

Blog post

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Fy Ardal/My Neighbourhood: Pupils' perceptions of place — a pedagogy for living in Wales

Kevin Smith, Cardiff University, 8 September 2015

For the past three years, the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research Data & Methods (WISERD) has been conducting research with pupils, teachers and parents in 29 primary and secondary schools throughout Wales. The aims of the WISERDEducation study are to increase Wales' capacity to carry out high quality educational research and to improve the quality of learning and standards of teaching and teacher education in Wales. Each year, we visit over 1200 pupils, aged 5-17, at their schools and ask them to complete surveys on a variety of topics such as aspects of their daily routine, academic performance, life aspirations, friendships and well-being.

My research interests involve examining the socio-cultural components of curriculum. I am particularly interested in the Cwricwlwm Cymraeg — a curricular initiative intended to ensure schools in Wales demonstrate a “Welsh ethos” in the educational experiences they provide for their pupils. From this particular orientation to schooling, it is hoped pupils will appreciate living and learning in Wales in the 21st century, develop their own sense of “Welshness” and understand Wales within a globalised context (Developing the Curriculum Cymreig, 2003). Through the Cwricwlwm Cymreig, discourses of ‘place’ emphasise certain historical, political and cultural representations of Wales, but these discourses do not necessarily represent (or engage) the interpretations and constructions of ‘place’ expressed by the pupils and teachers living in those areas.

I wanted to capture the language young people in Wales use to describe the areas in which they live and to better understand how they come to understand and represent these places. This was accomplished through a mixed methods approach incorporating statistical and content analysis. Because my time with the pupils was limited, and I wanted the pupils to provide their most concise response, I decided to ask the pupils to provide up to three words that best described the areas in which they live. This approach was informed through phenomenological methods, and it was hoped this purposeful limitation of responses might serve as a type of bracketing that reduced the almost innumerable potential of their responses to a nearly ‘essential-ised’ expression of place.

Through multiple coding attempts, nearly 3000 responses were coded into positive, neutral and negative categories. Responses were also coded into physical, social and ‘ambient’ (meaning ‘mood-like’ factors that don’t fall into social or physical descriptions) categories. Finally, responses were also categorised into themes emerging from the data, including topics such as economy, people, geography, sound, etc. The results indicate pupils 62.7% of the pupils surveyed have a positive orientation to the areas they live. From these results, the location of the most positively and negatively oriented areas can be found, providing a window into the lived experiences of pupils there and bringing to mind questions of what factors contribute to positive and negative associations with place. Overwhelmingly, “friendly,” “quiet” and “boring” were the three most frequent responses provided by pupils, but perhaps even more interesting are the incongruities in

the most frequent responses when organised by school, differences which highlight compelling nuances in pupils' representations of place.

Although discussions of 'place' in the Cwricwlwm Cymreig focus on historical accounts of industrialisation, physical features such as mountains and valleys, and contemporary themes of sport, recreation and even devolution, pupils primarily construct their 'place images' representing immediate social relationships, like friends and family, and broader connections within their community. While our participants expressed a sense of frustration with the boredom of living in Wales, this frustration was ameliorated through their positive associations of place and expressions of the friendly, pastoral and communal representations they provided.

Discussions of cultural conservation and political status are important themes in narratives supporting the curricular construction and expression of Wales as a political entity. However, teachers and pupils should also be encouraged to engage in onto-epistemological investigations of these curricular discourses and their own orientations to, and representations of, place. From these philosophical inquiries and even critique, teachers and pupils can engage in more sophisticated discussions that not only render an elucidated understanding of the areas in which they live, but also of Wales and their role as members of a local, regional, national and global community.

These findings and more will be discussed in greater detail during my presentation Tuesday, September 15th at 11:30 in the Curriculum, Assessment and Pedagogy SIG at the BERA 2015 Conference.