

Using story stones in geography

Nell Seal

In this article Nell describes a youthful approach to connecting young pupils with maps.

I have come to believe that by focusing on developing curiosity through noticing, encouraging pupils to ask questions, and showing we are genuinely interested in their perspectives, we nurture and evolve keen geographers and learners. Since my daughter was born, I have been astonished by just how much geographical understanding even the very youngest child possesses. This, and an interest in maps, led me to develop ideas for using 'story stones' with primary pupils.

The story stone seeds

Bruner (1960) believed that pupils are capable of understanding complex information if it is taught at a simple level and re-visited at increasingly complex levels later on – essentially a spiral of learning. I consulted Owens' (2016) *Progression in Mapping* to discover how I could apply this approach to using Ordnance Survey (OS) maps, because in England, by years 1 and 2, pupils might be expected to 'use their own and class agreed symbols on maps, know that symbols mean something on maps, and find given OS symbols on a map with support' (DfE, 2013). OS maps are wonderful, detailed and colourful, but convey complex information that can be daunting to the uninitiated.

When playing with ideas it occurred to me that in daily life we routinely use symbols in the form of emojis; I also found that researchers are exploring their use as a way to get children's perspectives on issues and increase their engagement (Fane *et al.*, 2016; see also Seargeant (2019) on emoji as a 'language'). I decided to marry the use of painted story stones with symbols and maps.

Developing map skills

In a hands-on lesson, a reception class used story stones with OS maps. The aims were for the pupils to:

- exhibit curiosity about OS map content
- ask questions about the information on the maps
- make basic observations about the information shown
- be able to recognise that we use symbols and keys on maps.

Resources

- paper versions of OS Explorer maps (1:25,000) (the maps do not need to relate to your setting's home area)
- a number of smooth stones (don't remove stones from a beach, by-laws prevent the removal of beach material; instead buy them from hardware stores or garden centres)
- either acrylic paint pens (these will not require varnish) or marker pens (but the finished stones will need a coat of varnish) to draw map symbols on the stones – the colours should relate directly to the OS map symbols.

Groups of up to ten pupils sat around tables with a printed OS Explorer map spread out. Initially, I allowed time for the pupils to chatter about the map – their talk roamed from 'treasure maps and pirates' to 'holidays' and 'boats'. I then introduced the 'secret symbol stones' (Figure 1a), and invited the pupils to look at the symbols on the stones and choose one (Figure 1b).

Enthusiastic chaos ensued, but, once pupils had chosen a stone, I challenged them to find their symbol on the map and place their stone on it (Figure 1c). We talked about what each symbol might mean and why it was chosen. As I revealed what the symbols actually related to on the OS map, we discussed and imagined that place.

The final challenge was for the pupils to think of something they would like to see marked on a map and devise an appropriate symbol for their feature – suggestions included ice rinks, soft-play centres, farms and McDonald's. Some were able to draw their symbol.

Emotional responses to place

Having been impressed by how the Reception pupils engaged in conversations with me during the previous activity, I decided to try using story stones to explore how they felt about their dedicated outdoor space. I created a set of basic 'emoji' story stones. After establishing with the pupils what feeling each emoji illustrated, I asked them to place the stone in the part of the dedicated outside space that they associated with that emotion. (Figure 2 shows the responses of one pupil.) This proved effective in gathering pupils' insights about 'their' place.



Figure 1: (a) The 'secret symbols', (b) pupils choose their symbol stone, and (c) locate their stones. Photos © (a) Nell Seal, (b, c) Mary Milne.



Figure 2: Emoji stones in the playground. Photos © Nell Seal.

Developing stories

I wanted to develop the ideas above by diving more deeply into the story-telling potential that existed and trialling the ideas with a class. Unfortunately this plan was a casualty of the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, so I turned to my captive audience: my own daughter, aged 7 during lockdown 1.0.

We used a 1:25,000 OS Explorer map and the symbol stones to follow the progression of steps outlined in the map skills activity above. As we moved through the steps, her questions and conversations became increasingly complex, showing the depth of her geographical understanding. Interacting with the OS map and symbol stones allowed her to make many 'correct' observations and inferences. She began to wonder aloud about the things she was seeing on the map of our wider local area – a long, thin, curved lake and a public footpath that crossed the railway line – and speculated on the time it would take to walk from a to b.

I then took a child-centred approach to create a story setting. I challenged her to use the symbol stones and features on the map to take 'small world' characters on an adventure, and she decided the characters would represent herself and a friend. As she told their story, using the map as inspiration, she employed positional language (e.g. under, around, beside, over), and, as she spoke, I drew a map based on her story (see web panel video). We discussed why maps have titles,

scales, north arrows and keys. Later, she was able to re-tell her adventure story to her dad using this map. Here, the geographical outcomes related to map features and symbols, making inferences about places and using geographical vocabulary.

The success of the story stones and OS map symbols work has encouraged me to take the ideas further; I hope to go on to work with lower key stage 2 groups and challenge them to create their own adventure maps, or perhaps ask them to create maps based on an adventure story I tell. I would also love to hear how you have explored some of the ideas here and from the web panel, and about the wonderful places you take your own story stones.

References

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Web Resources

Early Impact Learning: <https://earlyimpactlearning.com/story-stones/>
More ideas from Workshop 27:
The story stone store: <https://www.geography.org.uk/Sheffield-2018-session-downloads#2>
Salix Education (video): <https://www.facebook.com/salixeducation/videos/193029118803239>

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