

Children's geographies and schools: beyond the mandated curriculum

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Published in:
Children, Education and Geography: Rethinking Intersections

DOI:
[10.4324/9781003248538-6](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248538-6)

Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Author accepted manuscript

[Link to publication in ResearchOnline](#)

Citation for published version (Harvard):
McKendrick, JH 2022, Children's geographies and schools: beyond the mandated curriculum. in *Children, Education and Geography: Rethinking Intersections*. Routledge , London.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248538-6>

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Citation for published version: McKendrick, J.H. (2022) Children's geographies and schools: Beyond the mandated curriculum In Hammond, L., Biddulph, M., Catling, S., & McKendrick, J. H. (Eds.) *Children, Education and Geography: Rethinking Intersections*. Routledge. 49-66.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003248538>

Abstract

National curricular define common purpose and assure stakeholders of uniformity of standards. However, it is inconceivable – given the diversity of biography, circumstance, and access to learning resources – that a uniform offer in geography will equate to equality of opportunity and a diet to which all can relate. Our world is ridden with inequality and, unless corrective action is taken, geography is complicit in (inadvertently) reinforcing the injustices of the status quo. For the potential of school geography to be realised by all, a way must be found to maintain the advantages of a common purpose while at the same time fashioning an approach that allows deep-rooted inequalities to be challenged. Scotland is presented as a case study in which this could be achieved. Scotland’s commitment to eradicate child poverty, by 2030, has led to a range of interventions focused on schools, such as ‘cost of the school day’ projects, ‘PACT’ developments between teachers and communities, and strengthening provision of nutritious school food for all. Each offers opportunities for a school geography that actively promotes social justice. It is argued that a purposively progressive fusion of children’s geographies, the geography of education, and geography education is required. It may not be desirable or necessary to shed the mandated curriculum, but it is imperative to refashion its function and for our school geography to engage more directly with wider everyday inequalities that shape children’s lives.

Children's geographies and schools

Beyond the mandated curriculum

John H. McKendrick

Human geography – the easy option for posh kids?

As the season of goodwill approached in 2019, little was shown by his peers to Danny Dorling, custodian of one of the most prestigious chairs in the discipline, the Halford Mackinder Professor of Geography at the University of Oxford. Led by the president for research and higher education at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) and the chair of the council of heads of geography, and co-signed by 87 other senior geographers including 57 other departmental heads, a stinging rebuttal to Dorling's claim that geography in higher education in the UK was a soft option for posh kids (Dorling, 2019) was published in the Times Higher Education Supplement (Blunt et al., 2019). Dorling's turn of phrase was unfortunate in an article that implores geography to become a kinder discipline, but the criticisms that he makes are ones that cannot be ignored. Dorling's concerns are fivefold: he observes that the discipline was rooted in a tradition of generating useful knowledge for those who were expected to administer the British Empire's affairs; he asserts that British geography celebrates that many of its students progress to careers that sustain the prevailing economic system; he is uncharitable on the competencies of many of its students, particularly those from privileged backgrounds; he argues that geography became viewed as a palatable university degree option for those from privileged backgrounds who had not 'done that well' at school; and he notes that British geography departments have a higher-than-average proportion of students from richer homes. He implores UK geography in higher education to redress the imbalance of who we teach and implies that the human geography that we teach might need to be recalibrated for this to be achieved. Blunt et al.'s case for the defence revolved around assertions that a geographical education readied students to tackle complex

problems such as poverty, that geography graduates were tackling poverty in their careers, that geography is not a ‘soft option’, and that the proportion of disadvantaged students studying school geography had doubled in less than a decade. The examination of British geography’s social complexion has continued beyond this initial exchange (Dorling, 2020; Brace and South, 2020).

Depending on how the reader chooses to position this chapter, it might be viewed as taking up Dorling’s challenge to think more critically about who we teach and what we teach. On the other hand, it might also be viewed as exemplifying what Blunt et al. argue is the utility of geography to address complex issues such as poverty. Undoubtedly, it is an extension of their exchange, as the focus in this chapter is squarely on school geography. I argue that geography has the power to improve the quality of children’s lives as lived and that we should seek to realise that potential in the interests of promoting social justice, specifically with regard to tackling child poverty and overcoming problems associated with area deprivation. This will only be achieved when one of the central premises of this book is realised: when we seek a purposively progressive fusion of children’s geographies, geographies of education, and geography education. If we believe in the power of geographical thinking, then we also need to think much more seriously about who we teach, what geography we teach in schools, and how we teach those geographies and why.

I start by rethinking how we define purpose in the discipline. As I adopt a case study approach, I provide some essential background to Scotland, and its school geography, before presenting the case for disruptively progressive school geography by reflecting on the scale of geographical education, the character of learning communities, what we teach, and how we teach it. Although focused on Scotland, I argue that this geographical agenda has relevance far beyond.¹

Refocusing the purpose of our valuable geographical education in schools

No reader of this book needs convincing of the (potential) value of geography. Overt specifications of purpose are outlined by learned geographical societies, university geography departments, and school qualification frameworks, among others. In Scotland, the Scottish Qualification Agency² explains that

[t]he study of geography introduces candidates to our changing world, its human interactions and physical processes. Candidates develop the knowledge and skills to enable them to contribute to their local communities and wider society. The study of geography fosters positive life-long attitudes of environmental stewardship, sustainability and global citizenship. Practical activities, including fieldwork, provide opportunities for candidates to interact with their environment.

(SQA: n.d)

School geography in what is known as the senior phase (ages 15–18 in Secondary Year 4 through Secondary Year 6) in Scotland is structured into content on (i) physical environments, (ii) human environments, and (iii) global issues and geographical skills.

The focus on global citizenship and global issues might be viewed as a continuation of geography's traditional concern to broaden horizons and enable learners to better understand the nature of the wider world and their place within it. Less charitably, such a focus in Scotland (as with the rest of the UK) might be viewed as a continuation of the narrow Empire mindset that it is our British birthright to assume responsibility for the wider world (Cudjoe, 2014). What is more certain is that all our actions have consequences. Although geography's focus on global issues might draw attention to the ways in which our minority world creates many global problems, it also reinforces the mindset that things are not so bad 'back home' and others

(beyond Scotland and the rest of the UK) are much worse off than us. Relatively, this might be so. However, if school geography is blind to the problems that are endured by its own pupils, then it is complicit in their presence, perpetuation, and proliferation. At the very least, we need to strengthen our focus on the geographies of injustice in Scotland, and preferably to fashion a geography that is *for* and *with* disadvantaged pupils.

We might argue that the subject matter of geography is merely a means to an end if our goal is to demonstrate the value of a geographical education and furnish learners with geographical skills or to promote ‘thinking geographically’. On the contrary, the subject matter of geography is critically important if we aspire to deliver a purposeful geography that tackles social injustice (which would also demonstrate the value of geographical approaches and furnish learners with geographical skills). Fashioning such an agenda is not without precedent in geography in higher education, most notably with the emergence of the welfare tradition in the 1970s (Smith, 1974). Similarly, much contemporary research in the subdiscipline children’s geographies aims to better understand children’s everyday lives and to ‘centre’ the child in this analysis (Holloway, 2014). However, these progressive geographies have a limited reach, perpetuated by reward structures in higher education that prioritise the production of academic knowledge over impactful and transformative outcomes that arise from it. In this chapter, I speculate on the potential for a geographical education that seeks to improve children’s lives as lived, focusing on what geography can do to tackle the poverty that is experienced by many in school classrooms.

Case study: Scotland and its geography

Scotland has its own education system, which differs in important ways from the other nations in the UK. School education in Scotland (and Wales) remains more strongly welded to comprehensive education, having not embraced the Academy system that is being promoted in England (Eyles and Machin, 2019) and with almost all state-funded schools under the control of

one of Scotland's 32 local authorities. School education is broadly based with pupils who are considered to be the most academically able expected to present for five Scottish Highers (compared to three A Levels elsewhere in the UK). University honours degrees tend to be four years (compared to three elsewhere in the UK).

Since 2010, Scotland's schools have followed the *Curriculum for Excellence (CfE)*, which outlines the national curriculum for nursery, primary, and secondary schools.³ The purpose of *CfE* is to enable each child or young person to become a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen, and an effective contributor. A broad general education (for pupils aged 3 to 13/14, straddling nursery education, primary school, and the first three years of secondary school) is followed by a senior phase (to the end of school studies – therefore, lasting between one and three years, depending on when pupils leave school). In the broad phase, learning is organised into eight curricular areas, with learning outcomes specified for five stages across these first 11 years of school education. Geography is somewhat hidden and sits awkwardly in the broad general phase of *CfE*, with what we would understand as geography delivered across two curricular areas, that is, science (which includes a focus on biodiversity and interdependence, energy sources and sustainability, processes of the planet, and earth's materials) and social sciences (which includes a progression of outcomes for a range of themes under the umbrella of 'people, place, and environment'). In the senior phase, geography is an elective, which pupils may choose to pursue qualifications.⁴ It is also one of the broadening courses for the Scottish Baccalaureate in Science, and one of the core courses for the Scottish Baccalaureate in Social Science.

Although less social mobility through education in Scotland is attained than desired (McKendrick and Sinclair, 2021), it is an aspiration that is supported through Scottish policy interventions, such as closing the poverty-related attainment gap (Scottish Government, 2021a), contextualised admissions to university (Boliver et al., 2017), and the setting of national targets to ensure that a representative proportion of young people from Scotland's 20% most deprived areas progress to higher education by 2030 (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2021). Furthermore,

as with Wales and Northern Ireland, Scotland continues to offer an educational maintenance allowance to support low-income pupils to continue their education beyond the years of compulsory schooling (Scottish Government, 2021b). Traditionally, this idea of someone without means being able through education to realise their full potential is central to the purpose of education in Scotland. Although not absent elsewhere in the UK, arguably the association with social justice and education is strongest in Scotland.

Scotland also has a national commitment to eradicate child poverty by 2030, enshrined in law through the Child Poverty (Scotland) Act (2017). School-level action is specified as part of work to reduce the ‘costs of living’, which together with ‘income from employment’ and ‘income from social security and benefits in kind’ are identified by the Scottish government as the three drivers of child poverty (Scottish Government, 2018). In *Every Child Every Chance* (Scottish Government, 2018), the first tackling child poverty delivery plan, actions were specified to introduce a minimum level for school clothing grants and provide ‘further’ support to reduce the hidden costs of the school day, with the child poverty measurement framework to include evidence on the school leaver attainment gap, take up of free school meals, and level of school clothing grant. The importance of this work was reaffirmed in *Best Start, Bright Futures*, its second child poverty delivery plan for 2022–2026 (Scottish Government, 2022a).

Potentially powerful geography

Nine of Scotland’s 16 non-specialist higher education institutions offer degrees in geography. According to the University and Colleges Admission Service for the UK, 305 applicants were accepted to a geography degree course at university in Scotland in 2021, with 150 specialising in human geography, 100 in physical geographical sciences, and 55 registered for general geography (UCAS, 2021). However, this greatly underestimates the number of undergraduate students who encounter geography in Scottish universities, as the first year of university study in Scotland typically comprises four or five electives, in addition to a foundational module/s in their

chosen specialism. Many non-geographers will elect to study geography in the first year of their university degree.

In the senior phase in schools, in any given year, over 10,000 pupils choose geography as one of their (typically) seven National 5 subjects, with over 7,000 progressing to higher studies and almost 800 to advanced higher studies ([Scottish Qualifications Agency, 2021](#)). Geography remains a popular option in the senior phase, with the numbers presenting for examinations increasing for all levels between 2020 and 2021. It is the tenth most studied discipline at National 5 level and the eleventh most studied at higher level, although its relative ranking in numbers presenting for examinations is slightly lower at all levels compared to a decade earlier.

As with universities, and although substantial, the number of pupils specialising in geography in the senior phase in Scotland, greatly underestimates exposure to geography in its schools. Every year almost 400,000 pupils in primary schools and 170,000 pupils in secondary schools encounter geography through social studies (and arguably science in primary schools) ([Scottish Government, 2021c](#)). On the other hand, it should be acknowledged that in this broad general education phase, geography may not occupy a significant amount of teaching time, and in primary schools at least, it is 'hidden' within the curricular areas of science and social studies, and the division of its content across science and social studies tends to mitigate against an integrated approach to geography.

The key point in this barrage of statistics is that geography remains a discipline with potential, given its reach. Understandably, our focus is often on those who choose us – the pupils who elect to study geography in the senior stages of school and those who specialise in geography in higher education. However, if our aim is to utilise the power of geography for the greater good, then there may be traction to be gained by strengthening the focus on geography for social justice within the broad general learning phase in schools and in the first year of university education.

Who do we teach?

Dorling (2019) contended that the traditional goal of geography in the UK is to learn about the wider world so that UK plc might benefit from what it has to offer. Sometimes, this goal is explicit, as Brown (1957) explained when accounting for the work of the Manchester Society of Commercial Geography, but more commonly it is implicit. Where it is assumed that learners are not significantly and personally impacted in relation to subject matter, there is no compelling reason to reflect on the position of learners in relation to it, for example, in relation to rapid population growth in developing countries or problems of the central business district in UK cities. Back in the real world, Dorling is not alone in challenging the assumption of homogeneity among geography students (for example, see Pirbhai-Illich and Martin, 2022, in Chapter 10). Our pupils may already have more connections to our geographies than we think. The problems we discuss in class will have been, and will be, part of many pupils' life experiences. Furthermore, if teachers of geography are to strengthen our focus on local geographies of social justice, it is critical that we understand our learners and learning communities. The life experiences and social capital that learners bring when confronting geographies of poverty, for example, must inform our classroom practice.

It is estimated that 80,000 pre-school-aged children, 100,000 primary-school-aged children, and 60,000 secondary school-aged children are living in poverty in Scotland, close to one in every four children, with approaching one in five considered to be living in severe poverty (Scottish Government, 2021d). Over 50,000 pupils in secondary schools are entitled to, and have registered for, free school meals on account of living in low-income households (Scottish Government, 2020). While it was already understood that children living in poverty are less well prepared and less well-resourced to engage with learning (Sosa and Ellis, 2014), the scale of the problems that poverty presents became much more evident when school learning decanted to home learning environments during COVID-19-induced lockdowns in 2020 and 2021. Several studies highlighted how some children were disadvantaged on account of the lack of support that

parents could provide, that digital exclusion was an everyday reality for far more children than was assumed, that many children were reliant on food freely provided in school, and that home environments were not conducive to learning for all (McKinney, 2021; McKinney et al., 2021; Robertson and McHardy, 2021). If geography is to tackle social injustice, it needs to first consider what must be done to counter the disadvantages already faced by too many of its learners.

Table 4.1 Selected school pupil profiles

School	Stage	Authority	Area	% FS M	% SIM D1	% SIM D2	% SIM D3	% SIM D4	% SIM D5
Lochend Community High	Secondary	Glasgow	Large Urban	59.7	94.8	2.7	*	2.5	0
Holy Cross High	Secondary	South Lanarkshire	Other Urban	15.6	24.0	18.6	14.7	19.8	22.9
Kirkcaldy High	Secondary	Fife	Other Urban	20.8	30.2	38.1	*	*	31.7
Westhill Academy	Secondary	Aberdeenshire	Other Urban	3.2	0	*	*	21.3	78.8
<i>Scotland (average)</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Scotland</i>	<i>N.A.</i>	<i>17.0</i>	<i>21.6</i>	<i>19.4</i>	<i>18.7</i>	<i>20.3</i>	<i>19.9</i>
Bellsbank	Primary	East Ayrshire	Remote Rural	45.7	100	*	*	0	0
Condorrat	Primary	North Lanarkshire	Other Urban	11.3	19.2	13.5	25.6	22.9	18.9
St John Ogilvie	Primary	West Lothian	Other Urban	17.6	22.1	21.6	12.8	18.2	25.4
Touch	Primary	Fife	Other Urban	26.1	49.3	7.2	5.8	6.5	31.2

Colquhoun Park	Primary	East Dunbartonshire	Large Urban	22.2	40.9	*	3.0	6.4	49.8
Carolside	Primary	East Renfrewshire	Large Urban	1.2	0.7	1.2	0.8	3.4	93.9
<i>Scotland (average)</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Scotland</i>	<i>N.A.</i>	<i>21.3</i>	<i>22.9</i>	<i>19.8</i>	<i>18.1</i>	<i>20.2</i>	<i>19.0</i>

Source: [Scottish Government \(2021\)](#).

Notes: (1) FSM = Free school meals (2) Free school estimated for primary schools are provided for P4 to P7 only, as there is universal provision of free school meals in P1 to P3. (3) SIMD = Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, with SIMD 1 representing those living in the 20% most deprived areas in Scotland. (4) * represents where there were between one and five pupils in a category, the asterisk used to assure anonymity for those pupils.

As every geographer would expect, these disadvantages are unevenly distributed. Although poverty and multiple deprivation is found throughout Scotland, it is predictably more characteristic of some neighbourhoods, geographical settings, and local authorities ([McKendrick and Treanor, 2021](#)). Consequently, social complexion in the schools that serve these communities differs markedly, both in the primary and secondary school sectors ([Table 4.1](#)). Poverty and area deprivation are commonplace in some schools (Lochend secondary and Bellsbank primary) but almost absent in others (Westhill Academy and Carolside primary). Some schools have an even distribution across social strata (Kirkcaldy High, Condorrat primary and St John Ogilvie primary) while others are polarised with most pupils either from the very most deprived or very least deprived areas (Holy Cross High, Touch primary, and Colquhoun primary). Each school demands a bespoke approach to how social justice is approached, both to overcome it as a barrier to learning and to appraise how geographical skills and knowledge can be used to tackle it.

What might we teach?

There are no shortages of non-curricular interest groups arguing that time within the school day should be found to accommodate learning that would facilitate the personal development of pupils. Among the many examples are Money Advice Scotland's delivery of financial education workshops, the Mentors in Violence Prevention's work of the Violence Reduction Unit, Keep Scotland Beautiful's promotion of Eco-Schools, and the Soil Association Scotland's promotion of Food for Life Scotland (campaigning for healthier school meals). While some groups and parents have rejected some content on religious or moral grounds, the main barrier to extending the range of school learning is the finite resource of the time that is available within the school day.

With learning time already under pressure, there is little prospect of extending the amount of geography that is taught within the school day. In Scotland, there is already a very limited amount of time for geography teaching in the broad general phase of education in Scotland, sitting as it does within the curricular area of social studies. Further undermining the prospects for introducing new geographies to children in schools is the reality that the tried-and-tested geographical content would appear to have served pupils well for generations: the metric of the numbers electing to present for qualifications in the senior stage is testament to this. The subfield of children's geographies will not be the only specialist subfield of geography to have emerged in higher education in recent decades that is frustrated that the school geography syllabus cannot be enriched with an infusion of its interests, issues, and approaches to geography.

The way ahead might be to promote the geographical rather than geography. That is, thinking of ways in which geographical skills and a geographical mindset ('thinking geographically') might be brought to bear on all manner of issues that present in schools and that are covered in classroom learning. The proposal is not for geography to colonise the curriculum for the sake of it; rather, the argument is grounded in the belief in the value of geographical approaches, thinking, and skills. More of what we teach in schools would be enriched through

geographical analysis – much of which is not currently understood to be ‘geography’. It follows that positioning geography as part of social studies need not be a threat to its status. These reflections on the status of geography in schools are not a distraction from the central purpose of this chapter, which is to argue for a school geography that seeks to improve the quality of children’s lives as lived. Rather, the geographical analysis that is being promoted would provide additional opportunities for a purposively progressive geography *for* children. From the many ways in which this could be achieved in Scotland, three examples are suggested here – rethinking place, challenging school injustices, and contributing to national priorities.

The social studies curriculum in Scotland could be read as embracing history (people, past events, and societies), geography (people, place, and environment), and modern studies (people in society, economy, and business). Thus, much of what is taught as social studies might not be understood as geography or not presented to pupils as geography. Consider the first row in [Table 4.2](#), which describes recommended outcomes for one of the themes under ‘people in society, economy, and business’, and the lower row, which describes outcomes for a theme within ‘people, past events, and societies’. Although perhaps unlikely to be conceived as geography, these learning outcomes engage subject matter that is at the heart of our discipline, for example, exploring places (SOC 1–02a in [Table 4.2](#)), thinking critically about multi-scalar identities (SOC 4–02a), thinking critically about the scale at which social support should be provided (SOC 4–16a), and understanding communities (SOC 2–16a).

Table 4.2 Extract for ‘Society, Economy and Business’ from *Social Studies: Experiences and Outcomes*

Curriculum for Excellence Levels in the Broad General Stage of Education				
Early (pre-school and P1)	First (P2–P4)	Second (P5–P7)	Third (S1–S3)	Fourth (S1–S3)
By exploring my local community, I	I can contribute to a discussion of the difference	I can explain how the needs of a group in my	I can explain why a group I have identified	I can contribute to a discussion on the extent to

<p>have discovered the different roles people play and how they can help. SOC 0–16a</p>	<p>between my needs and wants and those of others around me. SOC 1–16a</p>	<p>local community are supported. SOC 2–16a</p>	<p>might experience inequality and can suggest ways in which this inequality might be addressed. SOC 3–16a</p>	<p>which people’s needs should be met by the state or the individual. SOC 4–16a</p>
		<p>I can gather and use information about forms of discrimination against people in societies and consider the impact this has on people’s lives. SOC 2–16b</p>		<p>Through discussion, I have identified aspects of a social issue to investigate and by gathering information I can assess its impact and the attitudes of the people affected. SOC 4–16b</p>
		<p>I can discuss issues of the diversity of cultures, values, and customs in our society. SOC 2–16c</p>		<p>I can analyse the factors contributing to the development of a multicultural society and can express an informed view on issues associated with this. SOC 4–16c</p>
<p>I can make a personal link to the past by exploring items or images connected with important individuals or special events in my life. SOC 0–02a</p>	<p>By exploring places, investigating artefacts, and locating them in time, I have developed an awareness of the ways we remember and preserve Scotland’s history. SOC 1–02a</p>	<p>I can interpret historical evidence from a range of periods to help build a picture of Scotland’s heritage and my sense of chronology. SOC 2–02a</p>	<p>I can make links between my current and previous studies and show my understanding of how people and events have contributed to the development of the Scottish nation. SOC 3–02a</p>	<p>I have developed a sense of my heritage and identity as a British, European, or global citizen and can present arguments about the importance of respecting the heritage and identity of</p>

				others. SOC 4–02a
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Source: [Scottish Qualifications Agency \(2009\)](#).

The potential afforded by thinking differently about social studies extends beyond finding geography wherever we look. Geography has a rich tradition of profiling places and mapping geographical inequities in access to services. This work is critical in alerting us to the realities of the geographies of poverty and area deprivation. However, there is also risk that area labelling creates its own problems and stigma. Extending our geographical analyses of poverty to embrace issues that seem to ‘belong’ to other social studies at once enriches our geographical analysis and social studies enquiry. We should not be content to draw attention to the persistence of poverty and area deprivation in areas such as Easterhouse in Glasgow and Raploch in Stirling ([McKendrick and Treanor, 2021](#)). We might also want to raise teacher and pupil awareness of those local champions of place who are challenging injustices (such as the work of Cathy [McCormack \(2009\)](#) in tackling housing conditions in Easterhouse in Glasgow), a learning goal of SOC 4–16a in [Table 4.2](#).

Most importantly, there are opportunities to think critically about the extent to which these adult constructions of place adequately reflect the lived reality of children and young people. For example, the so-called deprived areas (such as the Raploch housing estate on the edge of Stirling) are often criticised for not providing ready access to employment, for the lack of community infrastructure, for the poor quality of housing, and the unruly behaviours of its young people. Consideration might be given – a local variant of learning goal SOC 2–02a in [Table 4.2](#) – to exploring local success stories which demonstrate how the so-called deprived areas have provided unique opportunities for some children to thrive (such as the ‘rich’ environment that allowed Billy Bremner, the professional football player, to hone his skills as a youth in the Raploch – [Figure 4.1](#)).

Figure 1: Growing up in Raploch: a vignette of Bill Bremner

Career history

Billy Bremner was born on the 9th of December in 1942 and grew up in the Raploch estate on the outskirts of Stirling. He has a place in both the Scottish and English Football Halls of Fame, following an illustrious playing career with Leeds United, Hull City and Scotland. Billy won 54 caps and scored 3 goals for Scotland. With Leeds United, he played in four European finals (winning the Fairs Cup (early version of the Europa Cup) in 1968, as well as winning the FA Cup in 1972, the League Championship (now Premiership) in 1969 and 1974, the Charity Shield in 1969 and the Football League Cup in 1968. The biography (*Bremner: The legend of Billy Bremner*, by Bernard Bale) was published by Andre Deutsch in 1998. Billy passed away In December 1997.

Childhood days in Raploch

Billy Bremner grew up in Weir Street in the Raploch estate on the outskirts of Stirling. In the words of Bernard Bale, his "... pre-school education was all about football. Before he had even heard of the 'three Rs', he was learning football's 'three Cs' - control, confidence and competitiveness". His competitive spirit was clear at the informal games he played in the local swing park on Sundays. His best friend Issy described how "each team put a shilling in the hat and whoever won the most games used to take all the cash – the money came from returned pop bottles and odd jobs. Billy's favourite expression was, "Are we going for broke?" I don't ever remember losing a game (with Billy in the team) so we did all right out of it." One of the major influences on Billy's early football was his father James. As Billy himself observed, "My father used to remind me very often that things did not just happen, you had to work hard to make them happen. He was a great help to me, I could not have wished for greater support from my parents." Although naturally talented, Billy practiced hard to get the best from his talent and what he lacked in inches in height, he made up for in tenacity. At school and with Gownahill Juniors. he played alongside boys who were older and bigger than he was. Size didn't matter to the diminutive Bremner, "I soon discovered one thing about playing against lads who were twice as big as me. I had to make up for my lack of height and weight by getting stuck in just that little bit harder." But it was the work ethic, weaned on the Raploch, that Billy himself attributed most to his success. As he said, "Never give anything less than 100 per cent – in everything that you decide to do. If you want to come out on top you will have to try that little bit harder than the next fellow or you will never make it."

Geography's contribution to promoting social justice is not limited to core curricular: there is a need for geographical skills and knowledge to be deployed to tackle wider injustices that frame school experiences. Is it acceptable that children in less deprived areas have a wider choice of subjects to study in the senior stages of schooling compared to those serving more deprived communities (Iannelli et al., 2016)? Why do more pupils in remote small towns and remote rural areas fail to attain the expected levels in literacy and numeracy throughout the general phase of schooling in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2021e)? Why do we not know whether extracurricular activities in schools are reinforcing or challenging access to opportunities between more and less disadvantaged pupils? Why are there such dramatic

differences in the uptake of free school meals across schools in Scotland (McKendrick et al., 2019)? To what extent are the ‘cost of the school day’ interventions impactful across Scotland (Blake Stevenston Associates, 2020)? Is it acceptable that there are persistent differences in rates of progression to university across secondary schools in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2022b)? To what extent do all pupils have access to the resources that enable them to thrive in – and beyond – school (Robertson and McHardy, 2021)? To what extent does tutoring reinforce or challenge injustices in school education (Jerrim, 2017)?

Geographical analysis has much to contribute to the issues. If we do not use our geographical understanding and skills to tackle these issues, then we are part of the problem. We should not be content to teach geography to whoever presents in the classroom. We should be concerned to ensure that all have a fair chance of getting to that classroom in the first instance.

Scotland has a national performance framework which aims to measure the extent to which the nation is making progress towards achieving the kind of Scotland the nation aspires to become (Scottish Government, 2022c). The Scottish Government has also specified a series of ambitious national commitments to fashion its future, working towards a more social just nation. There are commitments to eradicate child poverty by 2030 (Scottish Government, 2018). There are commitments to tackle the climate emergency (Scottish Government, 2021f). There are commitments to adhere to the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Scottish Government, 2021g). These three examples are illustrative, rather than exhaustive. Significantly, each commitment has the potential to enrich children’s lives, as lived in the here-and-now. As for the school injustices, there is scope for geographical analysis to enrich our understanding of these issues and for school geography to embrace these issues, demonstrating the necessity and power of geographical analysis.

There is clearly scope for geography in schools to deal more directly with much more of the issues that impact directly on children’s lives, highlighting the relevance of geography and the power of geographical analysis.

Lessons from social policy for geographical education? From ‘nothing about us’ to ‘nothing about us, without us, is for us’

There is a growing expectation in social policy in Scotland, that those impacted by a policy should be consulted as it is being developed. This is also consistent with the commitment to uphold the UNCRC and afford children the opportunity to express their opinion on matters that impact on them. As Hart (1992) following [Arnstein \(1969\)](#) outlined, there is always a risk of tokenism, with what presents as consultation delivering no more than an illusion of engagement. However, there is firm belief, if not a plethora of irrefutable evidence, that meaningful participation leads to better outcomes.

Each local authority in Scotland must prepare an annual Local Child Poverty Action Report (LCPAR) to outline what is being undertaken to tackle child poverty locally. In 2019, the [Poverty and Inequality Commission \(2019\)](#) reported that it has been asked by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government to review the 32 Local Child Poverty Action Reports to understand if people with direct lived experience of poverty had been asked for their views and experiences and to appraise the impact of this engagement on the development of the local action plans. The Commission was disappointed to find that most of the reports it reviewed did not even mention such engagement: on the other hand, it highlighted two reports in which involving those with lived experience was ‘making a real difference’ to policy and practice. Although focused on child poverty, no mention was made of whether it was children with lived experience who were consulted.

There are lessons to be learned for classroom geography if the progressive potential of children’s geographies is to be fully realised. What is sought is more than a geography of children, in which there is a shift from children being an absence to becoming an absent presence in geographical education (see McKendrick, 2001 for parallels in population geography). Rather,

what is desired is learning in which school geography affords children meaningful opportunity to understand and confront the social injustices that frame their lives.

Conclusion: a purposively progressive fusion of children's geographies, geography of education, and geography education

Geography in UK universities continues to be populated by a disproportionate share of students from more affluent backgrounds. Unlike Dan Dorling, my experience of these 'posh kids' is not so damning. One of the memories that endures from my time as a lecturer in geography at the University of Manchester in the early 1990s is walking the streets of Bayeux at lunchtime at the end of a Normandy field trip without a penny in my pocket, with an extra helping of an unwanted packed lunch in my backpack, and encountering a group of jovial students devouring bowls of *moules-frites* washed down with wine at a pavement restaurant. They were not at fault for their backgrounds. They were, overall, motivated students who shared a passion for geography, delivered what was required, and were a pleasure to teach. However, I do recall one parent exclaiming 'why are you studying that?' and being perturbed having viewed a research poster on the geography of deprivation, which was on display outside the annual graduation reception. Thus, although I am not unduly concerned with the competency of who we teach in UK higher education, like [Dorling \(2013\)](#), I recognise that there are consequences for what geography can achieve that follow from who we teach and what we teach. Geography can do better.

I believe in the utility of geography, and I believe that education could and should be used to promote social justice – my particular interest is reducing poverty and area deprivation and the problems associated with them. In this chapter, I have argued that we could be more impactful working within the existing curriculum, but that much more could be achieved if we recalibrated our purpose as geographers beyond the mandated curriculum. I am not alone in

arguing the point. Back in 2014, Simon Catling outlined principles to give voice to younger children's voice in primary geography, premising his argument on the point that education is political and it is a pretence that school subjects are neutral. Among the principles for an 'empowering pedagogy' was an agenda for social justice in which:

[C]hildren are to be encouraged to value and work for equity and just approaches in their lives, their class and school, and more widely. This means tackling problems and issues, and at the least trying to understand them even though they cannot resolve them. It infers quizzing those who have responsible and powerful roles and arguing points with them.

(Catling, 2014: p. 367)

More recently, Steve Puttick and colleagues (2020) have described how six primary schools have collaborated to develop, share, and improve anti-poverty practice in their communities.

What is proposed is a different kind of powerful geographical knowledge from that which is debated in geography education. There is merit in Young's (2008) conception of powerful knowledge (Lambert, 2011; Maude, 2016); notably the aspiration to give children power over their own knowledge and to provide knowledge that facilitates participation. However, there are limitations and dangers (Rudolph et al., 2018). Although geography celebrates how it broadens horizons, advocates of 'powerful geographical knowledge' assert that geography must take young people beyond their immediate and constrained lives so that the power of this geography can be realised (to develop young people's intellectual powers). Our powerful knowledge needs to be less elitist. As Catling (2014) has shown, we can be powerful by respecting this local knowledge and working alongside it, to better understand and challenge the everyday injustices that too many of our young people endure.

Notes

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- ¹ There is no ‘United Kingdom school geography’, with each of the four nations in the UK having discretion to fashion its own. However, the four nations share a common heritage and politics as part of the United Kingdom, which should shape what might be considered a relevant geographical education in schools across the UK.
- ² The SQA is currently Scotland’s national awarding and accreditation body. It accredits all qualifications in Scotland, with the exception of degrees. It is one of four such national agencies in the UK alongside Ofqual (England), DCELLS (Wales), and CCEA (Northern Ireland). The Scottish Government announced in March 2022, that a new public body was to be formed to replace the SQA and assume responsibility for developing and awarding qualifications (www.gov.scot/news/new-national-education-bodies/).
- ³ The *CfE* narrative was ‘refreshed’ in 2019, to strengthen focus on its core objectives (<https://scotlandscurriculum.scot/>): this did not alter its structure and objectives. In 2020, the Scottish Government commissioned the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to review *CfE*. At the time of writing, the Scottish Government was reflecting on how it would address the recommendations of the OECD report on *Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence: Into the Future*, published in 2021 (OECD, 2021).
- ⁴ Typically, pupils in Scotland present for National 5s in Secondary Year 4, Highers in Secondary Year 5, and Advanced Highers in Secondary Year 6. Broadly speaking, GCSEs elsewhere in the UK are equivalent to National 5s in Scotland (which replaced Standard Grades, which in turn had replaced O Grades). Scottish Highers sit between

AS and A Levels. Advanced Highers are broadly equivalent to A Levels (although are worth slightly more points for university entry).