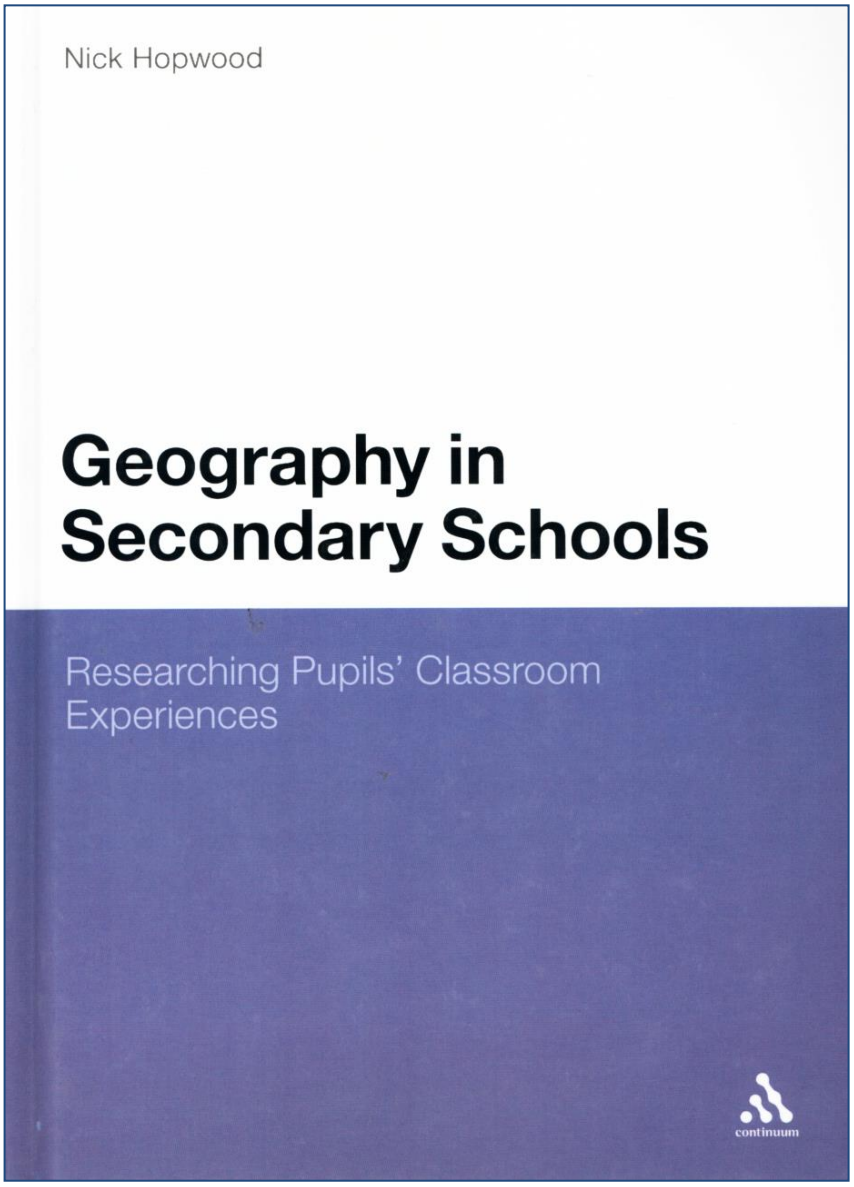
Geography in Secondary Schools: Researching Pupils' Classroom Experiences



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In this book, Nick Hopwood explores how pupils experience geography lessons, what they think geography as a school subject is about and what geography means to them. He does this rather well and in polishing the fruits of his doctoral research Hopwood has produced a book that will have a long shelf-life. There are plenty of directions a new researcher could take this original and engaging story. And, based on the experiences of just six 13-14 year olds (in three different schools), the book is a fine guide to how to conduct meaningful research with a small group of informants. Hopwood tackles this at the very beginning:

> *'Why write a book just about six pupils? Because we can learn a great deal by exploring the way young people make sense of their world and learning experiences in depth … What studies based on larger samples gain in generalizability, they lose in doing justice to the complexity of pupils' ideas and being able to link analysis to classroom experience.' (p1)*

I can testify from years of supervising and assessing Masters dissertations in the Institute of Education's MA Geography Education programme that small-scale research on pupils' experiences is an enduring (and legitimate) area of interest for geography teachers and educationists. In some ways this is not the slightest bit surprising: it would be a strange teacher who was not curious about the children they encountered on a daily basis, and what sense they made of what they were being given in geography lessons. What strange, inert places classrooms would be without the fuel of mutual curiosity - and sometimes mystery. And it has to be said that what also motivates teachers' interest in the pupils' views and perceptions is actually professional self-interest: for example, it is often driven by the pressures of subject choices at 14 years old (what teachers in England refer to as 'option time', when subjects like geography fall off the statutory national curriculum). Thus, knowing a little more about what pupils think may help teachers market the subject, make it more palatable maybe or oriented more overtly to 'workplace skills'.

However, what we should understand from the start is that this is not primarily what this book is concerned with. Hopwood leans over backwards to ensure that the reader

understands that he is not interested in the 'adult world' - of curriculum selections, progression charts, pupil assessment … or option choices and the subject's popularity. He wants the children to speak for themselves and not mediate this through 'aggregated categories or adult-derived themes' (p2). Thus he is comfortable with contradictions in the data and congratulatory to the teachers who remain in the background but who nevertheless are assumed to teach in such a manner - with 'creativity and openness' (p3) - that enables pupils to interpret knowledge and ideas in different ways.

On the whole he is successful in this venture. Following an introduction, a literature review on 'school geography in England' and a short methodological chapter that locates this research in relation to the slowly building field of 'geography education research' (GER), there are three chapters (Chapters 4-6) to report the data gathered, each taking a pair of pupils. These are devoted to addressing a clear research question: What descriptive and evaluative ideas and opinions are brought to bear when each case pupils' experiences, talks about and thinks about school geography? On the basis of lesson observation, pupil conversations and more structured tasks such as constructing concept maps, we really do get to know what bugs pupils, why they turned off certain topics, what they made of particular ideas or materials; and more generally how they describe school geography from their perspective. Reassuringly perhaps, most do 'see' physical and human distinctions, people and places and themes such as development, hazards and environment and many do appreciate the opportunity geography seems to offer for expressing opinions and judgment.

In a subsequent chapter (Chapter 7) the tone becomes more evaluative, oriented by a second research question: How do the case pupils' descriptions of school geography relate to aspects that they value? Here, Hopwood attempts to look across the data and make comparisons, seeking contrasts and similarities in the way these pupils talk about geography. So for example, some individuals he feels are more influenced by external factors than others; these pupils see geography as existing out there rather than something than can be simply appropriated and internalized 'in accord with their values' (p119) (more on this later). This then is the 'analysis' chapter and it is followed by what many readers may feel is the key product of the research. This is a chapter (Chapter 8) in which the pupils' conceptions are re-worked to address the third research question: What themes emerge across the case pupils' conceptions of school geography, how do their ideas and opinions relating to these themes vary, and how can concepts from geography education literature illuminate these variations? Quite a long list of themes is used to structure this discussion, giving us sections on (for example)

'people and environment';

'geography and Education for Sustainable Development; and

'geographical knowledge and the future,

together with a number of more generic themes such as the 'relevance' of school geography and its 'uses and importance'. This, and the rest of the book, is well written and engaging.

I am, however, left slightly perplexed. Whilst I can pour praise on Hopwood's work I am left with a nagging doubt. This may be nothing more than to say 'OK, good work, worthwhile and thank you for giving it to us - now, let's move on'. I will attempt to explain my position with the following rather more critical perspectives on the book.

I will begin with a small, knotty point which I was tempted to overlook in the spirit of accepting what is a very good piece of work which I am glad we have. This is to reflect for a moment on the title. As Hopwood himself knows full well this book is not about Geography in Secondary Schools. It is about the testimony of six pupils in three schools in England. It certainly does provide food for thought and contributes to the nourishment of continuing debates on school geography, but the research does not enable the author to make any generalizations that may be applied to geography in secondary schools. Indeed Hopwood is absolutely clear about this in his conclusions - that he has no 'key findings' or 'clear messages for teachers and educators' (p177).

This niggle takes us to a more substantial matter which is a methodological issue. Maybe because of the author's determination to resist imposing the adult world on these children's voices, we are I think, very unclear about how the integrative themes in Chapter 8 'emerge'. It appears to be based on a 'grounded theory' approach which asserts that the theory on which these categories are derived really can 'emerge' and that data can speak for themselves. I do not believe this. I do not believe those categories would have been the same if a different researcher had been gathering and handling the data; or even if the same researcher had been undertaking this study 10 or 20 years ago. Let me be clear: I do not seek to undermine Hopwood's achievement, but I do think a more open admission about the tensions inherent in a study such as this would have increased still further the value of the work. What really helped shape these themes?

Following this line of thought a little more leads me again to the conclusions. I do not object to the researcher seeking to 'take pupils' ideas seriously' (p177) but I do feel a little let down when on the basis of all this work and effort all I am offered is more questions! Clearly, this research is not in the tradition of 'what works' and 'what needs to be done': I understand that. But it seems an abrogation of the researcher's responsibility, which is to simplify and to make intelligible, to leave us with complexity. For one thing all educators know is that their work is complex, and one reason for this is that they are dealing with young, growing human beings each of whom is unique. To be fair, of course Hopwood does help make the pupils' conceptions intelligible - this is his achievement. But I don't see the need to be quite so coy about the themes, and the adult/professional world.

In the end, school geography is not the responsibility of the pupils. It is good - essential - to know what pupils think about their school geography experiences. It is essential to examine critically what they make of the work we give them to do. But we risk selling them down the river if we spend too much time agonizing about this, for these are essential(ly) pedagogic rather than curriculum questions. For this reviewer, a book on Geography in Secondary Schools would be equally about curriculum matters, and an immediate question arises about the role 13-14 year-olds can legitimately play in this. Interestingly, one of Hopwood's subjects, Sara, understood this. She understood that the role (although Hopwood reports this with the indefinite article - a role) for geography is to transgress her experience: 'geographical learning was the vehicle to increase her understanding beyond what her own experience had taught her.' (p149).

I hope that this book, which is an important addition to any education library, will be the point from which those engaged in research in geography education will be encouraged to turn their gaze to the curriculum and perhaps what we mean by making progress in teaching and learning the subject in school. For among the many things we learn from this book is that these children value (in their different ways) geography lessons.