"If you went out it would stick": Irish children's learning in their local environments

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This paper reports on the findings of a research project investigating children's experiences of their local environments. Children's experiences of spaces and places and the interaction of such experiences and their learning were investigated, using mixed research methods, informed by phenomenological and participatory methodologies. Through these activities including discussion, interviews and drawing, children described how they experienced affordances of spaces, places and people in a range of ways. The children also revealed varied and dynamic attitudes to their local environments. Children's use and opinions of the environment were influenced by temporal, physical, social and economic factors. As well as expressing that such local experiences enhanced their current lives, the children also described how experiences in their local environment contributed to the different areas of their development, including their learning. For most children, such experiences emanated from outside school, with learning in geography in school more likely to be about places farther from home. These findings suggest that attempts to make children's geographies in their local environments central to primary geography through content and activities like many of those outlined in the Primary School Curriculum would be successful. The children's views also suggest that the contributions of all children could be used in decision-making beyond schools. Such consideration and development of children's geographies has the potential to contribute to children's lives as active citizens, currently and in the future.

Keywords: children's geographies; geography education; Irish education; geography curriculum; primary geography; geography fieldwork

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in researching children's lives (Aitken, 2001; Deegan, Devine, & Lodge, 2004; Greene & Hogan, 2005; James & Prout, 1997; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994), including their experiences of their local environments (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1997; Matthews, 1992; Spencer & Blades, 2006; Tranter & Pawson, 2001). Such experiences appear to be important to children for a number of reasons, including their current well-being as well as their cognitive and affective development (Hart, 1979; Matthews, Limb, & Taylor, 2000; Moore, 1986; Punch, 2000; Skelton, 2000). Although children's lives have become an increasingly popular field of research, it has been argued that there is much to discover about the "here and now" of children's experiences in their local environments (Matthews & Limb, 1999, p. 61).

Recent research about children's local environments has tended to be categorised within the fields of "children's geographies" and the "geography of children" (Catling, 2003;

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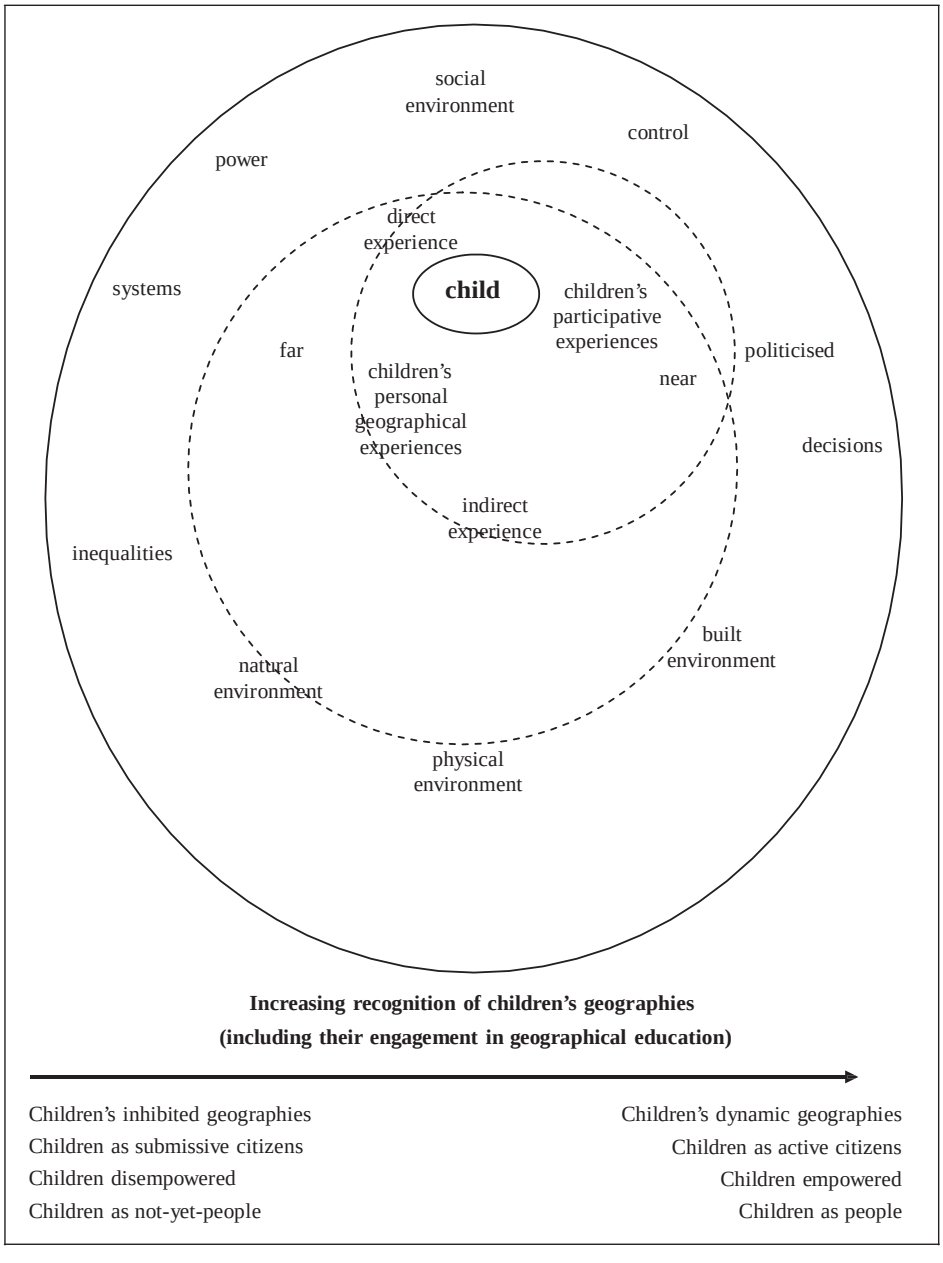

Figure 1. Elements in children's geographies. Source: Catling (2003, p. 172).

Matthews, 2003). To draw these categories together, this paper investigates children's experiences of their local environments and their learning, as illustrated by Catling in his model shown in Figure 1 (2003, p. 172). Within the model, children's geographies are represented as a series of spheres, encompassing their experiences. In the top half of the diagram, the child is portrayed within their immediate "world at hand", encompassing their direct experiences and their participation in communities. Also, within this sphere is the "world beyond", or children's indirect experiences. Circulating these realms of experiences

are the influences, such as the local environment itself and the systems and structures of society. The lower half of the diagram represents a continuum of the potential for recognising children's geographies; to the left is a situation where children's geographies are not recognised by the society, where children are inhibited, disempowered and submissive, and furthermore where children are considered "not yet-persons". To the right is a situation where children's dynamic geographies are recognised and developed by children becoming empowered, active citizens within their local communities. In this way, Catling's model promotes the "agency" of children (Holloway & Valentine, 2000a; Matthews, 2003), generally described as "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (James & James, 2008, p. 9). The model illustrates a continuum of children's increasing independent engagement with their local environment, including their learning at school, referred to in this paper as children's "local learning".

Emerging from Catling's model in Figure 1, this paper will focus on the following questions:

- How do children use their local environments?
- How do such experiences contribute to children's learning?
- What influences children's experiences, including their learning about their local environments?
- What are the implications for practice for the incorporation of children's experiences into learning in geography?

Children's experiences of their local environments

The study of children's experiences in their localities has a relatively long tradition not only influenced primarily from geography and psychology but also from other disciplines (Matthews, 2003). Bunge and Bordessa's (1975) investigations of children's expeditions found that the children were subject to structural oppression and subsequent spatial restrictions, especially for the poorest of children. Hart (1979) spent 18 months with the children of a New England town focusing on their experiences in their local environment. Despite their common geographical focus, these studies drew different conclusions, as Bunge and Bordessa's work emphasised the structural forces at work on children's experiences, whereas Hart's work emphasised children's agency, in that they shaped their environment as much as it shaped them. Although it has been found that the children explore their local environments for the sake of it (Hart, 1979), space is generally used to access particular places. Across the literature, it is consistently found that children will use the places that are available and that they like. Research into children's use of local places and their experiences in their local environments has focused on the specific natural and built places that children use in their local environments, including natural landscapes, such as woods and rivers (Fjørtoft & Sageie, 2000; Olwig, 1993; Owens, 1988; Tunstall, Tapsell, & House, 2004), and human landscapes, such as parks and shopping centres (Hopkins, 1990; Skelton, 2000; Vanderbeck & Johnson, 2000). The Growing up in Cities (GuiC) project compared children's experiences spatially (in 11 countries) and temporally (in the 1970s and 1990s) (Chawla, 2002; Lynch, 1977). Findings reflected previous studies, but the comparative nature of the projects meant that differences along as ethnic, class and gender were more apparent, with girls, those from ethnic minorities and middle-class children having least freedom in their localities. Across all research in the field, the most consistent finding in the research is that there is a value, including learning, in the use of the local environment.

Education, curriculum and children's environments

Educational theorists have noted the value of local learning: From a developmental perspective, Piaget valued children's complex environmental interactions, as such interactions contributed towards children's intellectual development (Piaget & Inhelder, 1954). Socio-constructivists have criticised constructivists for ignoring the social context of learning (Bruner, 1986). Although still under-researched, there is evidence that children receive cognitive and affective benefits from local learning (Blaut, 1991, 1997; Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1992; Matthews, 1987). There is overwhelming evidence that teaching, using the locality and appropriate resources, develops children's spatial capabilities (Catling, 1998; Walsh, 2006). Such awareness also develops where children have the opportunity for unrestricted play, alone or with friends, in environments (Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1987). Newer research evidence also reveals that when learning concepts in geography, children are more likely to understand them if they are actively learning in environments (Nundy, 1999). Nundy (1999) found that the levels of understanding were significantly higher in children carrying out fieldwork on rivers outdoors than a control group learning in the classroom. There is also evidence that local learning, within a school context or not, brings affective benefits to children, including positive attitudes to learning and developed self-identity (Ballantyne & Packer, 2002; Biddulph & Adey, 2004; James, 1995; Matthews et al., 2000; Scourfield & Davies, 2005; Scourfield, Dicks, Holland, Drakeford, & Davies, 2006).

Drawing on research evidence, local learning has featured subsequent curricular in the Republic of Ireland (RoI), including the 1971 CURACLAM NA BUNSCOILE (CnB) and 1999 Primary School Curriculum (PSC) (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 1999b; DoE, 1971a, 1971b). The current geography programme aims to help children "make sense of their surroundings and the wider world … to learn about people and places and the inter-relationships between them", encompassing the development of both a "sense of space" and "a sense of place" (DES/NCCA, 1999b, p. 6). Within the geography curriculum, a sense of space refers to the understanding of and feeling for places, whereas a sense of place refers to the identity of places, including local places, and developing an appreciation of what it may be like to experience such places (DES/NCCA, 1999b, p. 9). Furthermore, the PSC views children as members of local communities recognising the worth of children's learning in a local context (DES/NCCA, 1999b), reflecting the established literature (Driskell, 2002; Hart, 1992; Heft & Chawla, 2006). Within Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), reference is made to enhancing and deepening children's experiences of, attitudes to and participation in local communities (DES/NCCA, 1999d, 1999e). In geography, there are opportunities for children to engage with local learning, expressing their ideas and opinions about their locality (DES/NCCA, 1999b, 1999c). Although the PSC holds progressive and active views of children, there are some shortcomings, as the concept of participation in the PSC is limited to action within school (Waldron, 2004). Nevertheless, teaching and learning in primary geography is not just a product of the curriculum but also of interpretation (Catling, 2003, p. 169). In the RoI, limited research evidence suggests that following the introduction of the CnB, provision for child-centred creative learning, including local learning, in the curriculum was not evident in classroom practice (Gash, 1985). Limited evidence suggests that children's experiences of primary geography may be shaped more by requirements of school textbooks rather than by the curriculum (Devine, 2003; Pike, 2006). Research indicates that actively learning about or within the local environments is rarely experienced in schools (Devine, 2003; INTO, 1996; Pike, 2006).

Research methods

Drawing on a tradition of phenomenology to inform research in geography, the theoretical basis of this project was the field of phenomenology, being a study of the essences of children's experiences (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. vii). Crucially, the research aimed to be participatory, to allow participants the opportunity to "act, take part in, change and become changed by the social and cultural world they live in" (Christensen & Prout, 2002, p. 481). Therefore, the "mosaic approach" was drawn upon (Clark & Moss, 2001) to research the lived experiences of children within a participatory process.

The fieldwork for this research took place over the period from September 2005 to June 2007 in state primary schools in Dublin City and Waterford County and City, as outlined in Table 1. Initial data were collected from two rural schools in Waterford County in September 2005, which indicated interesting dimensions to the children's experience. Therefore, a further selection of schools was made that were located in areas known to the author (Huberman & Miles, 2002, p. 12) and were varied in the socio-economic profile of their catchment and in ethos and nature. In these schools, the school principals, teachers and children were willing to take part in the research. The choice of this range of schools helped ensure external validity in the sample, whilst ensuring there was sufficient time to gather meaningful data with each child (Robson, 2002).

This research was carried out with pupils in fifth and sixth classes (aged 10–13 years). In the two rural schools, the pupils in fifth and sixth classes were included in the project as they were in multi-grade settings. The range of ages reflected the fact that children start school at any age between 4 years and 5 years 11 months, depending on parental decisions

Table 1. Schools and children participating in the study.

Name of school* Age of pupils	Description of school Location of school	Location/catchment of school	Number of pupils in school	Number of children taking part in the study
Mountainview	Small, co-educational	Small village	85	21
4–13 years	National school	Rural		
Seaview	Small, co-educational	Large village	72	21
4–13 years	National school	Village/rural		
Bayside	Medium, mixed	Suburbs of town	221	21
4–13 years	Gaelscoil	Rural/village/town		
Hillside	Medium, co-educational	Rural	192	20
4–13 years	National school	Rural/suburbs of town		
Countryview	Large, co-educational	Rural	553	40
4–13 years	National school	Rural/suburbs/city		
City girls' school	Large girls school	Inner city suburbs	291	21
8–13 years	Senior national school	City		
City boys' school	Large boys	Inner city suburbs	258	24
8–13 years	Senior national school	City		

* Names of schools have been changed.

Table 2. Examples of children's ideas for the research process.

Talk to us more.	*Get it drawn, write a bit, get us to TALK ABOUT IT!*
Draw maps.	*We could interview other people.*
Poster.	*Go on a walk around the village.*
Publish on cars.	*Draw it. Go on TV. Call a meeting.*
Ask us more questions.	*Talk to younger children.*

in the RoI. The gender breakdown in each of the co-educational schools was broadly evenly split in each school, and when the children in the single-sex schools were accounted for, the gender breakdown for all children was 95 (56.5%) boys to 73 (43.5%) girls. The vast majority of children were both born in Ireland and considered themselves as Irish (92.9%). Children living in rural or urban area were broadly evenly split, with 79 children (47%) living in rural areas and 89 (53%) living in urban areas. Most children had lived in their current locality for a relatively long time; 45% of the children had never moved, with a further 29.4% of the children only having moved locally.

In considering the methods most suitable for collecting information about their experiences in their local environments, the children's ideas were sought, as outlined on Table 2 (Tilbury & Walford, 1996, p. 57), which included a variety of methods for finding out opinions, reflecting the mosaic approach using mixed methods (Clark & Moss, 2001). Such mixed research methods were evident in other studies of children's localities, even if not named as such (Hart, 1979; Nairn, Panelli, & McCormack, 2003; Punch, 2000; Skelton, 2000). It was hoped that the quantitative data would discover the patterns of the children's experiences and qualitative data would provide some reasons for the children's experiences (Huberman & Miles, 2002), with the chances of biases arising from over-reliance on one method being minimised (Ennew & Morrow, 1994, p. 70; Morrow & Richards, 1996, p. 101).

The first activity for data collection was to invite the children to draw their local environment ($n = 133$), an established technique in geography research (Lynch, 1977; Matthews, 1992), rather than relying on writing and speaking (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999) (Table 3). The children also completed questionnaires on their experiences of and attitudes to their local environment. The first of these was a multiple-choice, short response questionnaire (SRQ) ($n = 155$) about their experiences in their local environment at home and school. The SRQ fitted in with the findings of initial research and the research questions regarding children's experience in the local environment (Czaja & Blair, 1996). The second of these was a long response questionnaire (LRQ) ($n = 126$) about their local environment containing questions about children's experiences in their local environment, used to collect more open data than the SRQ. Focus group interviews ($n = 112$) were also designed to collect the children's verbal accounts to give the children space to explore the ideas they had expressed (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005; Merton & Kendall, 1946). Interview groups were "geographical" and friendship groups, as such groups were both supportive and enabling for the children (Matthews & Tucker, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Tucker, 2003). Complimenting the questionnaires and interviews were the children's photographs ($n = 102$), helping to access their ideas of places, enabling features or places talked of to become more visible (Punch, 2003).

The range of data was processed by open coding, noting the themes in the children's activities (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Codes included types of experiences and relationships between learning and experiences, using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Thereafter, purely quantitative data sets were transferred to the Statistical Packages for the Social Sciences

Table 3. Techniques used in the research process.

Technique (Grouping)	Children's activity	Researcher's activity
Classroom discussion (Whole class, friendship groups)	Viewing and discussing research material in groups Devising ideas for research process in pairs/groups Completing permission slip and asking for parental permission	Introducing ideas of the research Providing examples of research Asking for ideas about research process
Short response questionnaire (Individual)	Completing questionnaire	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Clarifying task and helping individuals
Pictoral representations of the present locality (Individual)	Drawing a pictoral representation of their local environment	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Clarifying task and helping individuals
Long responses questionnaire (Individual)	Completing questionnaire	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Clarifying task and helping individuals
Interview (Self-selected friendship groups)	Asking questions Answering questions Discussing with friends	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Asking questions Managing discussions
Photography (Individual with some pairings)	Taking photograph of their local environment Writing responses about photograph	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Asking questions
Pictoral representations of future locality (Individual)	Drawing a representation of their local environment	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Clarifying task and helping individuals
Feedback on study (Whole class)	Discussing findings Making suggestions	Outlining task and inviting children to take part Presenting initial findings of research

(SPSS), to enable summary statistics and comparisons to be made to complement codes (Robson, 2002). By considering the written and drawn data from each child individually, it was evident that the quantitative data provided the patterns of the children's experiences, but that influences on their experiences were apparent through the qualitative data (Jick, 1979).

Findings

Children's uses of their local environment included their movements through space and their uses of places in their locality, as outlined in Table 4. In many ways, the children spoke about their experiences as many before them, although children had contrasting experiences (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1992, 2003; Spencer & Blades, 2006).

Children's uses of local spaces

The children used a range of spaces in their locality to play, to meet up within or to travel through to reach other spaces or places, as outlined in Table 5. Overall, 24.3% of the

Table 4. Children's spaces and places in their local environments ($n = 168$).

Natural spaces and places	
Natural	Built "green" areas
• Beaches	• Dens
• Fields	• Parks
• Hills/mountains	• Public "greens"
• Rivers	• Sports fields
• Woods	
Built places spaces and places	
Commercial places	Community facilities
• Bowling alleys	• Churches
• Cinemas	• GAA/soccer clubs
• Food outlets/restaurants	• Swimming pools
• Local shops/shopping centres	• Tennis clubs
• Swimming pools	• Youth clubs
People	
Familiar people	Less familiar people
• Family	• Adults, e.g. youth workers
• Friends	• Children, e.g. younger children
• Local residents	• Teenagers

Source: All data.

children described using the space very close to their home, such as the street or common area, with the majority (54.8%) of children using space in their immediate area, such as the whole of their housing estate or their part of the town or city. A small proportion of children (2.6%) had particularly large ranges, describing their use of the whole city or large areas or the countryside. It was evident that the children's experiences of local spaces were related to who lived near to them (Costall, 1995; Hart, 1979; Matthews & Field, 2001; Matthews et al., 2000; Newson & Newson, 1977; Punch, 2000; Skelton, 2000), with over three quarters of children visiting friends and relatives at least once a week. In fact, there were no statistically significant differences found using gender or location as variables (gender/friends: $p = 0.218$, $U = 2163.5$, $z = -1.231$; gender/relatives: $p = 0.406$, $U = 2253.0$, $z = -0.830$; location/friends: $p = 0.33$, $U = 1944.0$, $z = -2.136$; location/relatives: $p = 0.164$, $U = 2190.5$, $z = 0.164$), contrasting with earlier studies (Hart, 1979).

Table 5. Children's use of their local environment ($n = 155$).

Percentage of children carrying out this type of activity	At least once a week	At least once a month	Once a year or less	Not near my home
Walking	81.2	90.6	5.8	–
Shops	80.3	88.3	8.1	2.2
Paths	73.2	78.3	8.2	8.7
Cycling	68.9	85.6	11.5	–
Roads	59.3	72.9	20.8	–
Public places	53.9	71.9	18.0	5.8
Fields	48.2	68.3	19.5	6.5
Woods	24.5	46.1	38.8	5.8
Playgrounds	13.0	40.7	33.8	28.8

Source: SRQ.

In terms of movement through space, the SRQ ($n = 155$) children frequently walked and cycled around their local environments, with 81.2% of children questioned walking and 88.9% cycling in their local area at least once a week. The most common reason for using space in this way was to meet friends and/or relatives, as over three quarters (76%) of children visited or met friends at least once a week, with 68.0% doing the same with relatives. The proximity of others, particularly friends and relatives, appeared to direct children's uses of space in their local environment:

> Where my house is it's really close to my cousin's and my nanny's house. So like, lots of times I might ring my cousin and say: "Do you want to go for a walk?" And like we're close so we can go, together and it's not noisy. (Girl, rural area, interviewed with her two female cousins)

Whilst the majority of children used space frequently, there were differences within groups of children in their choice of transport through space. For example, children in urban areas were more likely to walk around their area, with children from rural areas more likely to cycle. However, these differences were not statistically significant (walking: $p = 0.058$, $U = 1944.5$, $z = -1.894$; cycling: $p = 0.083$, $U = 1963.0$, $z = -1.736$). Using gender as a variable, fewer girls than boys either walked or cycled around their local environments on a daily basis, though this was found to be statistically significant for cycling but not for walking (walking: $p = 0.451$, $U = 2211.5$, $z = -0.754$; cycling: $p = 0.570$, $U = 2249.0$, $z = -0.568$). Interviews revealed complex patterns of use of space at different times; children used their local environments both extensively and intensively.

In all areas, children frequently used different spaces, reflecting the environment the children resided in (Kyttä, 2006), with children in urban areas more likely to use the built environment and children in rural areas more likely to use the natural environment spaces. Of all the spaces and places used by the children, the most common were journeys to the local shops. Although a shop is a place, rather than space, to the children the streets outside shops or arcades within shopping centres were part of their local spaces, most often used for "hanging out" in spaces near to the shop.

The children used a range of local spaces, most commonly woods and fields, as can be seen in Table 6. There were a large number of children who did not use natural spaces such as woods (30%) and fields (17.3%), even though they were accessible to them, reflecting previous findings (Matthews et al., 2000; Nairn et al., 2003). As with the children's ranges, there were temporal and seasonal variations in children's use of local spaces, as not such easily defined spaces such as pavements, streets and other areas of their immediate neighbourhood were valued by children (Karsten, 2002; Karsten, Bongertman, de Haan, Van Der Straaten, & Tom, 1995; Matthews, 2002; Moore, 1986; Owens, 1988), and this

Table 6. Children's weekly use of the natural and built environment ($n = 155$).

Percentage of children using spaces and places	Urban	Rural	Male	Female	All
Shops	83.6	77.6	76.0	84.9	80.3
Friend's homes	84.6	75.3	78.3	70.2	75.0
Relative's homes	63.5	75.4	73.7	70.2	70.0
Fields	35.5	58.5	53.4	42.4	48.2
Woods	32.5	14.5	27.4	21.2	39.6
Playgrounds	16.2	10.4	16.5	9.1	13.0

Source: SRQ.

Figure 2. "The anti-adult corner", boy, city. Source: child's photograph.

pattern of space use, so different to how adults use space, was true of some of the children. As these boys photographed (Figure 2) and described:

> Boy 1: There's a place we hang around it's called the AAC, the "anti-adult corner". We just hang out there and play. We just were talking and we were messing because we were bored and we gave it a name.
>
> Boy 2: It's our main hang out place. We send songs on our phones through Bluetooth. (Boys, city, interview)

Overall, children in the project used spaces in their local environments frequently and in a variety of ways at different times. The children used spaces where other children were found, used space to move through to get to people and places, and used space to be alone.

Children's uses of local places

The children also used a wide range of places in their local environments, as outlined in Table 7, most commonly shops (80.3% at least once per week). After shops, other frequently

Table 7. Children's use of places in their local environments ($n = 155$).

Percentage of children using places	At least once a week	At least once a month	Once a year or less	Never (as not nearby)
Shops	80.3	88.3	8.1	2.2
Relatives' houses	68.9	92.9	10.0	6.4
Friends' houses	67.0	89.3	5.7	0.7
Public places	53.9	71.9	18.0	5.8
Playgrounds	13.0	31.7	33.8	28.8

Source: SRQ.

Figure 3. “The take away” girl, city. Source: children’s photograph.

used places were facilities partly or wholly designed for children, such as green areas, sports and youth centres. One-third of all children photographed common “green” areas on estates, and children spoke very highly of such provision. In rural areas, children were more likely to visit places of the natural environment, such as woods and beaches; conversely, in urban areas, children were more likely to talk of elements of the built environment, such as youth centres, shops and places to eat, as depicted in Figure 3. Like local spaces, places were not only used for particular attractions as a place but also to meet others. In fact, the amount and range of places used by the children made categorisation difficult, as many of the places were a mixture of place types, for example, local shops were privately owned, but were effectively a public facility used by many children to shop but also to meet outside of. This was true of other spaces and/or places used by the children, such as youth centres and Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) facilities.

The final types of places mentioned by the children were places they had made themselves. Although only two interview groups talked of such spaces, the amount of time they spent talking of these places justifies inclusion, as the children described in detail about the construction and use of these places. Like others (Derr, 2006; Hart, 1979), it was evident, even with this small amount of children, that the girls focused on the insides of the dens, for example, what they had put in the dens, whilst the boys talked about how they made the dens, for example, the process of making dens out of tree branches.

Overall, children used a wide range of spaces and places in their locality. The nature of the environment itself appeared to be the largest determinant in what places and spaces children used. Where there was a combination of spaces, places and people nearby, children used their local environments to a great extent.

Children's learning in their local environments

From the children's perspective, their experiences in their local environments were not only valuable in themselves but also contributed to their learning, supporting previous findings (Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1992; Moore, 1986). This learning was multi-faceted, including cognitive and affective domains of learning, with experiences contributing to the development of children's knowledge of spaces and places and understanding of physical and human processes.

Across the range of data, there was evidence of extensive and intensive knowledge of their local environments; for example, in the interviews, the extent of children's knowledge of their local environments was also evident, as illustrated in Figure 4 and within this quote:

> Well, it's a very long boreen and then you go in and my house and I've a bit of it going into a farmyard, which is my Nanny's and all the brothers share. Then it's kind of a dead end from there and then there are rough little pats (sic) that we use to keep the sheep up to the mountains. Then there's no more houses or anything in further than my nanny's. And then (there's a) walk up to the fields and then we have old broken down sheds, houses and dipping tanks and stuff. (Girl, rural area, interview)

As found elsewhere (Hart, 1979; Matthews, 1987), pictures showing the widest area were drawn by children with the most spatial activity. Furthermore, the majority of children drew pictures that (n = 133) were broadly topographically accurate (73.5%) and well organised (88.7%). Overall, many children held detailed knowledge of the features and people in their local environment. The children had an impressive awareness of human processes and were able to describe changes that had occurred in their areas, explain why these changes had occurred and appreciate different people's views on such changes,

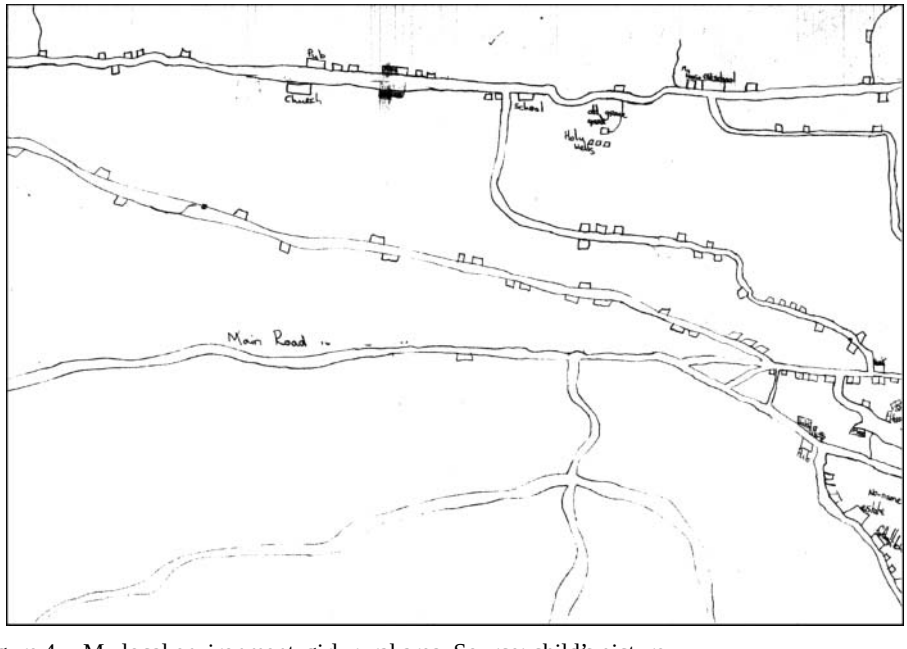

Figure 4. My local environment, girl, rural area. Source: child's picture.

reflecting previous studies (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1992). Their awareness of change in the local environment, including changes that had happened or were about to happen, was apparent in their photographs, with 82.7% taking the photograph because of past or future changes. Overall, 70% of children looked at their local paper each week and over 80% used their local environment on a weekly basis, and so, it was not surprising that the children knew what was going on in their locality! There were a number of local processes on which children had quite marked opinions and were concerned about, particularly the closing of facilities and the increase in traffic volumes. Children appeared to have less of an understanding of local physical processes, as no children talked of local physical processes in any of the interviews. For example, the children photographed those places that were changing due to physical processes, but this was not given as a reason why they took the photograph.

Although the children had a range of knowledge and understanding of their local environments, it was not strictly developmental, as suggested by constructivist theories of children's learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1954). For example, some children found it difficult to draw their locality but could describe it in detail, whilst other children appeared to know little about the human and physical processes in their locality but were able to engage verbally in complex ideas about the influences on changes in their area. It was evident that children's experiences contributed to their learning beyond cognitive abilities, with evident mixing of cognitive and affective dimensions of children's learning, for example, in relation to ideas and opinions about local changes.

Through the use of the local environment, children constructed detailed knowledge about the local spaces, places and people, and it was evident that knowledge of local spaces was something the children were proud of. Children also expressed how experiences in their local environments contributed to their spatial awareness, their knowledge of places, their sense of safety and their sense of fun:

> It's more fun than watching telly all day. If you're playing something or someone's chasing you or something it gets funny like, it gets so funny and then you have to stop running because you're laughing so hard. (Girl, town centre, interview)

Overall, children's experiences in their locality developed a range of cognitive and affective dimensions in children's learning, as well as being good fun.

Children's learning at home and school

Within and around the local environment, children appeared to develop their knowledge and understanding of the local environment from themselves (constructed learning) and from others (received learning), with most of the children's experiences of the local environments emanating from home rather than from the school. Children had experiences of learning about their local environments at school; however, this was far less common than their home-based experiences, with experiences of local learning in geography varying from class to class. The teachers' preferences were evident to the children. For example, in Seaview School, the teacher drew heavily on the local environment, an area rich in historical features and stories, although the teacher's ambivalent attitude to geography was reflected in the children's negative attitude to it. In contrast, at a City Boys' school, the teacher had a particular interest in geography and incorporated local geography into classroom planning.

Overall, the SRQ, as summarised in Tables 8 and 9, revealed the types of activities that the children carried out in geography lessons in school geography, with children spending

Table 8. Children's experiences of learning local environments at home ($n = 165$).

Percentage of children	At least once a week	Once a year or less	Not near/in my home
Walking locally	81.2	5.8	–
Cycling locally	68.9	10.1	–
Visiting shops	80.3	6.6	2.0
Visiting relatives' houses	75.0	3.6	0.7
Visiting friends' houses	70.0	6.4	6.4
Look at local paper	60.2	7.8	8.5
Look at a local picture	7.6	33.6	35.0
Look at local aerial photographs	17.1	32.1	34.3

Source: SRQ.

relatively little time in learning about their locality (34.9% once a term; 12.1% never), with figures for learning about the school environments even lower (24.6% once a term; 16.4% never). Furthermore, active engagement in the local environment through fieldwork was infrequent in all of the schools that the children attended. Children tended to be carrying out passive activities on non-local environments in geography lessons, such as learning about Ireland and other countries from a textbook.

Children had varied views of their local learning; some felt that it was exclusively part of their home experience, whilst others felt that it should be part of their school experiences. Where they expressed an opinion, it was clear that children were not impressed by geography lessons that were book based, even though this was a common experience for many of them. Girls were particularly negative about these experiences, but when their teacher diverted from the book, the children were much happier about their experiences:

> Our teacher just does what's in the book. If I was a teacher I'd just go "Yer right … book goodbye" and improvise I'd start my own thing. You learn more from a person than a book, as a person has been more places than the book. When our teacher talks about (her town), it's really interesting. We are hanging on her every word. (Girl, large city, interview)

Teachers clearly inluenced the extent to which children engaged in learning about locality, as shown in Table 10. Overall, the children's personally constructed knowledge of

Table 9. Children's experiences of learning various environments in school ($n = 155$).

Number of children stating that they carried out this activity	At least once a month	At least once a term	At least once a year	Never
Local environment				
Learning about school area	25.6	30.7	27.1	16.4
Learning about local environments	34.9	30.7	22.1	12.1
Learning about county	33.3	22.7	17.7	5.7
Non-local environment				
Learning about country	71.6	14.9	9.2	4.3
Learning about MEDCs	38.6	20.7	19.3	21.4
Learning about LEDCs	41.6	27.1	18.6	22.9

Source: SRQ.

Table 10. Teacher influence on learning in geography.

	Teachers in this study who . . .			
	were recently qualified	were a local resident	had local interest	had a geography interest
. . . were significantly more likely to enable the children to*				
Learn about school	No	No	No	Yes
Learn about local area	No	No	No	Yes
Learn about county	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Use a map of local area	No	No	No	Yes
Use a map of county	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Use a map of Ireland	No	No	No	Yes
Draw a map of school	No	Yes	No	No
Draw a map of local area	No	No	Yes	No
Draw a map of county	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Use school grounds	No	No	Yes	Yes
Do fieldwork in the locality	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

* As measured by a Mann–Whitney U test where $p < 0.05$.
Source: SRQ.

their local environments greatly outweighed their knowledge gained from experiences at school.

Conclusions and recommendations

In summary, children used their local environments in a diverse range of ways; they used the spaces around their homes intensively, and when time and parents permitted, they ventured further and used the space more extensively. They used specific places in the built environment, formally for organised activity and informally. Overall, the children took advantage of the affordances of people, spaces and places to construct personal local environments, showing their engagement with many elements of Catling's model. Whilst the children referred many of these elements of the local environment, certain elements were alluded to more than others; notably, the social environment appeared to be the most important element of the locality for the children. After people, the natural and built environment was considered important to the children, although the relative importance of these types of environment depended on the setting. The fact that children in rural areas used the built environment and children in urban areas used the natural environment revealed the value of varied environments for children, whatever setting they live in. Overall, Catling's model provided a suitable model of the children's uses of their locality, although in reality the elements of the environment varied for each child involved.

Children's use of the environment, and their interactions with people, space and places, meant they had well-developed, broadly positive attitudes to their locality, with some children not wanting to change their locality at all. This finding brings into question the recurring assumption within the curriculum in Ireland and elsewhere of a need to "improve" the locality (DES/NCCA, 1999a, pp. 61, 84). Although this was very encouraging, there were also elements of their locality that children had extremely negative views about ranging from large-scale problems, through to smaller scale issues. In all areas, there was no audience for children's articulate and considered points to make about what would improve their experiences in their locality. So, whilst in some aspects the children had dynamic geographies, as illustrated in the right of Catling's model, in terms of empowered

Table 11. Examples of children's learning in their local environments.

Examples of learning	Cognitive development	Affective development
Developed by children in study*	Knowledge of locality (S/H)	Responding and reacting to locality (H)
	Comprehension of local processes (H)	Valuing locality (S/H)
	Evaluation of locality (S/H)	Expressing ideas and opinions (S/H)
		Appreciating the opinions of others (S/H)
Potential for development (in school and at home)	Understanding and analysis of local physical and human processes	Participation in local decision-making
		Receiving attitudes
		Organisation of values
	Evaluation of local physical and human processes	Resolving conflicts
		Appreciating diverse opinions
		Participation in local decision making
		Managing risks

* H = largely at home; S = largely at school.
Source: Adapted from Bloom (1976).

citizens, they remained to the left of the diagram. The children's interactions with their local environments meant that they had a connection with it, suggesting that any attempt to use the locality as a basis for geography education was likely to be successful. Again referring to Catling's model, the children's connection with their locality suggested that a move to the right of the model could enhance children's experiences of geography education.

Children were in no doubt that experience in their locality resulted in learning that was relevant and useful both now and in the future, examples of which are outlined in Table 11. In terms of their activity, evidence across the data sources revealed that children enjoyed using their locality; they liked interacting with others, for example, whilst partaking in social and sporting activities. Such activity was valued by the children, making them feel part of their community and confident as a social actor in their locality. In this way, children's interactions with their locality were very important, even if the children learned nothing from them. In fact, the overwhelming evidence from the project is that children's use of the local environment contributed to different dimensions of their learning. Drawing on Bloom's work on the dimensions of children's learning, there was evidence of children's cognitive development, including their knowledge (e.g. spatial awareness and place knowledge) and to a lesser extent their understanding (e.g. understanding of physical and human process) through their use of their local environments as outlined in Table 12 (Bloom, 1976). However, a disparity between personally constructed learning and received learning in schools resulted in variations in children's cognition in geography.

Despite the growing evidence for the importance of local experiences for children's current and future lives (Hart, 1979; Holloway & Valentine, 2000b; Matthews, 1992; Spencer & Blades, 2006), there was evidence of a "discontinuity between home and school local experiences" (Catling, 2005, p. 325). Whilst children described how teachers made frequent reference to the locality, sustained learning on local topics was only experienced by one class of children. In fact, across all the classes, children spent more time in learning about distant localities than they did about their locality, despite curriculum requirements to balance place studies (DES/NCCA, 1999b). This pattern reflects previous findings of

Table 12. Encouraging use of the local environment by children.

Examples of activities	
Formal	Informal
Fieldwork in school grounds	Discussions of local examples when studying physical processes
Enquiries into local issues	Discussions about leisure time
Projects on leisure time activities	Discussions on local issues affecting children
Fieldwork to local streams or rivers	Talking about experiences, e.g. our news activities, circle time.
Practical experiences of safe ways to cross roads in the locality	Discussion of fears over use of locality
Role plays on local issues	
Walking to school initiatives: 20-km speed limits near schools, walking buses	

degrees of non-implementation of curricular in the RoI (Gash, 1985; INTO, 1995). This lack of implementation of both the 1971 CnB and the 1999 PSC in relation to the local environment in geography means that children such as those were lacking certain aspects of their geography education, by not learning key concepts in geography using familiar examples from their locality. Such planning in geography is recognised within both education theory and more practical guidance for learning in primary geography (Catling, 2003; Scoffham, 2006).

The recommendations arising from this project draw together some of the disparities described above to effectively help shift children's experiences to the right of Catling's model (2003, p. 172). The main recommendation arising from this project is to incorporate children's local experiences into their learning experiences in schools. The children involved in this project had a wealth of knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes in relation to the people, places and processes in their localities; however, as outlined above, this knowledge was not generally drawn upon and developed in school. As there is curriculum provision to do this with children of all ages in primary schools (DES/NCCA, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c), this project reveals the capabilities of children to engage in their local environment and hence enhance their learning at school. In other contexts in which this is not the case, this study reveals the importance of local learning to be included in primary school geography curricular. There are a number of dimensions of children's learning that could be encouraged in schools. First, as Catling suggests, learning about the locality can be approached formally, through studies of children's localities and their experiences within them, and informally, through learning about the lives of children in terms of their own and adults' geographies (Catling, 2005). Second, the local environment can be used to help children understand about other places, in comparative work or in using key concepts such as development and decision-making in geography. In this way, by understanding the world at hand in Catling's model, the world beyond children's direct experiences can also begin to make sense to the children. Such activity would contribute to the affective and cognitive domains of children's learning, as outlined in Table 12. Children's use of the locality can also be fostered in school beyond school-based work. For example, teachers could act on suggestions made by children, or in their own classrooms and communities. The benefits of developing such content and methods specifically in school geography in Irish and other schools would be numerous. First, such practice would bring geography experiences in school more into line with theoretical and practical ideas about what are positive experiences for children in geography. Second, it would mean that geography in primary schools was

more positive and challenging for children. For example, if teachers use the locality for learning in primary geography, much of the content that is covered can then be applied to other localities; making sense of the local can help children understand wider patterns and processes in the world. Furthermore, many of the skills learnt in primary school, such as decision-making and fieldwork activities, can be built on later in geographical experiences. Third, children would enjoy geography more, as evidence from the children's initial reaction to this project and elsewhere is that geography is often not particularly popular!

The second recommendation from this project is the promotion and implementation of children's participation in decision-making in local communities. Children in this project had important points to make about their localities, including changes for themselves and for others. Most ideas were relatively easy to achieve but would not necessarily have been thought of by adults, reflecting previous findings (Chawla, 2002; Hart, 1992). As there is evidence that when children's ideas are heard and acted upon the results are positive, children having a say in the geography of their locality makes sense. Therefore, the second recommendation from this project is that children's participation should be mainstreamed, through children's participative initiatives such as Dáil na nÓg (DnÓ) (national youth parliament) and Dáil na bPáistí (DnP).

The third recommendation from this project is the development of research with children about their local environments in a further range of contexts. Throughout the project, from reviewing the literature to working with children, it was evident that there were many avenues that this research could have taken, in terms of the research topics and the research methods and techniques.

In conclusion, like others involved in geography education (Catling, 2003; Catling & Willy, 2009; Scoffham, 2006), this project has confirmed my belief that the creative use of the local environment opens up a wealth of opportunities for children's learning in geography and that this learning should be used beyond school for the benefits of local communities, but most of all for the children themselves.

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