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Children, childhood and children's geographies: evolving through technology

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Abstract

Technology is increasingly part of society's institutional fabric (Van Dijck, 2013), and is changing communication (Kitchin, Linehan, O'Callaghan and Lawton, 2013), how social space is produced, and how lives and geographies are represented. The advancement of a digital age (Walshe and Healy, 2020) has sparked debates about the opportunities and challenges these changes bring. Livingstone and Bovill (2002) conceptualise these debates as existing between optimists (who perceive that technological advancements offer opportunities for the evolution of democracy), and pessimists (who raise concerns about challenges to traditional authority and systems). These debates are often of particular concern when considering children and technology. This chapter examines how the evolution of, and access to, technology (specifically Web 2.0, including social media) has changed children's geographies. To do this it draws on both academic debate, and my doctoral research, endeavoring to include and represent young people in these discussions. It then critically considers how, and why, these changes (and children's geographies more broadly) are of value to geography education in schools.

Introduction

Children are central to education, and education is often a central part of children's lives. On initial reading this statement seems unproblematic. However, the relationships between children's everyday lives, geographies and knowledge, and the specialist knowledge they engage with in schools as part of their formal education, is much debated. These debates are

philosophical, for example in considering the purpose of schooling (Young, Lambert, Roberts and Roberts, 2014) and its potential for emancipation (Freire, 1970) and human flourishing (Reiss and White, 2013). They are also highly practical, as teachers engage with what Lambert and Morgan (2010) term 'curriculum making' – which represents the process in which 'the curriculum comes in to being via the day-to-day interactions between teachers, their students and the subject discipline' (Lambert and Biddulph, 2014, p215).

Geography is in a unique position in relation to these debates, as a major area of research in the academic discipline is everyday life. This includes the study of children's and young people's geographies. Tani (2011) argues the importance of these debates for geography as a school subject, and asserts that geography is one of the few spaces in the school curriculum "in which students' experiences and relationships with their environments can be taken into account" (p.27). However, despite Tani and others (Young People's Geographies Project, 2011; Biddulph, 2012; Yarwood and Tyrell, 2012; Catling, 2014; Roberts, 2017) extolling the benefits of engaging with ideas, and methodologies, from the academic discipline to actively consider children's geographies in the school classroom, barriers often exist which prevent this from happening in practice (Catling, 2011). These barriers can be multi-faceted and commonly include: time and space in the curriculum, teacher education and teachers' knowledge of children's geographies, and the existence of accountability and performativity pressures in schools (Catling, 2011; Hammond, forthcoming).

The context of a digital world (Walshe and Healy, 2020) brings new dimensions, and areas of consideration, to these discussions. This is because technology is changing children's lives and geographies, as well as perceptions and representations of childhood. Examining these debates is of value to geography education in developing teachers' knowledge of the children they teach and considering the social contexts that both they, and their students, exist within and contribute to. This knowledge can both inform, and support, teachers as they engage in curriculum making.

This chapter considers these debates specifically focusing on the development of Web 2.0 (including social media) since the 1990s. It argues that if geography education in schools fails to critically consider, and engage with, children's geographies (including their experiences of a digital world), then it risks creating what Freire (1970) terms 'banking education'. In this situation "education becomes an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor" (Freire, 1970, p.45). Students are conceptualised only as being able to receive information that the teacher provides. Thus, children's opportunities for meaning-making and engaging in student-teacher reciprocal dialogue is limited, along with respect for, and engagement with, children's everyday knowledge and geographies.

In considering children's rich, and varied, experiences and imaginations of the world, this chapter begins by examining what is meant by childhood and children's geographies. It then examines how developments in digital technology over the last thirty years have changed both children's lives and the 'production of space' (Lefebvre, 1991). Following this, the chapter draws upon, and shares, the narratives of young people who participated in research I conducted as part of my doctorate. This section focusses specifically on sharing children's experiences, and perceptions, of a digital world. The chapter then concludes by considering how, and why, these debates are important for school geography and raises questions for consideration by geography educators, to move these debates forward.

What is childhood, and what are children's geographies?

The concepts of children and childhood are familiar to most people, and are often ingrained in shared social imaginations of the world. Indeed, they can be so familiar to us that they can seem 'natural' (Matthews and Limb, 1999; Aitken, 2001; Skelton, 2008). However, "childhood is a contested notion" (Freeman and Tranter, 2015, p.491) and children are not a homogenous group. Debates in the academy now acknowledge children, and childhood, as being socially constructed and historically situated (rather than solely biologically defined: Valentine, Skelton and Chambers, 1998). Furthermore, children are recognised as having an active role in constructing their own social identities (Skelton, 2008), and as contributing to the production of social space (Lefebvre, 1991; Hammond, 2019).

Research into, and debates about, children and young people was absent for much of the early development of geography as an academic discipline (Aitken, 2001; Freeman and Tranter, 2015). In 1970s North America, academics including Bunge and Bordessa began to examine the everyday geographies, and spatial repression, of children (Aitken, 2001). This work was both fueled by, and informed, wider socio-political debates, for example about inequality, as well as discourse in the academy about the role of the geography in researching and representing all people(s) (Peet, 2013).

From its emergence as a sub discipline, a key area of concern in children's geographies has been not only to further knowledge about children's experiences and imaginations of the world, but to provide opportunities for children to share their voices. This philosophy has informed the design of participatory, and emancipatory, methodologies, which have been developed in the field (van Blerk et al., 2009); these critically consider the ethics, politics and power relations of working with children and young people (Valentine et al., 1998). These

philosophies, and debates, also inform discourse as to if, and how, young people are able to participate in their communities (McKendrick, 2009).

Today, children's geographies is a vibrant, and growing, sub-discipline. Research into, and debates about, children's geographies is diverse, international and interdisciplinary. With other socio-political groups such as policy makers, and Non-Governmental Organisations, also engaging with debates in the field (Holloway and Pilmott-Wison, 2011; Holt, 2011). However, despite advances in the sub discipline, concerns have also been raised as to the extent to which children's geographies sometimes acts as a gated community (Horton, Kraftl and Tucker, 2008; Holt, 2011). This can be seen to have resulted in knowledge, methodologies and debates about children's geographies sometimes remaining in the confines of the sub disciplines' dedicated conferences and journals (Horton, Kraftl and Tucker, 2008; Holt, 2011). If we consider knowledge about children's geographies to be of value to geography teachers in their curriculum making, then this raises important philosophical, and practical, questions for geography as a school subject. These include critically considering if, how, and why, school geography can, and should, access, engage with, and use, knowledge about children's geographies.

Before considering how, and why, ideas might be shared between children's geographies and geography education, the chapter introduces the context of a digital world. It focusses specifically on how changes in technology have changed the lives, and geographies, of children and young people. This draws on both what is written in academic literature, but also listens to the perspectives of young people themselves.

Changing technology, changing children's geographies?

Although now thoroughly ingrained in the social fabric, and everyday lives, of a substantial proportion on the world's population, the World Wide Web (www) is a fairly recent phenomenon. It was invented in 1991, with Web 2.0 emerging shortly after the millennium. The advent of Web 2.0 has transformed how information is shared, disseminated, consumed and responded to (Kitchin, Linehan, O'Callaghan and Lawton, 2013), and it has shifted communication to be increasingly interactive and two-way. According to Van Dijck (2013) these technological changes have resulted in a layer of platforms which "influences human interaction on an individual and community level, as well as on a larger societal level" (p.4). These changes in technology have resulted in significant changes to people's everyday lives, and how they choose to represent and share their own lives, as well as how they are

represented by others. These changes have also altered social space and how it is produced, as well as conceptions and representations of time.

Considerable socio-political debate about the impacts of living in a digital age have ensued since the advent and growth of Web 2.0 including social media. Livingstone and Bovill (2002) conceptualise the debates as existing between optimists and pessimists. They argue that optimists perceive that technological advancements offer new opportunities for creativity and play, and also opportunities to enhance democracy and to provide voice to people who have previously been under-represented (e.g. children and young people). In contrast, pessimists raise concerns about the potential for these technological changes to lead to the challenging of authority and traditional values, as well arguing that they may lead to social impacts from a different, and perhaps more sedentary, lifestyle (Livingstone and Bovill, 2002).

In line with the widely argued social construction of children as angels (who are vulnerable and need protecting) and devils (who need controlling) (Valentine, 1996);, debates about the impacts of technology have often had a 'pessimistic' (Livingstone and Bovill, 2002) focus when they consider children and young people. In a variety of socio-political spaces, concerns have been raised about technological change, and the context of a digital world, affecting both children's lives and parenting (Ofcom, 2017; Plowman, Stephen and McPake, 2010; Livingstone and Smith, 2014). For example, Livingstone and Smith (2014) highlight some of the concerns of children engaging with social media as being: "cyberbullying, contact with strangers, sexual messaging ('sexting') and pornography" (p.636). They argue that these concerns have, at times, become the subject of large scale political, and public, debates which attract the interest of a variety of people(s) including parents and carers, educationalists, and clinicians (Livingstone and Smith, 2014).

Despite research rarely making positive connections between social media use and desirable outcomes for children and young people (Plowman et al., 2010), some benefits of children engaging with a digital world are acknowledged and extolled. These include an increased access to a more diverse range of information, increased opportunities for sharing one's voice and active participation in different social and political forums, and new spaces of play being created. Glascott Burris and Wright (2001) also suggest that changes in technology have changed dynamics between the adult and the child, with children sometimes having more extensive experience, and superior knowledge, of technology than adults around them.

Although it is recognised that children are not a homogenous group, and therefore they will engage with technology in a multitude of different ways, the scale of social changes that have

been born out of the advent and growth of Web 2.0, including social media, are worthy of examination. In the case of the United Kingdom (UK), Ofcom (2017) report that 99% of young people aged between 12 and 15 (the age range of the young people in the research examined later in this chapter) go online for at least 21 hours per week, 90% use YouTube and 74% have a social media profile. Although this data does not tell us why, or how, young people are engaging with the internet, or the impacts it has, or has had, on their geographies, it helps us to conceptualise Web 2.0 as being ingrained in young people's daily lives in the UK. The social nature of the platforms young people are engaging with, also represent changes in both the production of space, and representation of life and being, through technological change.

Thus far in this chapter, I have introduced the concept of the child and the sub discipline of children's geographies. Following this, I examined debates about how children's geographies and conceptions of childhood have changed with, and through, technological advancements. However, until now children's voices have been missing from this chapter. In line with one of the primary aims of the sub discipline of children's geographies, to conduct research with and for children, and to empower and enable children to share their voices (van Blerk et al., 2009), I now introduce my doctoral research. Following this, I share narratives of young people who took part in the research, about their experiences and perceptions of living in a digital world.

Introducing the research

My doctoral research was an investigation into children's geographies and their value to geography education in schools. Recognising that children have different experiences and imaginations of the world (Matthews and Limb, 1999), which may also be difficult for adults to fully understand, I began my research by listening to children's voices. I did this through collecting data from a series of six semi-structured interviews with a group of five young people, aged 13, in London, through a 'storytelling and geography group'.

The methodology drew on Goodson's (2013) work on life histories, and encouraged young people to share their geographies, and imaginations, of London. Life histories research involves the triangulation of oral data, with the historical context and other narratives. This enables active consideration of how individual (and private) narratives interweave with public (and shared) narratives (Goodson, 2013). The value of this, and the group nature of the interviews, lies in making connections between the geographies of individuals, and broader

socio-cultural narratives (such as the evolution of a digital world), which the young people both shape and are shaped by (Cameron, 2012).

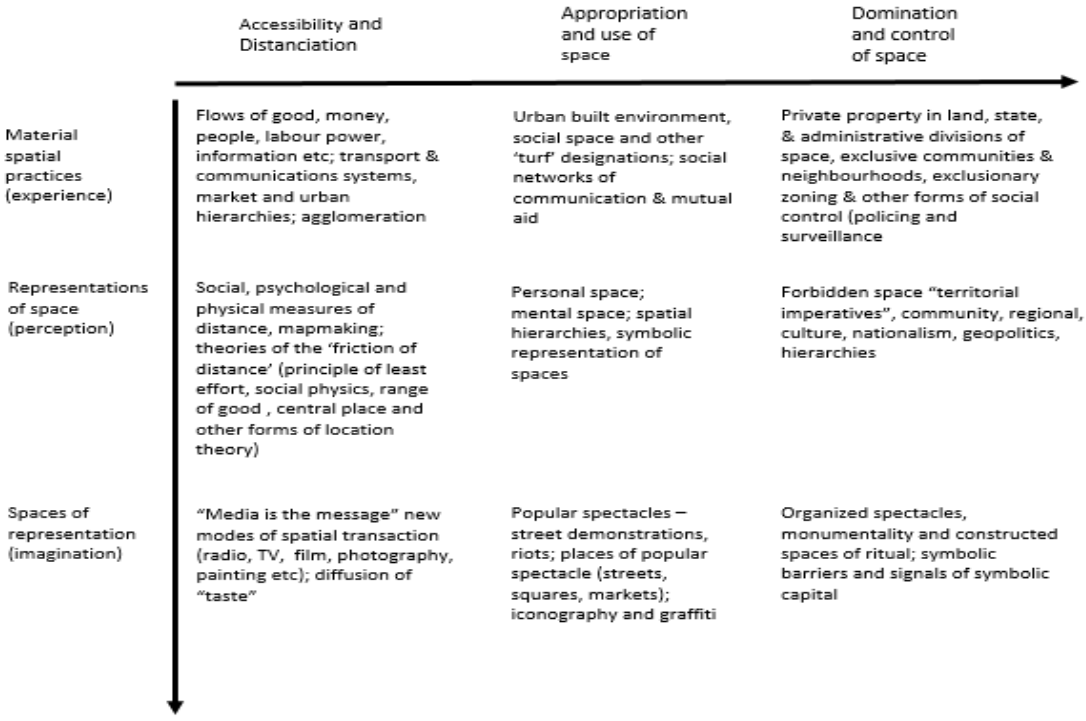
Following data collection, the recordings of the 'storytelling and geography group' were transcribed. They were then inductively coded to condense the data and identify themes for further examination. Whilst this process enabled me to cluster and categorise data, overlap between themes led to their potential under-examination. This led me to engage in a second cycle of coding, in which I used Harvey's (1990) 'grid of spatial practices' (see Figure 5.1) to code the narratives within, and across, the themes from the first cycle of coding

Harvey's (1990) grid of spatial practices was developed from, and informed by, Henri Lefebvre's (1991) work on the production of space. Motivated by what he described as his 'critical conscience' on everyday life (Elden, 2006, p190), Lefebvre sought to 'grasp how the production of space, patterns of state spatial organization, and geographies of socio-political struggle are being reshaped under late twentieth-century capitalism' (Brenner and Elden, 2009, p25). In his book 'The Production of Space' (translated into English from his native French in 1991), Lefebvre introduces a conceptual triad to support the consideration of how space is produced, sustained and evolves. The dimensions of this triad are: spatial practices, representations of space and representational space. Harvey's definition of these terms are included in Figure 5.1. However, to facilitate further examination of the complexities and subtleties of spatial practices in urban settings, Harvey (1990) adds three further dimensions to Lefebvre's triad (Figure 5.1):

> Accessibility and distanciation speak to the role of the 'friction of distance' in human affairs. Distance is both a barrier and a defense against human interaction. It imposes transaction costs upon any system of production and reproduction (particularly those based on any elaborate social division of labor, trade, and social differentiation of reproductive functions). Distanciation is simply a measure of the degree to which the friction of space has to be overcome to accommodate social interaction;
>
> The appropriation of space examines the way in which space is used and occupied by individuals, classes, or other social groupings. Systematized and institutionalized appropriation may entail the production of territorially founded forms of social solidarity;
>
> The domination of space reflects how individuals or powerful groups dominate the organization and production of space so as to exercise a

> greater degree of control either over the friction of distance or over the manner in which space is appropriated by themselves or others (Harvey, 1990, pp.258-259)

Figure 5.1 Harvey's (1990:257) 'Grid of Spatial Practices'



Material spatial practices
Refer to the physical and material flows, transfers and inter-actions that occur in and across space in such a way as to assure production and social reproduction

Representations of space
Encompass all of the signs and signifiers, codes and knowledge, that all such material practices to be talked about and understood, no matter whether in terms of everyday common sense or through the arcane jargon of the academic disciplines that deal with spatial practices (engineering, architecture, geography, planning, social ecology, and the like)

Spaces of representation
Are social inventions (codes, signs, and even material constructs such as symbolic spaces, particular built environments, paintings, museums and the like) that seek to generate new meanings and possibilities for spatial practices

Harvey explains that the "dimensions of the grid are not independent of each other" (p.259). For example, any domination of space may lead to some people(s) feeling a friction of distance from people, or the place and/or time-space, they exist within. The work of Lefebvre

(1991) and Harvey (1990) are of value in analysing this research, as they enable examination of how young people are shaped by, and shape, social space. In considering the context of a digital world, this can provide insight into young people(s) lives and geographies, as well as enabling us to consider their imaginations of technology and the digital world(s) they exist within and contribute to.

I now move on to examine the narratives of the young people in the research, specifically focussing on those reflecting their experiences, and imaginations, of a digital world.

Children's narratives about living digital world

A key finding of the research was that the children in the study navigated multiple, sometimes contradictory, social spaces when constructing and representing themselves, and their identities, in London. The context of a digital world featured strongly in two themes, related to identity, in the analysis. These were:

Voice and identity: This theme included narratives related to the use social media to share experiences of being and life;

Gender, sex, sexuality and identity: This theme included narratives in which the children considered access to what Harvey's (1990) grid terms 'forbidden spaces' (e.g. pornography and information about crimes) via the internet. Narratives also included consideration of how sex, sexuality and gender are represented on, and through, (social) media (including music videos), and also using social media to share and learn about others' relationship status.

The remainder of this section will focus on sharing the narratives of young people who took part in the research on the two themes highlighted above, beginning with voice and identity. All names given are pseudonyms. Following this, I will move on to consider the value of considering these debates to school geography.

One area of discussion that emerged during the 'storytelling and geography group' considered how, and why, young people share their lives and stories with others. In the narrative below, Jessica talks about a gang in her locality, who she explains are 'reppin' for' (representing) their lives and area, through a rap they have uploaded to YouTube:

> Jessica: while that one, it doesn't really, but it does set a bad example for London in a way. Because people are just gonna think, it's just full of teenagers, with alcohol, and rappers, and stuff like that. But most places

where you go, will have like a gang, that rap about their area, you know what I'm sayin'?

Researcher: why do you think that is?

Jessica: because like, they want people to know, like people that aint like us, like the Prime Minister or something, but they aint gonna listen to it are they? But basically, what I'm trying to say, this is my opinion, I think they're trying to let people know about our area, and how they grow up and stuff

Researcher: and what do they say that their lives are like?

Jessica: some of them say that their life's been hard, and also how they got into the gang, and they rap about what they do in the gang and stuff.

Jessica's narrative can be interpreted as her expressing a perspective that young people are often not listened to by powerful people(s), and institutions, within society. Her narratives can be seen to reflect a perspective that the gang feel, and are expressing, a 'friction of distance' (Harvey, 1990; Figure 5.1) from society because of who they are and their socio-economic backgrounds. They can be seen to reflect a perceived lack of voice in societal debates, which is, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, a fundamental area of interest for children's geographies. However, the context of a digital world, and in this case YouTube, can be interpreted as providing them with both a platform to, and perhaps a sense of opportunity and hope that theycan, share their lives and voices with others. Including those who they perceive to be powerful, and whom they may not have previously communicated with.

The second theme analysed as related to identity in a digital world, is gender, sex, sexuality . Like voice, gender, sex and sexuality are often fundamental to a person's identity (Jackson, 1992). However, Brown and Browne (2016) argue that despite the fact they have often been present, they have rarely been explicitly addressed in human geography. Further to this, children's experiences and imaginations of sex and sexuality are often perceived as an 'uncomfortable' topic for many people (Brown and Browne, 2016). For example, Anglo-European cultures often socially repress discussions about sex and sexuality which include reference to children (Foucault, 1978; Aitken, 2001), with Valentine et al., 1999, p24) arguing that there has been "very little consistent research on questions of sex, sexuality and gender" related to young people.Valentine, et al. (1998) go on to state that the research that has been undertaken, often relates to preventing the spread of Sexually Transmitted

Infections (STIs) or stopping teenage pregnancies, as opposed to exploring young people's perceptions and experiences of sex, sexuality and gender.

Throughout the 'storytelling and geography group', the young people shared multiple narratives that related to this theme. A large proportion of these narratives can be interpreted as relating to the context of a digital world. For example, the young people discussed using social media to share their relationship status, and accessing pornography websites via their mobile phones. As reflected in the narrative below which focuses on Nicki Minaj's song 'Anaconda', they also consider how gender, sexuality and sex, are represented in the media:

> Jack: it was just a smoking guy, some old guy. Miss, you see when Jessica was talking about the guy, and people rapping about stuff, and people talking about sex. You see that probably got a million views, 'Anaconda' the new song, she's just showing her cleavage and her arse.
>
> Jessica: her arse
>
> Tilly: she's famous already
>
> Jack: that got, that got, in two hours that got 300 views. 3 million views sorry
>
> Jessica: you don't have to show your arse, and your boobs, and your cleavage and everything, and your belly and your legs
>
> Tilly: I think it's kind of sexist!
>
> Jack: the video is so, the video is so bad!
>
> Jessica: You just don't have to show your legs and stuff just to get famous and just to get loads of views on it.
>
> Rachel: nowadays the majority of people do
>
> Tilly: yeah, you do kind of have to do that!

This discussion can be read as the young people critically considering the portrayal, and representations, of gender and sex in the song Anaconda. The group discuss complex social issues such as ethics related to Minaj's singing, dancing, and dressing, in a sexually provocative manner. Considering further as to whether there is a social pressure for women to do this to 'get views' (on media and social media platforms), and to become famous.

These two examples of children's narratives about dimensions of identity in a digital world, highlight the complexities of navigating, and shaping, a variety of social spaces as a young

person, in this case in London. I now move on to consider the value of children's geographies to geography education in schools, before concluding the chapter.

Towards valuing children's geographies in geography education in schools

Children's geographies, and how they change (for example, through a digital world) raise important pedagogical questions for geography education in school these include how, and why, teachers consider, value and connect to, children's everyday knowledge and geographies in the classroom. Considering these questions is significant, both in supporting students with meaning-making as they connect to specialist geographical knowledge in schools (Roberts, 2017), and also in respecting children's rich, and varied, experiences and imaginations of the world, and sometimes, supporting children in questioning and deconstructing their views.

They also raise important questions about curriculum. As geography as a discipline studies everyday life and children's geographies, why should this not be an area of study in schools? Lambert and Morgan (2010) point out that school geography has at times been 'socially selective' about what is, or has been, included in the curriculum. Education is always political (Catling, 2014), but it is of value to consider why children's geographies have often been excluded from school geography. Although this may be the result of fields of knowledge sometimes acting as 'gated communities', it is also worthy of critical consideration as to if, how, and why, children have, at times, been subordinated by society and schooling (Freire, 1970; Foucault, 1978; Catling, 2014; Giddens, 2016).

I argue that these questions are of value in paving paths to cross 'borders' (Castree, Fuller and Lambert , 2007) between fields of knowledge (in this case geography education and children's geographies: Hammond, forthcoming), and also for teachers making decisions about curriculum, pedagogy and purpose as they engage in curriculum making. These debates are pertinent, as although students, and their experiences and everyday knowledge, are often included and represented in many models and approaches to teaching geography (e.g. Bennetts' [2005] 'roots of understanding' model; Lambert and Morgan's [2010] 'curriculum making' model; the GeoCapabilities [2016] approach), if children's geographies (both as shared by children themselves, and the sub-discipline) are not considered in school geography, then we risk constructing a banking model of education. This concern is particularly relevant in the context of accountability and performativity pressures that schools now face (Biddulph, Lambert and Balderstone, 2015), and the questions raised here aim to offer some suggestions for consideration to support these debates in moving forward.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted that children's geographies and imaginations of the world are rich and varied, as is the study of them in the sub discipline children's geographies. The context of a digital world is changing the lives and geographies of children and young people in diverse ways, as well as changing the production of space. It is both offering opportunities (e.g. new spaces of play, access to information, and opportunities for voice), and challenges and dangers (e.g. sexting, open access to hardcore pornography, and a more sedentary lifestyle). These changes are both experienced, and imagined, by the children and young people, and they are researched and represented in the academy.

For geography education in schools, the context of a digital world and changing children's geographies offers new opportunities to critically consider how, and why, children's geographies are respected, and explored, in the classroom. Although, the digital world and the changes it has brought to children's geographies raise some, often difficult, questions (as they relate to identity, and the relationships between adults and children in schools, and potentially changing curriculum and pedagogical approaches), these questions are important to geography education. This is because knowledge of children's geographies, as drawn from both the academic discipline and shared by children themselves, has the potential to make geography teachers more informed in their curriculum making. Further to this, as geography offers one of the few spaces in the curriculum where children and young people can engage with, and connect to, specialised knowledge which examines (their own) everyday geographies, thus having the potential to enable children to situate, and explain, their geographies (Hammond, forthcoming).

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