

# ENGLISH PRIMARY SCHOOLCHILDREN'S DEFINITIONS OF *GEOGRAPHY*

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2001

## Abstract

*Geography is studied by English primary school children from the age of 5 to 11 years old.. This research considers what understanding of the term 'geography' 10 to 11 year olds have. By the time they leave primary school about one-seventh of the children had no idea or had misconceived what 'geography' is about. For the six-sevenths of children who had some idea, geography was associated essentially with four components of the subject. Mapwork was mentioned by three-quarters of the children. About two-thirds of children referred to countries and world knowledge, though these are not central elements of their geography curriculum. Place as studies of localities was noted by a third of the children. Every child who could give a definition mentioned at least one of these four components. About a third of the children also included a geographical theme, such as weather or settlement. A sixth can be inferred to have some notion of the underlying geographical concepts of location, pattern and process, though this is much less well grounded. While the children's definitions of 'geography' reflect relevant elements of the primary geography national curriculum content, the focus on mapwork, countries and world knowledge indicates a more limited sense of 'geography' than it would be anticipated that six years of geography teaching might lead them to hold. Nonetheless, the children's ideas are recognisable as a public perception of geography. This indicates that most children have a foundation on which to build on entry to secondary education. It is clear that many primary children develop a rudimentary understanding of a school subject and can give some account of it, however brief and limited or broad and detailed in scope.*

## INTRODUCTION

*Geography is where you learn about countries and continents like Europe Asia, Oceania, and capitals like Paris, Mexico City. It is a really good subject about seas, countries, towns, villages, rivers, lakes, islands, flags, places, the world basically, and maps, roads.*

Since 1989 English primary school children (5-11 year olds) have studied geography as one of ten compulsory school subjects. In 1991 the geography programmes of study for key stage 1 and key stage 2 were introduced (D.E.S./W.O., 1991), outlining what was to be taught. These were amended in 1995 (D.f.E., 1995), though the core aspects of geography remained much the same. In 2000 further modification, rebalancing and rephrasing was introduced to the Geography Order but no major change occurred in primary school geography content (D.f.E.E./Q.C.A., 1999).

Primary geography in England focuses on developing children's knowledge and understanding

of places as specific localities, particular geographical themes and core geographical concepts, as well their use of geographical skills (D.f.E., 1995; SCAA, 1997; Catling, 1998a; D.f.E./Q.C.A., 2000). The key elements of the English geography national curriculum for primary schools are set out in *Figure 1*.

**Figure 1** The Main Elements of the English Primary Geography National Curriculum

<b>Core aspects</b>	<b>Main components in the primary geography curriculum</b>
<i>Places</i>	What places are like, how they have become like that and how they change Similarities with and differences from other places The local area of the school Other localities in the UK and elsewhere in the world (including Europe) Awareness of the wider world
<i>Geographical Themes</i>	Settlement types, size and character, change, landuse change issues Weather locally and elsewhere through the year River and/or coastal features and processes Environmental quality, change, sustainability, management and issues
<i>Geographical Skills</i>	Undertaking enquiries and investigations Fieldwork Mapwork (including globes and atlases) Using other sources (such as photographs, text, television, computers) Decision making
<i>Geographical concepts</i>	Spatial location Spatial patterns human and physical processes

During their six years in primary school children spend about 30 hours a year studying geography. In many schools geography is taught in only two of the three terms; in others it may be taught for half a term each term; and in some it is taught every week. The first children to have followed the geography programmes of study throughout their primary schooling left primary school in the summer of 1997. The second cohort entered Year 6 in the autumn of 1997, and so forth.

Many aspects and components of children's geographical understanding and learning have been researched (for summaries see: Barker, 1974; Blyth, 1984; Matthews, 1992; Wiegand, 1992, 1993; Knight, 1993; Palmer, 1994; Blyth & Krause, 1995; Kimber et al., 1995; Williams, 1996; Tilbury & Williams, 1997; Scoffham, 1998; Carter, 1998; Catling, 1999a, 2000), providing helpful insights to support the development of the geography curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning. Little of this research has explored the impact of national curriculum geography on children's geographical understanding, though inspection reports on geography in primary schools have identified some considerable improvements in standards (Ofsted, 1999, Catling, 199b) Until the introduction of the national curriculum there was much variation in the quality and type of geography taught to primary school children; indeed, quite a number of children were not taught geography (D.E.S., 1989). The word *geography* rarely appeared on class timetables. Since 1991 increasingly schools have moved to timetables that refer to the named curriculum subjects. By the late 1990s in English primary schools most teachers use the word *geography* explicitly to label geography lessons and topics. Thus, primary school children have a word to identify the content they encounter, the experiences that take place and the

knowledge and ideas they 'take away' from their geography topics and lessons.

Children's encounter explicitly with *geography* as a named school subject raises the question: what do they make of *geography*? What does the label *geography* mean to them? As yet there has been no investigation of younger children's understanding of what *geography* as a term means to them, what in summary their idea of this subject is. With the nature and quality of what children are taught and learn in geography under scrutiny (Ofsted, 1993, 1995; Smith, 1997, Ofsted, 1999), it seems sensible to discover what idea it is that children have of the subject they are required to study during their primary school years. This paper reports some of the findings from initial research into children's understanding of the term *geography*.

In order to initiate research into children's ideas about geography, and to gain an awareness of the range of ideas about geography primary that children hold, it was decided to seek a large sample of children's statements about the term *geography*. While other scales and methods of research can be used to elicit more detailed awareness, knowledge and understanding from children, it was felt that this approach would provide a starting point to indicate subsequent research directions for which to identify appropriate approaches. Furthermore, in seeking children's personal statements about geography, what emerged might illustrate the experience and perception of *geography* that children most readily thought of and communicated.

## RESEARCH METHOD

The study was undertaken with 447 ten to eleven year olds (in Year 6, the final year of primary schooling in England) in twenty-four classes in twelve primary schools in two local education authorities in England. The children had been taught the national curriculum geography requirements for all six years of their primary schooling.

The children undertook a task administered by their class teachers. They were to imagine that a stranger had come into the classroom and asked them what geography is about. They had to write what they would say in reply, as a **definition** of *geography*. The children had all undertaken work on definitions, and this was not an unfamiliar task to them. The task was used in order to provide children with the opportunity to state what they think *geography* is about, to see if they know what the term means and what the subject studies. Ten minutes were given to complete the task, but more time could be taken by individuals who clearly wanted to write at greater length. Support could be provided by their class teacher to reassure them that this was not a test and that the interest was in their own ideas. However, teachers could not help in providing any substantive ideas about or examples of *geography*.

This approach was developed in a pilot study (Catling, 1998b) and modified but not altered substantially for this research. The reason for using a written task rather than interviews was to be able to obtain a large set of initial data in a short period of time late in the school term. It was not practicable to undertake individual interviews on this scale.

An initial examination of the children's output from the tasks led to the approach used to analyse the definitions. It was clear that to a considerable extent the children's ideas about geography were drawn from their experience of the national curriculum geography programmes of study and that their statements reflected this. However, while the children's definitions made reference to one or more of the core aspects of geography, by no means all reflected the main components of the primary geography curriculum requirements. Their definitions of *geography*, for instance, rarely included reference to the particular focus in place studies, on what places

are like and how they change, that is noted in *Figure 1*. Indeed, some components of geography were missing from the entire sample, such as reference to geographical enquiry, while new elements were included, for example, people and named countries. To see to what extent the children's definitions reflected their experienced curriculum, the analysis focused on both the elements within children's definitions as well as on their holistic statement. As a result, a modified list of the aspects and components of geography in the programmes of study was used. This still reflected the key aspects of places, geographical themes, geographical skills and geographical concepts, as well as many of the main components of the geography curriculum, but it included only those components which the children referred to in their definitions. This approach enabled the nature and balance of geography in the children's definitions to be identified and, as such, an understanding of their sense of geography to be codified and quantified.

The categories and components of geography that were used in the analysis are set out in *Figure 2*. While the very large majority of children were able to provide a definition of geography, some children confused geography with other curriculum subjects or stated their lack of knowledge, sometimes by writing nothing. *Figure 3* gives the two categories used to record these misconceived definitions and non-responses.

**Figure 2** The categories and components of geography used to analyse the children's definitions

<b>Geography categories</b>	<b>The components of geography identified in each category</b>
<i>Places</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Place (as locality)</li> <li>• People</li> <li>• The local area</li> <li>• Distant localities</li> <li>• Countries</li> <li>• World knowledge</li> </ul>
<i>Geographical Themes</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Settlement</li> <li>• Weather/climate</li> <li>• Rivers</li> <li>• The environment and environmental issues</li> </ul>
<i>Geographical Skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mapwork</li> <li>• Fieldwork</li> <li>• Other geographical skills</li> </ul>
<i>Geographical concepts</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Location, landscape patterns and environmental processes</li> </ul>

**Figure 3** Categories of children's misunderstanding about geography

<b>Category</b>	<b>Interpretation used</b>
Misconceptions about geography	Some or much confusion of geography with another subject
No idea about geography	A clear indication that the child does not know what geography is About, or where nothing is written, or where the child states they do not know

All the children's definitions of geography were scored against the list of aspects and components of geography listed in *Figure 2*. Where children referred either directly or indirectly to one of the aspects or components of geography, they were recorded as having included reference to it in their definition. For example, if a child wrote *that "geography is a subject where we study maps..."*, s/he was scored as having referred to the 'geographical skills' aspect and as including the 'mapwork' component in the definition of geography. If a child stated that in *"geography you have to do about places and the world"*, both 'places' and 'world knowledge' were scored as components in the 'places' aspect of geography. When a child named countries and/or wrote that in geography *"we learn about....other countries around the world"*, s/he was scored as having referred to the component 'countries' in the 'places' aspect. A single mention was enough to have an aspect and component score recorded, since it was expected that a 'definition' will be brief and a summary of ideas rather than lengthy and detailed.

## FINDINGS

The definition task provides a number of interesting findings. While 85% of children were able to provide some definition of geography, 15% of children could not do so. There was considerable variation in the length of definitions that children wrote. Some children gave lengthy descriptions, exceeding a hundred words, while others were relatively brief and some were very succinct.

*Geography is a subject where we study maps of somewhere in the world. It could be anywhere. We use compasses and equipment to help us find where we are and where other places are. We use map references to tell us where something is. We use latitude and longitude to tell us what time it is in a country. We learn about the lifestyle of people abroad and what they do in everyday life and then we compare them to our own lifestyle. We use signs and pictures to show us what the object is and what it is there for. We wrote instructions on how to get to places using sign words and pictures.*

*It is working on things about lands.*

The analysis of children's responses referred to the four aspects and to the fourteen components of geography identified in the initial analysis of the children's definitions (*Figure 2*). Many children's definitions of geography were limited in scope, referring chiefly to places and geographical skills, for example. A few children wrote definitions in which all four aspects of geography could be identified, and over one-fifth noted components that fell within the three aspects of places, geographical themes and geographical skills. The average number of aspects of geography was 2.1 for each child who provided a useable definition. There was considerable variation in the number of geographical components that children referred to, indicated in *Table 1*. In all, 39.6% of children identified one or two components of geography and 45.4% noted three or more components. Excluding those children who had no particular idea of geography, the average number of components noted was 2.9 per child.

But what sense of *geography* do the children's definitions indicate? To what extent does their reference to any particular number of aspects and components of geography indicate a limited or reasonable understanding of what *geography* in their experience refers to? Are there particular components that they include, which indicate the meaning they give to the term *geography*? The remainder of this paper explores these questions, first by considering the

aspects and components of geography within the children's definitions and second by looking more holistically at their definitions.

**Table 1** Children's reference to the number of geographical components in their definition

Number of components children referred to	% of children
1	17%
2	22.6%
3	21.3%
4	14.5%
5-7	9.4%
8	0.2%
Misconceptions or non-response	15%

### **An emerging sense of geography**

Some appreciation of what children believe *geography* studies does emerge from this research. Analysis of the children's responses in relation to the components of geography reveals a number of findings. Four components of geography were identified strongly by children, that is, by a third or more. A number of other components emerge as minor elements of a definition of geography for some children. *Table 2* indicates the percentage of individual children's definitions which included reference to the components of geography that were identified as those used by the children in the initial analysis (*Figure 2*). These figures are percentages of the 85% of children who were able to give a definition of *geography*.

**Table 2** The percentage of children referring to particular components of geography

Aspect of geography	Geographical component	% of children making reference
<i>Place</i>	• Place (as locality)/place studies	33%
	• People	9.5%
	• Local area	4.2%
	• Distant places	5.5%
	• Countries	44%
	• World knowledge	40%
<i>Geographical Themes</i>	• Settlement	14%
	• Weather/Climate	10.8%
	• Rivers	5.5%
	• The environment and environmental issues	7.4%
<i>Geographical Skills</i>	• Mapwork	76%
	• Fieldwork	0.7%
	• Other geographical skills	15%
<i>Geographical concepts</i>	• Location, landscape patterns and environmental processes	16%

Four geographical components merged as strongly evidenced in the children's definitions. There were mapwork, knowledge of countries, knowledge of the world and places.

For three-quarters of the children in this sample geography is strongly associated with the **geographical skill of mapwork**. A small minority of children who noted 'other geographical skills' referred almost exclusively to compass work and directions (15%). Fieldwork, receiving just 0.7% mention, was hardly noted by the children.

*Well, geography is about maps and how to use compasses and how to get around using compasses. When you have to go somewhere you will have to use a map otherwise you would get lost.*

*I think geography is about reading maps and doing directions. I also think geography is about learning all the different signs like ph +. Geography is about planning.*

*Geography is map study, which is about learning things like grid references on maps contours lines and to give directions. It is also how to plan routes that get you to places quickly. We also learn how to recognise different things like train signs.*

*Geography is to do with maps. Sometimes we draw maps and draw a key for them and we learn about different places. The type of book we use is an atlas.*

The references to learning about maps and to tasks indicate that mapwork is both a clear component of their geographical experience and that it stands out strongly for them. The more detailed references some children make to various elements of maps, such as grid references, symbols and the use of atlases, illustrates the nature of their experience of mapwork, and, perhaps, its distinctiveness within their curriculum experience at primary school. Mapwork has long been argued to be the fundamental skill geography uses and develops (Garnet, 1934; Carter, 1998). This finding indicates that children see mapwork as a core component of their idea of geography. It may also be that it is taught distinctly to children rather than integrated within geographical units of study. Mapwork certainly has an impact.

Geography is also clearly associated for many children with a **knowledge of countries** (44%) and **world knowledge** (40%). While 20% of the children referred to countries and world knowledge together in their definitions, a further 42% of children made reference to one or other component. The development of knowledge of countries is not explicitly included in primary school geography, though children will encounter countries and perhaps learn something of them as discrete nations as part of their locality studies and in looking at places in the news. The primary geography curriculum in England requires that children develop locational knowledge of key places and topical locations around the world, as a component of the study of places. The recommended list of locations includes several countries. In this sense children are expected to develop some knowledge of the world (D.f.E.E., 1995; D.f.E.E./Q.C.A., 1999). Both these elements make an evident impact on primary children, rather more strongly it would seem than other components which it is intended have greater emphasis within geography teaching.

*Geography is about countries and places in the world. We use maps to help us understand. Geography tells us all different things, like what soil is in that area we are studying, as well as how many people live there, and what is the most popular job. We do Geography because it helps us to understand our world. If we did not have*

*Geography we would not know where we are.*

*Geography is when we learn about the world and different countries. Sometimes we have a book that asks us questions about miles and different roads and signs. We get pieces of string of certain lengths and measure how long roads are and other things.*

A third of the children referred to **places** or **place studies**. Usually, places were referred to in a general, rather than particular, sense, but the inference to be drawn is that the children mean specific localities which they have studied (Foley & Janikoun, 1996; Carter, 1998). Associated with place studies, 9.5% of children included the study of people, often a focus within locality studies. Only about one in twenty children made reference to distant places. Surprisingly, less than one in twenty children referred explicitly to their immediate environmental experience, which alongside the paucity of reference to fieldwork, raises a concern about how children see what is an major strand of the primary geography curriculum. Children must study their own school's local area, undertake fieldwork and are encouraged to use the local area in thematic studies. It is clear that studies of the local area make a strong impact on children (Wiegand, 1993; Carter, 1998; Ofsted, 1999). One explanation might be that children regard this as such a natural part of their school experience that they do not specifically associate it with the term *geography*, perhaps because they also use the local area in historical and scientific studies. However, most children's lack of reference to studying their local area might indicate that they were providing a broader definition of *geography* rather than relating it specifically to a particular place, their locality.

*Geography is map reading, globe reading, looking at the world, where places are, finding out about many places. It is where you learn about places and learn about countries' languages. It is learning about countries.*

*Geography is a subject that we study in school and it is where we learn about different places and parts of the world. It is not about space because that is Astronomy. It's about land and sea. In geography at the moment we are doing about the rainforest which is fun. We also use maps to look at where we are and atlases which sometimes tell us a bit more like the weather in India or the amount of rain that fell in the rainforest in 1993.*

*Geography is all about countries and places and how people live, and what they do for a living and continents and all about the world.*

Every child mentions one or more of these four components, which are drawn from two aspects of geography: places and geographical skills. Less than one percent of children do not mention one of mapwork, countries or world knowledge. Many children related the components to each other, giving at least two dimensions to their understanding of geography. 29.7% of the children linked mapwork and countries; 27% connected mapwork and world knowledge. However, only 14.2% linked all three together. While place studies were linked with mapwork by 28.2% of children, place studies and countries/world knowledge was connected by 17.1%. All four were identified together by only 5% of children. Focusing on the references to the four core aspects of geography (*Figures 1 and 2*), four-fifths of children mentioned the places aspect (place studies, countries or world knowledge) and three-quarters of children referred to geographical skills (mapwork). In fact 57% of children linked the places and geographical skills aspects of geography in their definitions. Places and geographical skills clearly dominate within children's definitions of *geography*.

*Geography is to do with maps and places. It includes countries, maps and places. Compasses are used to find places (North, South, East and West). It is also about drawing maps. Geography is also about climate and comparing weather all around the world. It is also about Rivers and how they are formed and also seas. It is also about the world and space.*

*In Geography we work on maps and on specific countries. We have textbooks. We use the Weetabix atlas to find information. We have been looking at habitats. Geography tells us about the world places we have not been to and places we want to go. In Geography sometimes we use compasses. We went to Sutton Courtney to learn directions. I learned a lot there.*

While some components of the core aspects of places and geographical skills were emphasised by children, the two other aspects, geographical themes and geographical concepts, were less in evidence, the latter almost non-existent. Some 37% of children mentioned at least one of the **geographical themes** of settlement, weather/climate, rivers or the environment and environmental issues but rarely more than one. One in seven children referred to the theme of settlements, generally in relation to settlement size. A very few of these children noted what might be studied in a settlement, or linked it with local area study.

*I think geography is when you read maps and study where certain places are in the world. Sometimes you would look at a continent. Sometimes you would look at a country, a city, a town or even a village.*

*Geography is anything to do with map work of countries, the world, towns, cities and sometimes may involve co-ordinates, e.g. D,2, and different road sign's like bicycle signs, roads, Ordnance Survey map ones. It also to do with the surroundings of the local town, city. It includes drawing maps of the school and the town and houses and the surroundings of them. You sometimes do graphs and charts and tallies of information, like eg.how many people shop at Sainsbury's and others like it.*

Weather and climate study were referred to by one in ten children, but little reference was made to river studies (5.5%). There was evidence that these references, particularly, related to classroom studies of these topics, either in their current or previous class. This might indicate that for some children particular components of geography might have caught their interest, or have been recalled because of their recent study. Given that these Year 6 children would have covered much of the geography curriculum requirements in the previous five years, it is likely that these components were studied only as individual topics. Thus, not having been studied more than once (unlike maps and places) or been encountered more consistently (like world knowledge and countries) they have made little impact on many children but a distinct impact on some.

*Geography is weather and all kinds of climate in different countries.*

Only about one child in fifteen indicated geography's links with environmental features, matters and issues. In the main, use of the word 'environment' seemed to refer to the environment around us, that is to the landscape or townscape. Very few children noted that environmental issues fall within geographical study (2.2%), although other evidence suggests that children are taught about environmental concerns within and beyond geography (Ofsted, 1998).

*I think it is when you look at a map of the world. And you find out about the route of where you are going, and find out about your environment.*

*[Geography] is education about map work and learning how our world is getting destroyed, and understanding how big the world is.*

Roughly one-sixth of the children made what were essentially indirect references to the **geographical concepts** of location, landscape pattern and environmental processes, but there is no certainty that this is what they intended, so this figure is speculative. That children have awareness of these concepts has to be inferred from the way they describe geography in their definition, and there have been very limited indications of this. This should not be surprising, since these core concepts are not necessarily explicitly examined in the geography topics children study, and it has been a matter of criticism in English primary geography teaching that location, pattern and process are not well pursued by teachers, many of whom may well not be clear themselves about what they mean (Ofsted, 1999). In the following definition, the concepts of location and environmental process can be inferred as implicit in the definition.

*Geography is a subject that teaches you about mountains, rivers, deserts and cities. You find out how high mountains are and which are the highest mountains. You find out what rivers run through major cities and how long the longest river is. How big are deserts? What grows there? are questions that could be asked. Population numbers are looked at and what capital cities belong to which country. Where are oceans and how big they are. Geography is where you learn about the world you live in and how it works.*

## **Defining Geography**

The programmes of study for primary geography (D.f.E.E./Q.C.A., 1999) encourage children to develop a holistic sense of geography through the study of places and geographical themes while using geographical skills and building an understanding of geographical concepts (see *Figure 1*). About one in twenty children (5.5%) referred to all four aspects of geography and a little over one fifth (22%) of the children referred to places, themes and skills in their responses, indicating that they are developing a sense of the breadth of the subject at a general level. Another 5.5% linked places, skills and geographical concepts together. Two-fifths referred to two aspects of *geography*, with mapwork dominating, as it did for those children whose references noted just one just aspect (26.5%).

*Geography is about islands, countries and landscape. You can learn a lot from geography about the U.K. and lots of other countries in the world. Sometimes you can learn about rivers and it also helps you with your map reading. It is an important thing to learn about when you are going on holiday and you are the map reader.*

*I think Geography is a subject which teaches you about different countries, where they are, what size they are. I work from a book called "Master Maps". I have to write and answer questions. I also work from sheets, a bit like reinforcement sheets, so we can remember things we have been taught. I do different pages of books every week. We recently did a page, and we had to give directions to places in North Wales. We do different surveys sometimes, which is good for us as we have to make questionnaires*

*and hand them out.*

It would seem that a significant minority of children have a sound basis on which to offer a suitable, if inexperienced, definition of *geography*. Some definitions were very brief and to the point.

*Geography is the study of maps, and where in the world places are.*

*Geography is learning about the world and the environment.*

Other definitions were quite detailed and informed, as has been illustrated above.

*Geography is about the world, also about to know and to learn where each country is and what continent it is in. How hot or cold it is there. How many people live there. Also about where big and small rivers are, which is the longest and smallest, what width it is, what country it is in. And also in England where the counties are, and in the U.S.A. where the states are and what they are called.*

Many definitions were focused on just one or two aspects of geography, presenting a narrower image of the subject than some geographers might contend is accurate. However, this more focused perspective is one that the majority of children take with them from primary to secondary school.

*I think Geography is something where you find places on maps and it is different countries and you study on different places. Geography is when you, just study places, maps, towns and countries. Geography is also study map symbols, like this ..... would mean a footpath. This PH would mean Public House, that is what the PH stands for. Geography does come in handy. It is very useful.*

*Geography is the study of the land. For instance, how high a mountain's peak is above sea level, what is the lay of the land, how rocky is the terrain and what minerals are contained in the land.*

*Geography is about studying the land. In geography we learn to read maps using grid references, write clear directions to get from one place to another, describe the landscape using a map, find out about the distance between places and learn about the size and shape of countries, continents and counties.*

Inevitably children's ideas about geography reflect their experience of the subject during their schooling. The examples of definitions above reflect this clearly. A number of children, in their definitions, referred to the types of activities that they have undertaken.

*Geography is made up of different Tasks such as...*

*MAPS*

*SROUNDING AREAS and*

*GRAPHS*

*There are also lots more. Some geography consists of-out-doors activities or in-doors activities, some without even leaving your chair. DIAGRAMS are also part of Geography.*

Not every child is certain about their view of geography. In giving a definition, a number of children offer a more tentative idea or indicate a lack of clarity. Such views seem to draw on discrete experiences and images which the children have retained, rather than a developing sense of the subject.

*Geography is about different places of the world. It might be about religion or drama. It could be about wildlife. It could be different signs. Geography could be about information, other people's life and what they thought of coloured people's life styles.*

*[Geography is] learning about people who live in other countries, and places, far away and near us. I think wildlife as well, but I'm not sure.*

However, for other children, geography may be beginning to have a deeper meaning, related for example to a sense of identity.

*Geography to me, is a subject which teaches us about the world, continents, countries and us! It helps us to learn about the Great Wall of China or the Eiffel Tower. It helps us to learn who we really are.*

### **Having little idea about geography**

Within any class of children there will be those who have a sound or deeper appreciation of the meaning of a term, as there may well be some who remain uncertain or have limited awareness of the meaning of a word. Thus, it should not be surprising that there may be a few children will not be able to offer a useful definition. Some 7.6% of the children stated that they had **no idea** what 'geography' is about.

*I've heard of geography, but I don't know what it means.*

*I have not got a clue.*

Those that had no idea were spread across half of the schools. A larger number of children (10.3%) gave responses that indicated moderate or serious misconceptions about the meaning of *geography*. Misconceptions included, for example, either muddling geography with history or science completely or including historical points with geographical ones.

*Geography is what happened in the past, when have to write what happened, like when King Henry shut down all the monasteries and we have to write about it.*

*Geography is: something to do with maps, area, countries, measuring long distances of land, walking long distances, compass work, hiking. Some subjects along the lines of Geography are Archaeology - excavating in far countries - other countries. History is geography in the past. Geography can also come under the heading of Astronomy - studying the galaxy.*

*I think Geography is about landscape, but I used to think it was about science. Geography is also about the past and future and different times.*

Those children who indicated **misconceptions** or had **no idea** about *geography* were spread

across 71% of the classes and came from 83% of schools. However, one third of them came from a single school, which would indicate some weakness in its planning and teaching of geography. Inspection reports indicate that some 5% of geography teaching in primary schools is not satisfactory (Ofsted, 1999).

## CONCLUSION

Very many children in English primary schools can give an account of their developing sense of *geography*, as a reflection of their classroom experience of geography. A few children have a broad and thoughtful sense of the meaning of *geography*. However, the emphasis in very many children's definitions is on traditional aspects of geographical study:

- the use of maps
- awareness of and knowledge about the world and countries.

The importance of maps in geography is self-evident and clearly comes through to primary age children. Equally the idea of geography as a description of the earth also is recognised by them (Holt-Jensen, 1999).

Primary geography emphasises the study of places, as studies of localities and communities, near and far. Though a significant minority of children recognise that geography studies places, this aspect of geography has not made the impact on their idea of the subject which might have been expected. Particularly, this is reflected in the limited direct reference to the study of the local area and other localities, a point reinforced by the omission of reference to fieldwork. While an assumption has been made about their interpretation, effectively it remains unclear what children interpret *places* to mean, whether as localities or as towns, cities and countries. While their ideas are still at an early stage of development, this finding indicates it is important for teachers to give greater emphasis to place studies in primary geography.

Given the narrowness of many children's definitions, providing some detail within particular aspects of geography, questions remain about the impact of their geographical studies at primary school. Further research, using interviews, questionnaires and other approaches, will be needed to explore more deeply both the meaning children attach to the phrases they use in their definitions and whether there are aspects of geography that they have inadvertently or deliberately omitted. It would be fruitful, also, to link this with the evidence about children's geographical studies in school. While a sense of interest in geography may be inferred from many of the children's definitions, this could be pursued further by enquiring into children's interest in and attitude towards geography.

It may not be surprising that some aspects of geography are mentioned only by a small minority of children, such as settlement, weather, rivers and the environment and environmental issues. For some children, their studies may have made no particular impact and have been forgotten or at best not related to geography. Others may not have mentioned components of geography because they had not yet studied them. Information needs to be gathered in more detail about the geographical studies children undertake, not just the topics but the focus of and balance within these studies to relate the planned geographical curriculum to their idea of the *geography*.

These findings indicate that primary children are still very much developing their understanding of geography, that for many it has some breadth but is still fairly basic in nature. What this

research with English primary school children has indicated is that

- children can give an account of *geography*
- for many, their studies of geography begin to make some sense within a disciplinary framework
- the idea of *geography* as a subject that others might recognise is reflected in children's descriptions, though this may be a more popular and limited view of geography than would be given by professional geographers, even perhaps by primary geography specialists.

The large majority of primary children do have a working sense of the subject on entry to secondary education in England.

It appears to be the case that children's ideas of *geography* are to some extent circumscribed by the nature and focus of the English primary geography national curriculum. There may be other factors that lie behind the children's perspectives. These might include the emphasis that teachers put on different aspects of geography within the curriculum requirements, teachers' security in their own sense of geography or the teaching tasks and the resources they use. It is clear that further research needs to be undertaken into both children's understanding of *geography* and into what influences children to develop their sense of *geography*, not just in England or the United Kingdom but internationally.

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**NOTE:** This paper was published in *International Research in Geographical and Environmental Education* (2001), 10 (4), pp. 363-378.