

Book Review

Hopwood, N. (2012). *Geography in secondary schools: Researching pupils' classroom experiences*. New York: Continuum. ISBN-13: 978-1441199089. 202 pages, \$84.24.

Introduction

In his new book, *Geography in Secondary Schools*, Nick Hopwood reports the results of his research on pupils' conceptions and experiences of school geography. His study is organized around three research questions: (1) What descriptive and evaluative ideas and opinions are brought to bear when each case pupil experiences, talks about, and thinks about school geography?, (2) How do the case pupils' descriptions of school geography relate to aspects that they value?, and (3) What themes emerge across the case pupils' conceptions of school geography, how do their ideas and opinions relating to these themes vary, and how can concepts from geography education literature illuminate these variations? To explore these questions, Hopwood employed ethnographic methods through a multiple case study research design. He selected one male and one female pupil enrolled in the Year 9 geography course at three different schools near Oxford, England. Data were generated through extensive observations of geography lessons and interviews with the case pupils. An explanation of the purpose and rationale for the research, case selection criteria, data generation methods, and data analysis process is provided in the introductory chapter. Hopwood's research builds upon a fairly substantial body of literature on pupils' subject conceptions and experiences – particularly from the field of science education. He provides a clear review of the research literature that informed his study and offers a convincing argument that this work addresses weaknesses in the geographic education literature. Hopwood follows his introduction with a detailed chapter on the context of school geography in England. He explains recent developments in English school geography, the Geography National Curriculum, and policy trends related to geography content themes, geographic thinking skills, and values education through geography. The review is not intended to portray one correct version of school geography, but to demonstrate the wide range of adult perspectives on the subject. Hopwood explains, "I have tried to weave the notion of plurality throughout the discussion – that there is no one view of people-environment relations, space and place and so forth in geography education. In my view,

such a fluid representation and discussion is needed to reflect the contested nature of geography as a subject discipline, and the historical dynamics as it has changed over time” (Hopwood, 2012, p. 43).

Structure and Format

The bulk of the book reports the results of Hopwood’s primary research question: What descriptive and evaluative ideas and opinions are brought to bear when each case pupil experiences, talks about, and thinks about school geography? The results are organized into three chapters in which the conceptions of two pupils from the same school and class are presented. Following a description of the school context and an overview of the classroom experiences observed, Hopwood presents the conceptions of each pupil in terms of how the pupil describes school geography and what the pupil values in school geography. Each chapter ends with a comparative review of the two pupils’ experiences and conceptions. What emerges from this analysis is the diversity evident among pupils’ descriptive and evaluative ideas about school geography. Two pupils in the same geography class hold differing conceptions about what constitutes geography, and they value differing aspects of the subject. For example, Sara describes geography as about cultures in different places, things that affect people, and how these vary spatially. She values learning about people and cultures and the variation in human experience according to place. Her classmate, Matt, describes geography as a study of the physical environment and culture, but he places emphasis on ‘environment’ as the focus of geography. He values learning about physical processes and features; particularly extreme phenomena, such as hurricanes and tornadoes. Another pair of classmates, Jenie and Ryan, also described and evaluated school geography in differing ways. While Jenie conceived of the subject in terms of a distinct people/physical divide, Ryan framed the subject as a matter of the *relationships* between people and their environment without reference to a dualistic physical-human construction. Some similarities exist between pupils’ conceptions and values within and across schools, but Hopwood’s analysis reveals an intriguing diversity among pupils. Hopwood follows his discussion of pupils’ descriptive and evaluative ideas with a chapter that reports on his second research question: How do the case pupils’ descriptions of school geography relate to aspects that they value? This chapter illuminates the relationship between pupils’ conceptions and values. He found that, “While some pupils describe school geography largely in terms of the aspects that they value, for

some there is only partial overlap between descriptions and evaluations. For yet others, school geography is described as something quite separate and different from the sort of geography that they consider interesting, important, relevant, or worthwhile” (p. 131). An example of the latter is evident in Jennie’s candid remark: “I don’t really give a damn about why deserts are dry” (p. 105).

In the final two chapters, Hopwood discusses eight themes that emerged from his data and four overarching claims that he presents as a summary of his findings. The eight themes are: (1) people and the environment in school geography, (2) geography and education for sustainable development, (3) geographical knowledge and the future, (4) space and place in learning geography, (5) facts and opinions in geography and geography lessons, (6) interest in and enjoyment of school geography, (7) the relevance of school geography, and (8) the uses and importance of school geography. As he discusses these themes, Hopwood weaves in an exploration of the relevant literature and places his findings in the context of prior work. He cautions that the intent of this exploration of the literature is not to “use concepts developed by adults to pass judgment on pupils’ conceptions” (p. 152). Rather, he connects his emergent themes to the literature to highlight the contested nature of the subject, to explore the variation found in pupils’ conceptions, and to offer recommendations based on his findings. Hopwood concludes with four claims: (1) conceptions of school geography and reflections on geographical learning experiences comprise multiple ideas and opinions that vary from pupil to pupil, (2) while common threads are shared at a general level, surface similarities mask subtle yet important differences, (3) some of the ideas and opinions discussed by pupils in relation to school geography are context-dependent, loosely related or seemingly contradictory, and (4) there are different relationships between the ways in which pupils describe and evaluate school geography.

Review

Hopwood’s *Geography in Secondary Schools* is an excellent book on many levels. First, the study provides a superb example of the value of qualitative methods in research in geography education. Classrooms are dynamic environments rife with social interactions and contexts that are not easily pinned down for explanation. Similarly, geography is a discipline that is multifaceted with various, and sometimes competing, definitions and goals. The intersection of a dynamic environment and a complex subject area is challenging

for researchers to investigate adequately, and thus requires multiple research methodologies. Hopwood offers a cogent rationale for exploring pupils' conceptions of geography through an ethnographic, multiple case study design. The study is commendable, in part, because Hopwood applies the right methods to the questions that he seeks to investigate. Moreover, Hopwood demonstrates that qualitative methods are no less rigorous than other methods. His use of pilot work, case selection procedures, ethnographic data generation techniques, rich description, and iterative analysis provides a model for other researchers seeking to apply qualitative methods to research in geography education. For the novice researcher, Hopwood provides a text that is relatively jargon-free – and thus highly readable – yet also substantial in terms of the literature review, the presentation of data, and the analysis of emergent themes. Hopwood's work should be a source of inspiration for other geography education researchers seeking to employ qualitative methods in their research.

A second strength of Hopwood's work is the convincing justification he provides for researching pupils' conceptions and values, and the necessity of investigating the relationship between the two. As Hopwood explains, "It is important to understand the ways in which any learners conceive the subjects they study because these conceptions are not simply neutral, passive ideas. They have an important bearing upon the way they respond to, interpret and value their learning experiences" (p. 6). The study is grounded in constructivist learning theory, and thus offers evidence of the variation in the ways that pupils construct their understandings of geography. Yet, Hopwood goes further than simply reporting that different pupils hold different conceptions and value different aspects of what they learn. He also analyzes how pupils' descriptions and evaluations of geography learning interact to construct what might be called pupils' sense of geography. He argues, convincingly, that this is new territory in geography education research. Hopwood's work, here and elsewhere, should serve as a touchstone for future research into pupils' conceptions of geography. Additional research could be guided by Hopwood's remark that "this study opens up a series of important questions about whose opinions are valued in geography lessons, what counts as geographical knowledge and how pupils' views on these issues may be better understood" (p. 145).

Lastly, Hopwood's research illuminates issues related to the relationship between the written curriculum and the learned curriculum. Curriculum theorists have written extensively about the distinctions between the formal, written curriculum, and the curriculum that pupils actually learn. Many recent international policy efforts have focused on ensuring that the written curricu-

lum is clearly defined in terms of easily measured standards, so that the degree to which student learning meshes with adult-prescribed curriculum can be determined. Hopwood demonstrates that there is much to be gained from understanding the learned curriculum alone and that pupils' subject conceptions are much too complex to be meaningfully portrayed in standardized assessment measures. As Hopwood explains, "the analyses presented in this book are not situated within a trajectory of progress against curriculum benchmarks, level descriptors or achievements in assessments. To me such an approach would re-situate pupils' ideas back within the context of adult agendas, and I was keen to remain closely and richly within the world of pupils' ideas and experiences" (p. 3). Hopwood does situate these pupils' conceptions within the broader landscape of geography education, but he does so in a way that highlights the importance of such conceptions without passing judgment about the value, accuracy, or relative merit of the learned curriculum that these pupils experienced.

Conclusion

Finally, Hopwood is forthright about the limitations of this research. For example, all six of the pupils were white, middle class and in classrooms with teachers who employed active and engaging instructional strategies. The case pupils were not disaffected with schooling or persistently low-achieving in geography. Furthermore, the observed classroom experiences of these pupils lacked fieldwork, outdoor learning experiences, and the use of technology. These limitations should not be seen as weaknesses in the study design or reasons to doubt the veracity of his findings. On the contrary, the areas left unexplored by this study should serve as enticement for other researchers to investigate student conceptions in a variety of other contexts. Hopwood explains that "my approach was a deliberate decision to do something different, to get detail, nuance and connection to classroom experience where previously there had been broader-brushed, abstract findings" (p. 169). In *Geography in Secondary Schools*, Hopwood succeeds in providing the nuance, detail, and connection to classroom life that is missing in much of the research on geography education. This work is one that should be on every geography educator's reading list.

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