Article

Primary Geography as Challenging, even *Dangerous*[*]

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Primary Geography as Challenging, even *Dangerous**

Abstract

Primary geography is rather comfortable subject. It tends to avoid 'unacceptable', threatening and potentially dangerous geography topics. Considering challenge and 'danger' in primary geography is not so much about fieldwork dangers as about intellectually, emotionally and socially dangerous topics, locally and globally. The tendency is to teach what is acceptable and not to ruffle feathers, except perhaps ever so gently. The desire is to focus on the positive about the world, to be hopeful. But this may not always be wise. Four arguments for a comfortable approach in primary geography are outlined and challenged. The argument is that 'playing safe' in an unsafe world, for even younger children, keeps them uninformed and needs to be challenged. The desire to be positive must not undermine being realistic and honest with children, who are capable and resilient. To make a case for taking a more demanding, even 'dangerous', approach in primary geography, examples are given to indicate challenging geography topics which younger children can investigate. Inevitably, the emergent question is who geography is taught for. Essentially, the purpose of this article is to raise questions, to think more openly and to encourage reflection on the role of (geographical) education in today's world.

Keywords: Primary geography. Challenging geography. Dangerous geography. Local geography. Global geography.

A geografia dos anos iniciais como desafiadora e *perigosa*

Resumo

A geografia dos anos iniciais (AI) é um assunto muito confortável. Ela tende a evitar tópicos da Geografia considerados "inaceitáveis", ameaçadores ou potencialmente perigosos. Considerar desafio e "perigo" na Geografia dessa fase escolar não é tanto sobre os perigos do trabalho de campo, mas sim sobre tópicos intelectuais, emocionais e socialmente perigosos, local e globalmente. A tendência é ensinar o que é aceitável e não causar desconforto, focar os aspectos positivos do mundo, demonstrar esperança. Mas isso não é sempre recomendável. Aqui se descrevem e

questionam quatro argumentos em prol dessa abordagem confortável. O argumento que recomenda "ir com cuidado" num mundo inseguro, mesmo quando pensamos em crianças menores, mantém o indivíduo desinformado, e por isso deve ser questionado. O desejo de ser otimista não deve comprometer o ato de ser realista e honesto com as crianças, que por sua vez são capazes e resilientes. Para sustentar a proposta de uma abordagem mais exigente e mesmo mais "perigosa" da Geografia dos AI, sugerimos alguns tópicos que podem ser investigados pelas crianças. Surge então a inevitável pergunta: a quem ensinamos Geografia? O objetivo deste ensaio é levantar questionamentos e trazer uma reflexão sobre o papel da educação (em Geografia) no mundo atual.

Palavas-chave: Geografia dos anos iniciais. Geografia desafiadora. Geografia perigosa. Geografia local. Geografia global.

La geografía primaria como desafiante, incluso peligrosa

Resumen

La geografía primaria es un tema bastante cómodo. Tiende a evitar temas geográficos "inaceptables", amenazantes y potencialmente peligrosos. Considerar el desafío y el "peligro" en la geografía primaria no se trata tanto de los peligros del trabajo de campo como de los temas intelectual, emocional y socialmente peligrosos, a nivel local y global. La tendencia es enseñar lo que es aceptable y no causar incomodidad, enfocarse en los aspectos positivos del mundo, demostrar esperanza. El deseo es centrarse en lo positivo del mundo, tener esperanza. Pero esto no siempre puede ser sabio. Se describen y cuestionan cuatro argumentos a favor de un enfoque cómodo en la geografía primaria. El argumento es que "jugar a lo seguro" en un mundo inseguro, incluso para los niños más pequeños, los mantiene desinformados y necesita ser cuestionado. El deseo de ser positivo no debe socavar el ser realista y honesto con los niños, que son capaces y resistentes. Para justificar la adopción de un enfoque más exigente, incluso "peligroso", en la geografía primaria, se dan ejemplos para indicar temas de geografía desafiantes que los niños más pequeños pueden investigar. Inevitablemente, la pregunta emergente es para quién se enseña geografía. Esencialmente, el propósito de este artículo es plantear preguntas, pensar más abiertamente y alentar la reflexión sobre el papel de la educación (geográfica) en el mundo actual.

Palabras clave: Geografía primaria. Geografía desafiante. Geografía peligrosa. Geografía local. Geografía mundial.

Introduction

Teaching geography with younger children, be they 4-5 or 9-10 years old, reflects views about appropriate contexts and values for their education. The international consensus seems to be that younger children should have the opportunity to develop in primary school in a calm and organised way without the challenges and dangers of the wider world impacting on them. The school's role is to provide a safe environment. Yet, it must be noted that these self-same children spend more of their lives outside school, in the reality of their local world, their homes and neighbourhood. This real world involves everyday places, their homes, shops, streets and play spaces alongside family, friends, acquaintances and strangers. Most of these are ordinary and friendly people and places, but younger children's lives are not free of challenges, contradictions, difficulties and even dangers. Traffic is a normal danger for most children, but there are many more from stairwells to water, from crowded places to isolated routes, from myriad advertising to the world wide web. There is much in this real world which adults wish to safeguard children from, to an extent successfully but not always. Younger children have ways to find out about, gain access to and explore real and digital dangerous places, maybe with friends, beyond their carers' knowledge.

Children bring into pre-school and school a broad awareness and knowledge, albeit constrained, of the world beyond the school gate, because that world is a key aspect of their lives. It is varied and differs between children, related to their circumstances and themselves (Catling and Pike, 2023), where they live, their family and the urban, suburban or rural places they and their carers engage with. There may be few or many dangers in their lives in the places where they live They may be well chaperoned by adults and siblings or they may have a fair degree of personal responsibility for their own safekeeping when out in their locality. Younger children need to be geographically aware in their locale and keep their wits about them to avoid the dangers that lurk. To be aware, they need to be informed and to be alert.

A primary geography curriculum, wherever it is provided nationally, has a responsibility to enable children to know about their neighbourhood and the wider area. It is important that geography, as the subject which can best help younger children know about and appreciate their place, ensures they gain a rounded sense of the area, which goes beyond a straightforward description of its facilities and services, its physical context and the non-contentious aspects from the types of buildings and shops to traffic and pedestrian routes to the jobs people do and the locality's connections with other nearby and distant places. Limited to these aspects of its area, the subject in primary education provides just a closed and comfortable geography.

This article makes the case for providing a more challenging geography to teach primary children, and why this is important, indeed necessary, in the modern world. For a few teachers this is non-problematic, but other readers may regard this perspective as contentious and inappropriate, perhaps viewing it as raising overly sensitive matters in and for the primary curriculum and children. The article's premise is that primary geography focuses, around the world, too often and too much on a 'comfortable' geography, providing an oasis of calm and

optimism, a simplistic escape for children from the real world in which they live, reflecting this sense of what a primary school should do. But is this appropriate, right, or fair – not least for younger children? Should not primary geography focus on the local world *as it is*, not the image that most if not all adults consider it would be 'nice' to provide?

The intention and focus of this article *is* serious, suggesting that the world and the discipline of geography is not what, in very many cases, we 'market' them to be for younger children and their teachers – nor should this be the case. Certainly, there are valid concerns about the need to shelter younger children from danger; yet to over-protect them from knowing what the world, at hand and afar, is really like, does them a grave disservice, especially in the current and interconnected world, which they seem readily able to access, not least by intimating that children are needful of a secure and enclosed environment rather than be treated credibly as resilient, intelligent, thoughtful and able people who can cope with honesty about the world – even as we acknowledge that they come from and live in the messy world that lies beyond their safe school building and grounds. Thus, implicitly this article raises questions about what and who geography education is for, as not only a knowledge pursuit but as an ethical, emotional, realistic and day-to-day one.

An opening salvo

As an introduction to the ideas about and realities of places, environments and the world for younger children, geography tends to focus on providing brief, informative descriptions and some technical explanations of local areas or larger regions and of thematic aspects and features of different human and physical environments. In several western nations this approach served colonial purposes, indeed, infusing these countries' colonies with such perspectives looking to and from the 'motherland' as the key basis for subservient national thinking about the world (Radcliffe, 2022; Sharp, 2023). Concomitantly, it had a similar role with younger children, providing them with a singular world view but also creating a sense of the 'discipline' of school as a place to be and learn what is set. Essentially, in both contexts, this is about power in, about, of and for place, who holds and exercises that power over whom and what, its impact on people's lives and their places, and the way it seeps into their everydayness, both obviously and at times unrealised. Simple descriptions of the everyday helps to make them appear normal because they are presented as uncontentious and non-controversial. While the everyday can seem thus, it can give the (misleading) impression that daily life is uncontested. Yet there is much that raises concerns in any locality though it may be side-lined or even hidden, such as the types of shops seen to be acceptable in a community, the impact of traffic in side streets and solutions to this, and the types of housing allowed in an area and for whom – and by whom.

Critical and radical geographies have challenged the 'taken-for-granted' for many years (Peet, 1977; Berg et al., 2016; Santos, 2021). Their perspectives have not always been welcome, providing as they do for missing and alternative voices, minority perspectives and challenges to a comfortable view of the local area and the world around. Examining the aspects of places and

lives lived can be uncomfortable and problematic; it may even be perceived to be somewhat dangerous, for it opens ways to look at the places around us and the wider world as it affects us and it raises serious questions and challenges our ways of living and thinking about the world. The children's and young people's demonstrations about the ever-increasing severity of climate change impacts have provided such challenges but are seen as dangerous by some in our societies. Such challenges to 'comfortable' geographies are having the impact of creating changes to perceptions, appreciations and activities. To create and have this affect is by no means beyond the capabilities and engagement of younger children. Indeed, this is just the way to develop geography with primary school children; it is an approach that should be taken (Catling, 2022), if not all the time, at least as a key component of and approach in teaching primary geography. It engages children with the reality of the localities and world in which they live and to which they will have opportunities to contribute to in their future lives.

Primary geography has the potential to be dangerous. Children's desire to know about the world leads them to ask questions. Questioning by children can be highly problematic. Questions can be demanding, challenging, even intrusive, showing up ignorance and what some, often many, prefer to be left unsaid and unexplored. For the curious – our learners – geography explores the unknown, which has inevitable danger. It can be dangerous for those – their teachers – who are supposed to 'know' the answers, when places and topics studied venture into the 'knowers' unknown. Politicians bluff their way through such danger; teachers can do so too, especially when usure, but in education that is dangerous; children have ways of realising when they are being 'fobbed off'. Children want answers, not generalisations, partial responses or to be told some questions are inappropriate. This is a problem of safety – for someone. While it might not mean being unsafe physically, it can be seen as creating a lack of safety intellectually, emotionally and socially. These notions are significant contexts of danger, as elaborated in Chart 1.

In educational settings it can be dangerous to speak against the grain, to challenge received wisdom and accepted norms, including state or regional curriculum geography requirements, and to offer undesired or different perspectives and ideas to children and teachers. It challenges expectations and norms. Being unconventional, sparky and unpredictable, being unusual, going 'off-piste', and being provocative and contentious are all liable to be labelled as dangerous. Such can be the case when proposing topics within geography's ambit with which many in primary education may be uncomfortable. After all, geography as an intellectual pursuit is not neutral; it comes to judgements within its topics, for much about the world locally and afar is contentious and challenging – dangerous to have to think about – such as the many manifestations of climate change and its impacts (Thunberg, 2022).

Chart 1 – Meanings of dangerous

Types of 'danger'	Elaboration
Being physically unsafe	For instance, investigating a stream or river banks and flow or along a very busy road. Geography fieldwork, alongside its organisation, is viewed as having a range of dangers because the potential for unpredictability when being out in the world in situations in which teachers need to manage children.
Being intellectually or academically unsafe	Such as lacking argument, evidence or logic, stating partial information, presenting unjustified opinions, and offering uncomfortable and radically different perspectives. Where teachers have limited knowledge and understanding of geography, they may see it as dangerous to engage in.
Being emotionally unsafe	For example, creating emotive reactions. Indeed, being unsure of the geography to teach challenges personal confidence, with teachers concerned to be shown up. Teachers may focus on or emphasise reactions to and feelings about places and environments rather than help children develop knowledge about an area which will hinder children's understanding, which in itself is dangerous.
Being socially unsafe	As in espousing reckless actions and reactions, fostering prejudice and bigotry, and promoting unfounded protest, even insurrection. This depends on what is acceptable in the society and culture of the school and community. Teachers tend to 'play safe' and fail to engage in geographical topics which really do need to be explored, even with children, because they upset or discomfort others, such as teachers and parents.

That which is thought to be dangerous is often considered negatively. The dangers inherent in fieldwork can be overcome by undertaking risk assessments effectively and taking and following appropriate health and safety requirements, as well as by using sites noted to be safe. Playing safe, taking the acceptable line, not taking risks, remaining intellectually sound, doing what is perceived as unproblematic and unchallenging, even traditional, and currently approved, within the primary geography curriculum, is seen positively. It seems to be benign, usual and normal: this is what very many adults do, including in schooling. Possibly it is better to keep geography calm and unadventurous, and not to step into the 'dangerous' waters of alternative viewpoints and arguments, exploring unpredictable perspectives, providing challenging questions and not expecting straightforward answers. This is risky. It is difficult to know when to take such risks in primary geography. Thereagain, when is a good time to take risks, to challenge 'doing what is usual'? Perhaps *now* is the right time, given major environmental and place concerns globally, to examine this 'wicked problem' of a contentious, demanding, risky and challenging school subject, metaphorically to go white-water rafting on geography's Colorado river and venture into places and topics considered unsafe and dangerous because they may not provide the predictable responses.

The challenge of dangerous primary geography

In primary schools, most teachers have provided and continue to provide a 'comfortable' geography curriculum, interesting but un-disturbing, which is expected by and acceptable as a

government-approved curriculum. With much discussion of globalisation, critical thinking and de-colonising the curriculum, the question is whether to challenge the secure and largely benign geography that the majority, if perhaps not quite all, primary teachers teach. Why is this? Is it because it is recognised that very many teachers do not want to challenge or be challenged? The evidence from national inspection services in the UK, for example, indicates that only 5-10% of primary teachers feel so confident in teaching geography and other humanities subjects (Catling, 2017), that they are prepared to take up and run with challenging, problematic, and even controversial and insoluble geographical topics. What does this say about what teachers are content to teach of, in and as geography?

Such a reflection intimates that the proposition for and investigation of dangerous geography in primary schools cannot go unchallenged. Critical responses to dangerous primary geography tend to take one or more of four approaches: that primary geography should enable not undermine giving hope in the future to children; exploring local issues can be too controversial; dangerous geography over-expects of primary children; and teachers who lack strong geographical understanding cannot help children appreciate controversial geography topics. These critiques are outlined below, and each is responded to.

Keep primary geography hopeful

One concern is whether examining 'dangerous geography' topics in primary geography negates positivity and offering 'hope' to primary children (Hicks, 2014: Scoffham, 2021). Dangerous geography may well be problematic and troubling in primary geography teaching. Even though dangerous geography is serious geography, it may be felt that it is not for primary children to investigate, for as yet they lack the knowledge and understanding effectively to do so. For younger children, primary classrooms must be places of hope, calm, healing, becoming informed and feeling positive about the world. Primary children may need to consider topics containing controversy, but they should do so within safe constraints, so that they do not come to perceive the world as a place of argument, constant challenge, danger and disagreement; nor that geographical studies are about who has what power, influence and control locally and in the wider world. Such foci can be upsetting for the young. Primary classrooms should be places of reassurance and provide the sound grounding which school subjects like geography require and provide. They should not worry children unnecessarily but ensure hope and positivity. To be other than reassuring courts danger.

Yet dangerous geography topics offer opportunities for inspiration, analysis, reflection and ideas for change and improvement even in unpredictable contexts and world, in which identifying solutions and mitigations while problematic is possible to do. Challenging children to be creative and suggest a range of ways forward in tough and difficult topics – including how to cope alternatively – fosters their awareness, knowledge, criticality, reflections and sense of what matters, even though enacting solutions and changes may be highly problematic and something the children themselves cannot do. Primary teachers of geography should be positive – understanding a problem or issue is positive learning – but realistic and encourage children's sense of contribution, engagement and making a difference. This will not happen if their

geography topics are benign and do not challenge children with new ways of thinking, looking at and for solutions, whether local, national or global. Hope is to do with inspiration and looking forward; exploring it in dangerous geography topics gives hope meaning and provides learning which younger children can tackle. Dangerous geography is based in hope.

Know the local area of the school

There must be care about what is taught which is pertinent to helping younger children understanding a school's locality since some aspects may inflame sensitivities in the neighbourhood by being too 'near the knuckle' for people locally. Concerns about unsafe streets and alleyways is such an example. When a school's staff do not really appreciate the significance of geographical perspectives about the school's and wider area's environments, cultures and societies – and do not wish to cause local upset with parents and governors – there is a natural reluctance to include them within the geography curriculum and explore such concerns with children. In such circumstances, teachers will be reluctant to include dangerous geography topics, even where such topics might help children better to understand their home area and community. Dangerous geography topics that are pursued in class can be contested by members of the local community, for instance through the school governors and parents, because such topics may encourage children to raise questions at home that are not wanted. The primary geography curriculum depends on school leaders' and teachers' personal perspectives of the geographical and social dimensions of their communities. This can be reflected in their sense about whether local topics which might be challenging and dangerous geography are appreciated as serious matters to pursue or whether they are perceived as problematic to the extent that such aspects for investigation are unnecessary 'noise' in geographical studies.

Yet, this is equally an argument for including such challenging local geography studies to enable primary children to better understand their home area. Such issues-oriented and problem-based local topics provide a fuller and rounder insight into the locality, and help children to think through, understand and appreciate the diversity of their neighbourhood and reflect on the inequalities and benefits of their area. This might lead to proposing ways to tackle real local concerns, giving younger children a deeper sense of their geo-citizenship role in society and their community.

Danger lies in over-expectations of children in teaching geography

Children are naturally thoughtful, curious and reflective. Yet the argument persists that it is important not to allow and enable younger children to enquire too deeply into the variety of geography topics they might study; this is not a useful demand on younger minds in a challenging subject. Essentially, primary schooling is about teaching, and children learning through that teaching, not about involving children in curriculum responsibility and decisions, such as how they might undertake geographical studies. Primary children are, after all, not mature or informed enough to contribute usefully within knowledge-based geography topics and lessons. They need its information and to be comfortable with their learning in geography,

be this about locations and place name spellings or the approved descriptions of and reasons set out within social, urban or physical geography. After all, children are in school to be taught the curriculum as pupils. They lack the experience for teachers to call upon. It is timewasting and misleading to expect otherwise of them.

The counter to this perspective is that children bring much to their geography topics and curriculum (Catling and Martin, 2011; Catling and Willy, 2018). It is recognised that not infrequently what children bring is piecemeal information which needs structure within a disciplinary perspective. To provide this is a key role of schooling and learning in geography. What must be recognised, though, is that children have knowledge they can draw on and apply, geographical as much as in other dimensions of their lived experiences and understanding. Within a class this will be diverse (Catling and Pike, 2023). Drawing on children's knowledge, experiences, perspectives, viewpoints and values enables these to be related to geography's framework of key concepts and descriptions and explanations of the subject's place and thematic studies (Catling, 2019, 2021). The value in doing so is to enable children over time to build their sense of the ways geography supports and develops their understanding of the world they experience through first-hand and secondary contexts and sources. Children's agency in their geographical studies fosters their geographical thinking and their more-thoughtful lives in a challenging world which needs their contributions. Having nigh expectations in geography, as in everything else in their primary learning, enables children to develop their agency as geography learners and to give them voice in their geographical learning.

Teachers need to know their geography to tackle its challenging aspects

Teaching dangerous geography depends on how well and deeply primary teachers know and appreciate the subject, its key ideas, the ways it enables understanding of and action in the world, its diversity and more. The key issue lies in the question: what do primary teachers know about geography's non-neutral and controversial topics and how they can be investigated and engaged with well in geography? This is problematic (Catling, 2017, 2022b) and remains a thorny issue, which most governments, school leaders and teachers and have been largely unwilling to tackle for various reasons, including finance for resources, curriculum hierarchy (geography tends to be down the list)m which affects available teaching time, political and social interests in the school and wider community, and the inherent dangers in such geographical topics of examining and reflecting on controversial matters which teachers need the confidence to teach, and engaging with differing and conflicting viewpoints and possible ways forward. Tackling dangerous geography topics is likely to give children the false sense that they can influence matters that affect the world, near and far. Teaching dangerous geography requires primary teachers to know and understand the nature of the topics they teach, and appreciate the demands which this places on them as teachers of younger children. Challenging and dangerous geography is too much to ask of primary teachers.

This critique is a matter of concern, though there is negligible global evidence about the depth and limitations of teachers' knowledge of geography (Catling and Willy, 2018; Catling, 2022). Certainly, dangerous geography provides a challenge for primary teacher. To teach dangerous

geography effectively primary teachers need to understand and appreciate the geography they teach, so that they can enable their children explore geography topics locally and elsewhere. They need to know about local people's place and environmental concerns and issues, and their views on the impacts these have, if they are to help children's investigations be informative, insightful and effective. This is every primary teachers' responsibility for their children in their classes, as it is also their responsibility to introduce them honestly to the realities of the world.

For children properly to begin to and to develop and extend their sense and knowledge of geography, primary teachers must ensure that they have a nuanced understanding and appreciation of the subject in its fullest sense. It means using local resources and materials about other places and thematic concerns on geography which provide children with access to a rounded view of their geography topics. This is important for teaching challenging and dangerous geography, no less than when teaching apparently 'benign' geography topics. Essentially it requires appreciating that no geography topic is benign; it what teachers select and how they teach which opens or closes opportunities for fuller and deeper understanding by children. Community and environmental concerns and issues involve multiple viewpoints; there are no 'single stories' because these are matters of dispute and debate. Some geography topics might be valued because they are perceived as investigating acceptable concerns, such as about ways to tackle street littering, but even these may raise serious and deep concerns and controversial issues, such as ideas for tackling congested traffic use of local roads and actions in national and personal lives to mitigate the effects of climate change. What is required is that teachers set aside their 'discomforts' and realise that teaching dangerous geography, to reiterate, is about opening children's minds, developing critical thinking skills, undertaking in-depth investigations, engaging with different and divergent perspectives, and understanding that there are more often than not straightforward or single responses and 'answers' to the matters which geography examines and seeks to find resolutions for. It is essential that primary teachers appreciate this so that they can provide their children with a stimulating, challenging and enticing awareness of the geographical lens on their own and others places and lives.

Exemplifying 'dangerous' primary geography

To support and exemplify the argument for teaching a dangerous geography it will help to look directly at aspects of geography that might be included in a primary geography curriculum. Several familiar contexts are considered below. As with all aspects of dangerous geographies, these examples raise matters of values, inequality and social justice because nowhere is free of injustice, though it may go unlooked for and be ignored (thus creating a benign geography). The question that this debate and the following examples raise is: what is it that primary children should be able to enquire into, so as to know the world about them more fully? What follows is provided to give pause for recognition, reflection and decisions about what to include in younger children's geography.

Dangerous geography intends to get children thinking, asking questions, making investigations, drawing conclusions and offering ways forward, though their conclusions and solutions may be diverse. Teaching through dangerous geography topics is not an approach

which is about accepting information (whose?) or accepting a view about a place and wider and global concerns (whose view/s?). It engages with multiple viewpoints, at times contradictory arguments, difficult and unresolvable issues, and incompatible possible solutions. It is not about 'easy' answers but about enquiring into, reflecting on and recognising the contentiousness that there is in the world, be this in our own places or in others and about matters that cut across these (Scoffham and Rawlinson, 2022).

Five examples of geographical areas of study are presented: investigating primary school's geographies, enquiring into the school's local area, surveilling spaces, exploring the climate emergency, and investigating what is 'normal' in people's places and lives. The question to bear in mind is not whether such topics may be dangerous when pursued in primary geography but who they might make uncomfortable and why these people would have concerns? It is rarely the case that children will be uncomfortable, because they will engage with the topics, the challenges and thinking through what they find out and where this might lead. Dangerous geography shows children's resilience in learning about the nature of the world in which they live.

Context 1: Investigating primary school's geographies

Primary geography has a long tradition of investigating the children's own primary school. At the 'comfortable' level this can focus on who works in the school and the jobs they do, the uses of sites and spaces within and outside the building and the school grounds, including its physical setting, wildlife that uses the site, and what sort of plants grow where and when, whether intentionally or unintended, and how and why they are treated. For some schools and teachers, it may include the diversity of links through its children, families and staff about their global connections and why they attend this particular school.

When we investigate people's jobs and work in a primary school, various questions can be explored. For instance: who works when, why then, where in the school they work, for whose benefit, what this requires of them, and at what cost? Is the focus of enquiries more on some jobs that others? Is it asked who children see working and engage with often and who rarely, if at all? Do children engage with the comparative rewards for people's work and why there are disparities, and consider the status and hierarchy attached to their work? What would be the consequences if any of these jobs were not done, or were revalued? Some questions might be considered intrusive or of concern, but examining them will tell children about the power relations within the school as a workplace, about who has authority at what level over the spaces of a school, and the diversity of work, roles and sites and their varied significance in the daily geography of a school.

In schools, as in society, life is constrained by regulations. For example, why can children and adults go into some areas and not others, when and under what conditions? For example, consider playtimes in different weathers and 'out-of-bounds' sites. Who decides the rules for these situations and sites? How much is the reasoning communal and shared? Why is access to some sites tendentious, even ignored when it is possible to do so? What do the rules say about whose school it is, and about the community of school? What has such behaviour management to do with exerting control and power in a place and over place? What are the impacts on

whom? There are often good reasons for place rules but do all children and staff appreciate them and are involved in creating them – and if not, why not? If and when they are 'broken' by whom is this and what sanctions ensue? Are the school rules consistently applied fairly, and if not why not? This focus can be explored in our neighbourhoods as well. How do rules apply to the places we inhabit and expectations about ways to treat them – and whose expectations are used, even enforced or ignored?

Such topics in social and environmental geography are about life in our daily spaces and places – and they slip into political geography, the geographies of borders and access and geographies of power. They can seem benign topics, but dig a little deeper and they become dangerous to pursue, since children may raise questions about the power relations in school spaces and whether and to what extent they, the children, are asked to and can contribute to their 'being' of the school and the extent to which they are truly citizens of their school community. What do 'going to', 'being a member of' and 'it's my school' mean to and for children?. Do children need to be recognised as more than an element in a school's geography, by being appreciated as key to its geography, for without them the school has no purpose and is not needed. Its children make a school. To be engaged with its geography children at every age need to have agency within the school, its spaces and their curriculum (Devine, 2003).

Context 2: Enquiring into the school's local area

Consider the school's locality. Primary school localities or catchments are not uniform, though each may share many characteristics with others. Each school neighbourhood differs in various ways from all others. Children usually investigate aspects of their own local area, such as its features and facilities. But it is rare to investigate local inequalities, such as in housing, the differences between streets and neighbourhoods, why there and with what effect? What are people's, including children's, perceptions of social and environmental inequality within their own area, not just elsewhere? Indeed, who lives where within the locality and what are their varied views about local diversity? Are such perspectives accurate and fair? What are the attitudes which emerge from these perceptions, among other impacts?

When schools investigate their local area teachers tend to focus on acceptable information: its location, size and nature, the types and uses of shops, and topics like the types and amount of traffic or litter on the streets. What benefits or concerns do these matters have on people, and how do people feel about them? It has been accepted for many years that these aspects of localities are appropriate to examine and build understanding about with primary children. However, there are disturbing questions to ask, such as about local air pollution and its impact on children' health and lives and what might be done to limit traffic, a well-known cause of this.

When we look at the nature, variety, quality and accessibility of local housing, what focus is taken? Children can map who lives where in class and the school, but do they investigate the social and economic make-up of the neighbourhood or streets? Do these sites have the same status locally? Neighbourhoods are diverse. How are the various streets perceived? The children will be aware, but do teachers explore how they view and perceive their locality, beyond its facilities and perhaps its aesthetics? Is to explore such perspectives valid and just?

Who says it is, and thinks not? Why is this, and what does it tell us about how people consider which local geography is appropriate for younger children? Do geographical studies investigate who lives locally and who 'distantly' but works locally, their views, why they hold them, and their comparative knowledge and sense of the school's neighbourhood and people's lives? How diverse are these views, and do they overlap?

More than this, does primary geography investigate the nature and scale of homelessness in the school's neighbourhood? Who congregates where during the day and why there? Where would be the least pleasant and more sheltered sites to sleep out at night? What is an appropriate location to site a homeless hostel – or a mobile or permanent food provision for the homeless or for those not able to buy enough food for themselves and their family? These are rarely geographical topics for younger children, though they will know of them. Why are they not investigated (perhaps school staff 'miss' seeing them, or it is socially unacceptable to consider these realities)? What does homelessness tell us about a locality and the lives of some of the people living within it? What does it say about the diversity of the neighbourhood? More contentiously – and again children notice these things – does primary geography investigate the visible evidence of drug use in the streets and parks? Which sites are known, which open and which 'hidden' , why there? What does this tell us about life in a school's neighbourhood?

This focus should lead to local geography studies which ask: how prepared is the school to respond to a local disaster? With changing weather patterns, the increasing number, frequency and strength of storms, and the growing likelihood of flooding, what contingency plans has the school and each class made to remain safe? Is this something solely for a school's head teacher, teachers and governors to plan for, or should the children be involved in, even taking a lead in, preparing for such a situation? Why should they not be? Indeed, why are they not? Children can ask highly pertinent, incisive and demanding questions about ensuring safety, whether from circulating sewage in rivers, roof damage or power failure, and identify solutions? Children elsewhere in the world prepare for such situations (Catling, 2014), such as tornadoes and earthquakes. Do primary schools enable children to be knowledgeable and prepared, or do teachers believe they cannot be and must be told only? Or is it thought that catastrophes only affect other places and people?

These dangerous geography topics and questions ask what is acceptable and unacceptable for younger children to study in looking at the reality of their locality. These topics are all aspects of urban and rural geographies the world over. Why is location significant in them? What does their spatiality say about a neighbourhood? How does their presence impact on our environments and perceptions of place? What do we think can and should be done about such matters – for whom and by whom? Do the children's perspectives matter? The question arises: what is our primary geography really about and who is it for? What is acceptable and unacceptable, to whom and why?

Context 3: Exploring surveillence spaces

Increasingly primary school children have access to mobile phones and to home or personal computers, the large majority doing so at home in many parts of the world – for instance, more

than half of 7-8-year-olds have their own mobile phone (Ofcom, 2022; Childwise, 2020). This is significant geographically, with children linking locally, further afield and abroad with friends and family, and for games playing, finding out information and more. Computer access in localities, through their use in shops, businesses or personally is part of daily life. A key feature of the digital devise – unless it is disarmed – is its location function. Not only can digital devises show where you are when communicating with others or buying goods, the mobility of devises can show where you go, when and for how long. Everyone can be tracked! We live in the age of surveillance (Staples, 2014; Klauser, 2017; Flynn and Mackay, 2017; Newell et al., 2018). But this is a topic that may be a little too personal to investigate within a primary school and a class, though it should be asked: why?. Another form of surveillance is the use of cameras in buildings, stadia and the streets, and their digital records (Kroener, 2014). Digital cameras can be found in in many primary and pre-schools. The reasons for using them include monitoring children's behaviour and checking who comes into a school and where they go; it is stated to be a safety measure. As the police and other surveillance services do, people can be seen and monitored where they go, especially in urban areas, as can much else, especially traffic on most major and some minor roads.

Surveillance is a potential aspect of a locality for primary children to investigate (not about individuals) because it inevitably includes surveilling them when they area out and about. Surely, as an often-hidden aspect of their lives why and how surveillance happens is significant for them: about why surveillance occurs, where, for which reasons and with what effect. But it may be a dangerous geography topic but if it informs younger children about a less-obvious aspect of their daily lives, surely they have a right to know that they are being tracked and recorded? They should know they are being watched. Children might investigate the surveillance that occurs in their school, where cameras are located, what they show, the use of any information, and examine what they think and feel about this. If this is a little to 'close to home' for the adults in some primary schools, investigations can take place in other sites.

Consider surveillance cameras in or near the local area. Where are the cameras? Children can observe where they are sited and consider why in those places. They can suggest what the cameras might be viewing and recording and why these observations are useful, and to whom. It may be that the cameras focus on traffic and pedestrian flows, in which case it may be possible to take children to meet those who observe the digital cameras, to see what they see and to ask about how this is helpful and to whom. Perhaps in a large shop or store (even in many small shops) children might discuss with members of staff why they use cameras and the benefits of and problems with them. Another appropriate site can be a shopping centre, where the management of the centre observes and records people's movements and activities across the centre, and perhaps in individual shops, how this is helpful and what the limitations are. Such investigations involve excellent geography: about what is in a centre, how it is used, where positive and problematic events occur, where is well shown and where is less or not visible, and how such surveillance is beneficial or has limitations,

Surveillance inquiries may be considered dangerous by those who run shops, stores and centres, and by those who surveille roads, because what they do will be known about by the

investigating children; yet this topic may be more acceptable to managers and shop keepers because younger children are more likely to be stimulated by and interested in the geographical dimensions than in other opportunities which such explorations may provide. If an investigation is turned down, younger children can explore why this might be and what it implies for their local and wider community and society.

Context 4: Inquiring into the climate emergency

Asa result of the world's continuously rising temperatures, climate change and its impacts have become increasingly important primary geography topics. The inclusion of climate change is argued to help younger children know about, understand and appreciate the information and arguments which they hear about through news programmes and documentaries. At the same time, the terminology has shifted to 'the climate crisis' and 'the climate emergency' for the Earth and its people. It has become almost mainstream in secondary geography and science (Teaching the Future, 2022). Nevertheless, it is a challenging topic to examine in primary geography (Dolan, 2022). It is a challenge because gaining cross-national actions is notoriously hard. Resolving this planetary crisis is fraught with difficulties because it requires inter-governmental agreement, co-operation and solutions which are co-ordinated and acted upon. While there appear to be helpful solutions, implementation is the major challenge. COP27's agreement by nations globally for a *Loss and Damage Fund* (unfccc, 2022) to support vulnerable countries is helpful, but it requires the funding to be donated by the wealthy. The significant question about whether funds and a variety of other solutions really can be expected to happen identifies this a 'wicked problem', which national leaders may or may not be wholeheartedly committed, for the benefit of their nations and the plant's flora and fauna (Dasgupta, 2021). Indeed, the 'real' concern lies with humanity which has thoughtlessly created to the situation it finds itself in. The climate crisis is not only about what is changing across our climates and their weather, but what the effects are, including wildfires and flooding among many others (WMO, 2022), how this has been caused and what can be done to mitigate it (Foster, 2019; Gates, 2021). A wide range of practical, scientific, engineering and political, as well as humanitarian and personal, solutions are regularly proposed.

The climate emergency has generated school climate 'strikes' and other actions by young people, involving some primary children and their families (Thunberg, 2019). Many people are unconvinced by the apparently mitigating decisions and actions of industrialists, farmers and politicians. One approach is to appreciate the intentions to act as something good to recognise, though not to sees it as appropriate for primary children because adults think that younger children cannot yet understand what the climate crisis/emergency is about or appreciate the implications either of the climate emergency or of their own perspectives and actions. In other words, this important geography topic is dangerous geography and beyond primary children's capability. Indeed, if it is a part of the primary geography curriculum, teachers are likely to be indoctrinating children by stating there is a crisis and having children debate solutions, and even asking locally and nationally what is being done to support better futures for them. But perhaps this dangerous geography topic should be tackled head on with young children (Dolan, 2022). Do

we not teach matters because younger children have not yet encountered them? Teaching about the climate emergency is problematic because for many this topic is uncomfortable, disconcerting and overly-challenging – and for a small minority it does not exist or does not matter. Dealing with it demands deep change rather than some comfortable adjustments. Perhaps, it is simply too hard to deal with, which makes it a dangerous topic for us all.

We are encouraged to remain positive while global temperatures rise and humans continue to act in ways which foster rising temperatures in the oceans and the atmosphere. We are encouraged also to be hopeful that we can change our ways of doing things, such as by reducing the use of fossil fuels and bringing in carbon reduction actions and moving to carbon-free production and leisure activities, and living greener lifestyles. But what if being positive is somewhat misplaced? What if – as evidence about global heating, polar ice and glacier melts, and shifting climate zones indicates – matters are getting and will continue to become worse while we act too slowly, that disaster is coming (Franzen, 2021)? By not being honest, do we mislead children of every age? Are we content to misrepresent, to tell climate stories that are not going to be true? Are we prepared to be recognised as 'mis-leaders' by future generations? Might the case for being positive be inappropriate, even deceitful? Is it rather more of a problem and challenge than apparent 'solutions' such as trimming our energy use, removing fossil fuel use, travelling more sustainably and building wind turbines and solar panel fields for energy generation? Do we try to sell 'positivity' because this topic really is dangerous geography?

Primary children might be asked to consider what they know about the climate emergency and what is being proposed and done to tackle it. They might be asked for their opinions about what they know and to explore the accuracy of the knowledge they have, as well as what others say and think, and to find out to what extent these are accurate. They might investigate possible solutions and debate these. What is involved in providing alternative energy sources? If people change to electric cars, where does the required additional electrical energy come from, how is it generated, what sort of new batteries are needed, and where will these be charged while making short and long journeys? Who will provide the finances for the UN *Loss and Damage Fund* to help vulnerable nations, and what sort of funding for how many nations might be needed? Is any of this going to support low-lying island nations and coastal communities across the world, and what should be done to help, even move, them as sea levels rise? How will people be kept warm in their homes in cold winters as changes in heating homes, shops and other businesses occurs? It may be that an increasingly warm global climate affects where hotter and colder spells occur and how they affect people. Younger children have been on climate crisis protests and strikes. What do they feel about such actions? Do they consider they achieve anything, and if so, what? What are their own preferred ways to contribute to tackling the climate emergency, for themselves and for others? How would they justify such actions? What are the benefits and constraints? Primary children can explore these and many others pertinent questions, beginning in their school and community but taking their studies to other places and peoples, nationally and globally.

Educators have a responsibility to enable children to be realistic, which at times means recognising that some issues and solutions may be beyond international and national

governments at present and in the foreseeable future, and that there will be tough times ahead. To be unrealistic when considering the issues and possible solutions is neither honest nor fair to younger children, even though it may be comforting. Is it always right to desire or pretend to give hope? Yet, is the climate crisis so challenging that to do otherwise than respond in this way would be damaging for the world's children, the generations that will live in and deal with it? This is dangerous geography.

Context 5: Investigating the notion of 'normal' in people's lives

People talk about life 'being normal', meaning that they go about their everyday activities as they usually do day-to-day, following the same of very similar routines from which little differs, unless, perhaps, they choose this to make changes. Places are quite often referred to as 'normal places', meaning that people are used to them, that features remain where people expect them to be even if they do not frequently go to those sites, and that people's uses of places and their services, shops and so on occurs in much the same way from one day to the next. But over the years in different places aspects of this 'normality' have been upended, such as with fields becoming housing estates and shops being demolished or their uses changed. Such environmental and social events and issues have raised questions about what 'normal' life is in places – and not least the covid pandemic of 2020-2022, which had a major impact on much in everyday life and in places across the world.

So, what are *normal places*? What is *normal* daily life? What do people *normally* do when shopping, going to school or working or for leisure? The covid pandemic, the climate emergency, motor vehicle and aircraft carbon emissions, declining planetary biodiversity and environments, the impacts of and attitudes to migration, debates about pastoral agriculture and vegetarian diets, forestry depletion, the ubiquity of plastic and paper/cardboard containers and packaging, waste and its disposal, plastic pollution in drinking water and oceans, and increasing concerns about urban air pollution and the ways people care for – or do not – the environment, and much more, have emphasised questions about what is accepted as 'normal', about our what people are used to, their general expectations and assumptions, their choices and preferences, and their impacts, and how we perceive and respond to other peoples and places. These might all be brought together to explore what the 'normal' is that people – children and adults – expect of daily life.

Primary children can ask: what 'normal' means, perhaps investigating the covid restrictions. Is the same normal shared by all of us? What are normal places and activities like, and to whom? What normally affects places, around us and further afield? Children might pursue: What they think and feel now about what is taken to be daily normality, for themselves and others? Should they be positive or critical of normality? What should and can children and adults do to rethink their sense of 'normal's' benefits and to mitigate concerns? What might be done differently? Will they challenge others to rethink they understand by 'normal'? Are there ways of doing things and what is in places and how they feel that are different, and in which ways? Have some changes been inevitable or do we want them to return to how things normally were? Do children realise that changes, large and small in scale, are constant, even when they do not

notice them. Does one normal change to another normal for people and in places? What have children learned about places, the environment and people's lives through noticing that some aspects are no longer as they were – that 'normal' changes? Children can investigate in school, at home and locally what has changed, in what ways matters are different, who for and with what effects. How does affect their locality, and impact on other places and lives? They might consider whether people make matters worse by failing to change their treatment of places, lives and environments by tackling all of these issues.

Yet this has its dangers. Children and adults may hold different views and priorities about what they regard as normal, be this in school life or in the local community. Does everyone want to return to 'the way things were' pre-pandemic, or do some prefer the way they are after changes have occurred? It can be a dangerous dimension in geographical studies to want to return to the past or to move forward to create changes in the future. Perspectives and opinions may conflict, but this can raise the positive engagement in listening to other points of view, in agreeing to differ, in persuading others to change their minds, in justifying and debating, in critical thinking, in seeking to agree one or more resolutions, and in learning that living together is a balance (Shorer and Quinn, 2023).

There are multiple dangerous geographies to investigate

To bring these matters together, to rethink what these mean for children and others and for the planet, and to suggest and promote actions for change is dangerous, as environmental resistance and climate strikes have illustrated and the responses to them have shown. These topics are highly sensitive and controversial matters, because they may well mean changes in people's lifestyles, shopping habits, energy access, clothing and food purchases, uses or resources, and in the exploitation of places and others' lives, to name several areas of impact. Are teachers and children prepared to embrace this dangerous geography?

There is, certainly, much dangerous primary geography to investigate. The five geography topic areas presented above contain just some examples of potentially dangerous primary geography, and within them much else could have been raised. A variety of other dangerous geography possibilities are given in Chart 2. There are, of course, many more.

Chart 2 – Further dangerous geography topics for primary children.

- Examining who migrates, the variety of reasons for doing so, the nature of people's journeys and the places they travel through, how they travel, ways this affects them, whether they are where they intended to arrive, what it means to settle anew in a place, and their receptions, aspirations and futures at the end of their journey; likewise, it challenges preconceptions, attitudes and values and behaviours people hear about and see;
- the variety and diversity of peoples' lives in other parts of the world, what their lives really are like, the range of their circumstances, their opportunities and limitations living there, and how they feel about and deal with the situations they are in, and what they might change for whom;
- about who receives what remuneration in the journeys of resources people use, such as of bananas and chocolate, why this is, the fairness and justice in it, the range of impacts on people and places, others' perceptions of them, and the extent to which people think about this and their role and impact on others;
- the variety of local food stores and supermarkets and their relative pricings, why this is, how accessible they are, who uses them, why and for what; equally, the perspectives on their customers of those who run local stores;
- the existence and accessibility of take-away 'fast food' providers, what they provide, who uses them, how often and why, and at what cost, alongside where these providers obtain their resources, what the weekly use patterns are, and what the store staff perceive about their customers; who are their customers, and with what impact on surrounding streets and in homes;
- the small desecrations of streets, parks and other sites by those who create graffiti, drop cigarette butts and who do not clear up their dog's excrement, creating the interesting and the unsightly, concerns they can cause, and who has to deal with these aspects of disregard for others and the environment – if that is what they are;
- the number, variety, locations and roles of charity shops, their purpose in a locality, why there might be several in one neighbourhood or shopping area, their uses, by whom, how their presence is perceived, and the 'messages' their presence give, positive and negative;
- evidence about the UK's and other nations' colonial pasts in an area, the variety of ways it appears, whether people know or care about this, and why some people have concerns about it, as well as the impact of the removal (or retention) of 'memorials' or changes to them and for whom, and how people rethink their perspective on a place or site;
- the reality of people changing, for instance, to driving electric vehicles, the impact of much increased use of electricity in society, its generation and transmission from renewable energy sources, nuclear generated or fossil fuel based, its impacts and effects on streetscapes, landscapes and seascapes, the effects on rural and urban environments, and people's perceptions of multiple electrical features;
- the reduction in industrially farmed meat and the 'greening' of other agriculture practices, such as the practicalities and impacts of increasing crop farmland and production to feed a global population, as well as food preparation for, transportation and marketing, and the effects on livelihoods and health, alongside the rewilding of places, what this means and for whom;
- the 'throw-away' clothing culture in which many people live, driven by constant changes in fashion and having and wearing the latest items, where these items are made, who makes them and how they are remunerated, their working conditions, the sources of the materials used and their production, where items are sold, the disparities in prices and for whom, reusing or discarding items, matters of waste and recycling or the lack of this, and who, what and where all these matters affect, how and why.
- the geography of having a particular nationality, of its meaning in the home country and elsewhere, the meaning and experience of national citizenship in a geographical context and a diverse nation.

If there is reluctance to move to teaching such dangerous geographies, what is it that people are afraid of? What is dangerous about asking urban, rural, natural, physical and social geography questions as those above and in Chart 2? A significant question is whether they should matter. Are they inappropriate for primary children? Who says so; who says not? Is it that they are distasteful to teachers, or the headteacher or governors of a primary school – because uncomfortable, not age appropriate, too 'scary' – though children know about these matters, have views and can investigate and reflect thoughtfully on them? Is it that teachers do not wish to rock the societal or political boat? Might it mean having to consider and explore more than the foci and activities teachers feel secure in and are comfortable with teaching? What do benign and dangerous approaches to geography teaching this say about the values of the school, and what education – and particularly geographical education – is really is about? This is a matter for personal reflection for each teacher related to the school and their local and social context and their own values and purpose in being educators.

Conclusion

Dangerous primary geography focuses on values, both understanding values as a branch of knowledge and realising that values underpin our decisions about which and whose knowledge to engage with within subjects (Catling, 2021), the case studies to select and what is perceived as important in geography. Values lie at the core of geography education. Teaching geography reflects values in society, those which are acceptable in the wider community and reflected in its schools. No knowledge in geography can be readily understood as objective, for it is influenced by the societal, political and even personal perspectives of those who make these decisions. This is true of curriculum decisions. Taking up 'dangerous geography' topics is a values decision, and in itself id beset with dangers.

A challenging, motivating, stimulating and involving primary geography is dangerous. In this sense it has the hallmarks of a 'wicked problem'. Characteristics ascribed to wicked problems include that they are not straightforward to define, have nebulous boundaries, are dynamic in nature, evolve and change, have impacts, and create reactions, developments and responses which lead to other challenges. They have moral consequences (Duckett et al., 2016). Local issues such as traffic control and national matters such as energy provision can be wicked problems where conflicting perspectives clash though it may be that a local or national government imposes a solution, this does not necessarily resolve the problem. The real difficulty is that a really wicked problem has no central authority capable of resolving it. Climate change has been described as a wicked problem, and by some as a super-wicked problem, because it requires international co-operation globally, and in societal and personal changes in ways to live; it changes priorities. Like climate change, primary geography can be described as a wicked problem, not least because there remain arguments about whether its teaching should help children and teachers feel comfortable or if it should challenge them by taking a 'dangerous' approach. Equally, what may matter in geographical studies with younger children changes because the world changes. While geography is present and future based, time is not on its side, since planetary concerns keep emerging, whether disease pandemics, energy crisis or wars. Each

of the examples of dangerous primary geography topics referred to in this article can be said to be wicked, which is perhaps what makes geography more important to include and teach in the primary curriculum.

Primary geography needs to be and to tackle dangerous geographies – to be informatively and helpfully dangerous. Primary geography is concerned to engage and empower younger children through fostering their natural curiosity, their concerns for the world and its varied environments, their appreciation of global interconnectedness, their spatial awareness, and by engaging creatively, critically and positively (Owens, Willy and Witt, 2021). Primary geography needs to be honest and realistic to empower children and teachers to act, not to sit by and observe and describe (Dolan, 2020). Primary geography needs to grab attention and be sparky, even uncomfortable and a little scary. To avoid intellectual danger and tread around social and emotional danger, does children a deep disservice, weakens their education, disenfranchises them, and gives them negligible chance to create a better world. It is time for primary geography to be challenging and be dangerous!

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