

Catch them young: engaging children with maps and mapping

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Abstract:

Children are remarkably adept at using and making maps and appear to develop spatial awareness from an early age. The maps that they draw not only provide a fascinating insight into their imaginary world and but also indicate the places that they value and their ideas about their environment. There is considerable discussion about the stages which children go through as they develop their mapwork skills. What seems certain is that children find maps a valuable way to communicate to others and to express their ideas about the world and to that end a meaningful engagement with maps and mapping is essential to their educational development.

This paper explores the experience of the Meaningful Maps team (UK) in engaging with children as map makers but also draws on their individual experience as teachers and researchers, and as writers and consultants - working with UK school atlas publishers, the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), the UK Ordnance Survey, Geographical Association, and others. It provides evidence for how map education in UK schools might appropriately develop, with examples drawn from recent engagement with teachers and children and the development of on-line materials for young children (Primary age) for the Ordnance Survey *Digimap for Schools* digital mapping programme.

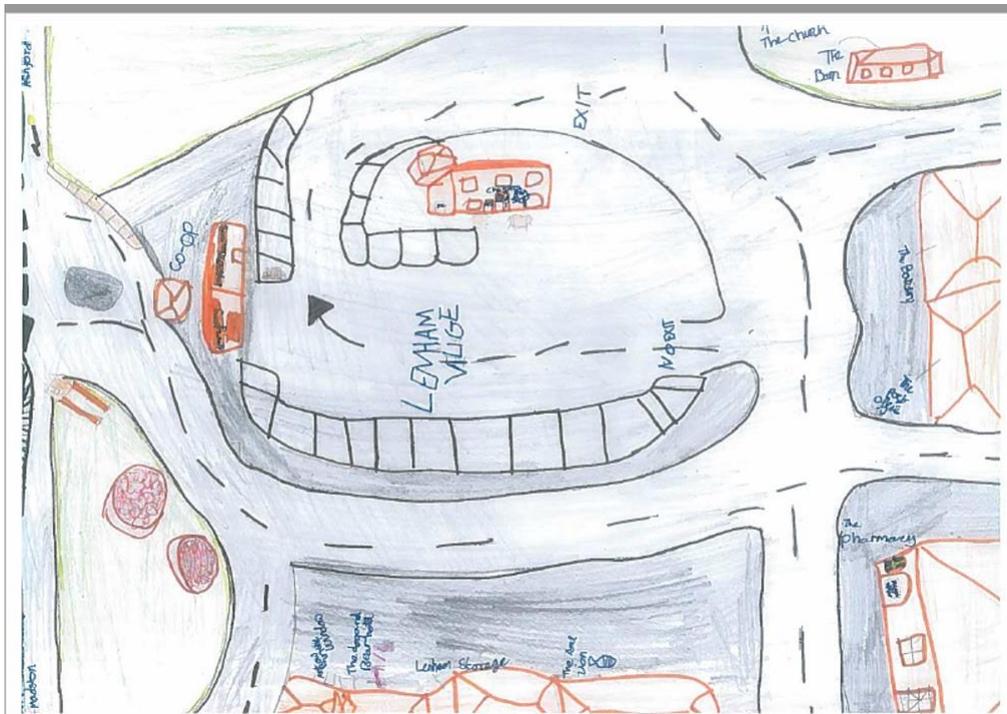


Figure 1. Primary age pupil's map of Lenham, Kent (UK) reproduced with kind permission of the child and parents.

Meaningful Maps is a research project concerning children's ideas about their locality through map making (Vujakovic, *et al.*, 2018, Owens *et al.* 2020). The project includes children from diverse backgrounds and geographical settings to find out what matters to them in their home area. The project (endorsed by the British Cartographic Society and the Geographical Association) has generated over 500 maps by individual children from across the UK. Robert Macfarlane, author of a recent book (Macfarlane and Morris, 2017) that seeks to recover words used to describe the natural world but removed from modern children's dictionaries, makes the point that "We do not care for what we do not know, and on the whole we do not know what we cannot name." Making maps involves drawing and naming, and through this a conscious engagement with place and environment. The maps made by children may be seen as a form of (auto)biography, following from an idea originally set out by the late Brian Harley (Harley, 1987, Vujakovic, 2021), in which their geographic knowledge is developed by actively considering their place in it.

As well as building a local sense of place large-scale mapping and fieldwork leads to better understanding of small-scale maps from regional to global scales. This provides a point of entry to school atlases that are arguably one of the key gateways to pupils' world knowledge, providing comparative and authoritative maps which they can interpret and interrogate in different ways as their horizons expand. Maps become meaningful when pupils see their personal value.

Peter Vujakovic is Emeritus Professor of Geography at Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU). He has been studying maps and their impact on education and society more generally since the 1980s. He is a member of the British Cartographic Society (BCS) and Chair of the BCS Education Committee, he is a past Editor and current Associated Editor of the *Cartographic Journal*. He co-edited the *Routledge Handbook of Mapping and Cartography* (2018). He has written numerous articles on maps and mapping for schools for the Geographical Association's *Primary Geography* and *Teaching Geography*.

Dr Paula Owens has many years of experience as a primary teacher and deputy head, passionate about high-quality geography education and the value of fieldwork. She is now an author and education consultant and regularly creates resources for the Ordnance Survey Digimap for Schools digital mapping programme. Paula leads fieldwork and CPD with schools across the country, is a mentor and school judge for the Ashden LESSCO2 programme and geography consultant to CBeebies Go Jetties (BBC). She is also a consultant to the Geographical Association, having been their curriculum lead for many years, and a member of their Primary Geography Editorial Board.

Dr Stephen Scoffham is Visiting Reader in Sustainability and Education at Canterbury Christ Church University. He is the author of numerous texts on primary school geography and is a long-term author/consultant for Collins school atlases. Stephen's research interests focus on teaching and learning and include primary school geography, the environment, sustainability, intercultural understanding and creativity. Stephen has been a member of the Geographical Association (GA) for many years and its President (2018-19). He is editor of the *Primary Geography Handbook* (GA 2010) and *Teaching Geography Creatively* (Routledge 2017) and co-author with Paula Owens of *Teaching Primary Geography* (Bloomsbury 2016).

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