senses and means, not just through speech.

Methods used to generate data included: interviews, a personal possessions exercise, a written assignment, and life history drawings with trainee teachers; formative dissemination discussions with and written accounts from experienced teacher/mentors; and video'd group discussions with pupils from a range of schools.

Data is analysed using both visual analysis (Rose, 2007) and narrative analysis (Moustakas, 1990) to reveal respondents' stories, recognising that 'Human beings (can) never reveal all that is in their minds...' Somekh (2005:4).

## **Frame**

Brooks (2007) researched 'expert' geography teachers and identified three common elements to their success, including the ability to link to the prior learning of pupils, and to use their own stories (personal geographies) to psychologise the learning. Brooks offers a persuasive argument that teachers need to 'psychologise' the subject (Geography) creating the bridge between the academic field and the pupils. Teachers need to create the 'right' bridge for a particular group of pupils. This idea of 'psychologising' I believe is at the heart of the learning moment, and needs further exploration, I am interested in exploring how the novice geography teacher connects with and extends the pupils personal geographies in the classroom exploring the dynamics of Amin & Thrift's 'encounter of togetherness' (2002).

Here, I develop this line of analysis by exploring the notion of personal geography as a 'floating signifier' (Derrida 1978), by analysing the views of curriculum designers, teachers, trainee teachers and pupils. This 'floating' term gains significance in three spheres: Curriculum Specifications; Teachers / Trainee Teachers; and Pupils. The words 'Personal Geography' constitute the 'signifier', and the meanings it conjures up for the different agents are considered as the 'signified' (Saussure, 1966 cited in Carson et al, 2005).

## **Research findings**

The findings not only reveal the extent of contestation around the meaning of 'Personal Geography' by all participants, but also the depth of resistance that it can evoke, by schools, departments, individual teachers and trainee teachers, and children.

Children may find it hurtful to share their experience of place and where they have lived if their experience does not meet the norm (e.g. children in foster care or who are refugees). They appear to set boundaries about what is acceptable to share within the public space of the classroom, and what they wish to keep within more personal bounds. For some, it is the escape from personal experience within the boundaries of the classroom that allows them to learn – so that 'personal' geography may be too personal to be safe.

Teachers and trainees also resist the discomfort of broaching controversial personal geographies, as in the case of young people who may support the British National Party, or in terms of the teachers' own personal experiences. Here, they experience difficulties in deciding which experiences can be expressed within the boundaries of personal geography in the classroom, and which have to be silenced.

I myself am resisting defining 'Personal Geography', and am searching for its meaning from those who are to implement / use / teach with that phrase and those who receive / learn using the phrase.