

NEW SCHOOL GEOGRAPHIES:

Engaging young people?

Submitted by Helen Gwyneth Griffiths, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Geography, September 2009.

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Abstract

In 2003 school geography was in a state of crisis: enrolment in GCSE¹ geography courses had fallen by a third over the previous eight years. In response, a radical new 'pilot' geography GCSE course was designed and implemented in England. The GCSE was an attempt to rejuvenate a school subject that had become out of date, with little change to its content since the inauguration of the National Curriculum in 1988. With student-centred learning at its heart the GCSE aimed to make the subject much more exciting and relevant to young people.

The following thesis examines alternative pedagogical approaches to teaching school geography that draw on young people's experiences as citizens and consumers to make geography more relevant and interesting to them. Written as an unfolding story this multi-sited ethnography began by exploring the networks behind the pilot. This involved not only several different actors/groups of actors (including geography educators, academic geographers, geography teachers and school pupils) but also several different spaces (including schools, classrooms, organisation headquarters, working group meetings and publications). It moves on to examine how the GCSE's approaches to teaching, learning and assessing were being played out in practice and to what extent its aims, claims and intentions were being realised in the classroom. Through exploring the pilot's approach to the pedagogy of school geography my research became action-oriented in approach, and I became involved in co-creating critical, connective curriculum materials for the GCSE. The development of these new materials and teaching and learning strategies are situated within debates in human geography about critical pedagogy, young people's geographies and public geographies and the thesis forges links between these different theoretical strands. I conclude by asking what lessons can be learnt from the pilot GCSE and its implications for the role of geography within a wider educational context. Written autoethnographically to reflect the collaborative and iterative nature of my research my intention has been to critically engage with multiple publics who are involved in this area.

¹ GCSE stands for General Certificate of Secondary Education- these are a set of qualifications that pupils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland study for from ages 14-16.

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List of Abbreviations

Symbol	Definition
CWG	Citizenship Working Group
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools and Families (from 2007)
DfES	Department for Education and Skills (from 2001-2007)
GA	Geographical Association
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education (from 1986)
GMC	Geographies of Material Culture: 3 rd year undergraduate module at the University of Birmingham run by Ian Cook
GNC	Geography National Curriculum
GWG	Geography Working Group
IoE	Institute of Education
KS	Key Stage
NC	National Curriculum
PGWG	Public Geographies Working Group
OCR	Oxford, Cambridge & RSA Examinations
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (prior to April 2007 known as the Office for Standards in Education)
QCA	Qualification and Curriculum Authority
RGS-IBG	Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers)
SLN	Staffordshire Learning Net
Tide~	Teachers in Development Education
YPG	Young People's Geographies Project