

IMPROVING Geography

in Post-Primary Schools

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A number of quantitative terms are used in the report. In percentages, the terms correspond as follows:-

| | | |
|---------------|---|--------------------------|
| More than 90% | - | almost/nearly all |
| 75%-90% | - | most |
| 50%-74% | - | a majority |
| 30%-49% | - | a significant minority |
| 10%-29% | - | a minority |
| Less than 10% | - | very few/a small number. |

INTRODUCTION

The findings in this paper are based on inspections of and visits to geography departments in post-primary schools in Northern Ireland during the period 1996-2000.

1. Strengths

- 1.1 Geography continues to be a very popular subject at both key stage 4 (KS4) and at GCE A level, in both non-selective secondary schools and grammar schools.
- 1.2 In most departments there is useful planning to ensure progression in teaching and learning. The best planning occurs where teachers work together under clear and purposeful leadership. In these circumstances the subject departments are developing detailed schemes of work which reflect the programme of study (POS), provide clear guidance for teaching and learning and often include appropriate references to the educational themes of education for mutual understanding/cultural heritage, health education and economic awareness. Increasingly, emphasis is being placed on the use of information and communications technology (ICT) to support teaching and learning in geography in most schools.
- 1.3 There is much good teaching in this subject. Almost all of the teachers are well qualified subject specialists who demonstrate good levels of knowledge of the topics being studied. Teaching often takes place in stimulating classroom environments in which due prominence is given to the display of materials which promote interest in, and engagement with, a range of places, contemporary issues and important geographical themes. In the best classrooms there is good provision of high-quality maps and posters which support topics

currently being studied and teachers make use of attractively displayed examples of the pupils' recent work. Most teachers employ a range of teaching methods, although whole-classroom teaching, much of which is effective, is the dominant approach. The best lessons involve the pupils fully, build on their experiences, and engender a clear sense of partnership in learning between the teachers and the pupils; in these lessons teachers often take time to ensure that the learning is well consolidated.

- 1.4 The best learning is characterised by high levels of motivation and interest on the part of the pupils. The majority are keen to respond to the teacher's questioning and to complete the tasks they are set; when required, they collaborate well with each other. Many pupils display a good understanding of the topics they have been studying and are developing an appropriate vocabulary and knowledge of the subject. The best work is carefully illustrated and annotated, well presented and logically structured.
- 1.5 In almost all schools there continues to be a sound focus on the study of a range of case studies, examples and places. In the best practice, the use of contemporary, accurate information, and engaging learning activities, promotes positive and questioning attitudes, and generally avoids creating or reinforcing stereotypical views of peoples, places and ways of life. The study of a good range of places of different size and complexity enriches the subject knowledge of the pupils; there is evidence of strong linkages between this and the strong subject uptake at KS4 and subsequent success in external examinations. Many pupils benefit from effective guidance on studying, revising and preparation for the demands of examinations.
- 1.6 The quality of investigative fieldwork continues to improve at KS3 and KS4. In both GCSE and A-level, coursework provides the pupils with opportunities for independence and choice which frequently results in work of good quality. This work often contributes to the development of many subject specific and general learning skills.

2. Areas for Improvement

- 2.1 In a significant minority of schools, planning provides insufficient guidance on the possible teaching strategies that may be used to enhance standards of achievement, and on the matching of the work to the pupils' abilities and the context in which the school is operating. The vast majority of schools have limited curricular links with their contributory primary schools; this restricts the scope to plan for progression in the pupils' geographical learning. Planning and provision for, and the use of, ICT, while improving, is still too varied. Adequate access to ICT remains a problem in many schools.
- 2.2 Within some departments there are still considerable variations in the quality of teaching. The main weaknesses observed in geography teaching are, inadequate lesson preparation, limited involvement of the pupils, insufficient match between the pupils' ability and the work set and excessive exposition by the teacher. Often the lessons exhibiting these weaknesses are not well enough focused; the key learning points are not emphasised or the objectives of the

lesson remain unclear to the pupils. Further, there is an over-dependence on a limited range of textbooks or poorly designed, undemanding worksheets. A minority of teachers need to develop a wider range of teaching approaches, to include more attractive resources and to extend the use of audio-visual and other equipment, including ICT, to enhance learning.

- 2.3 Many geography teachers underestimate the contribution they can make to developing their pupils' mathematical, linguistic skills and reasoning skills. Greater attention should give more to remedying basic weaknesses in the pupils' language; for example, teachers should give more guidance on the structuring of written work, and encourage personal note-making by the pupils rather than copying information; further, more guidance and opportunities should be given to the pupils so that they learn to research information from a range of suitable resources. In many lessons, more purposeful questioning is necessary to promote, extend and improve the spoken responses of the pupils, particularly when dealing with contentious issues where contrasting views are likely to be expressed.
- 2.4 In a significant minority of schools the standard in the pupils' work is uneven. A minority of pupils are insecure in their knowledge of basic locations or are unable to provide adequate definitions of key geographical terms. On occasions, the pupils reveal a limited understanding of important geographical topics which they have been studying. At all levels many pupils demonstrate technical competence in producing graphs and simple tables of data but they are less than secure at interpreting or analysing geographical data from a range of resources, including graphs, maps of varying scales, diagrams and photographs. Many have not acquired the skills needed to produce simple annotated sketch-maps to illustrate key geographical topics or to depict information which they have collected. While the range of case studies and examples covered at GCSE and GCE is generally adequate or better, there is a need to broaden the range of places studied, in a minority of schools. In addition, the pupils' general geographical knowledge about the location of places both locally and globally requires more consistent reinforcement.
- 2.5 While there have been many improvements in departmental management and leadership in secondary schools, a collegial approach to planning and to monitoring and evaluating the quality of teaching and learning is still underdeveloped in a minority of schools. In these instances, heads of departments and individual teachers take insufficient responsibility for monitoring the quality of the provision which they make for the pupils. In a significant minority of schools teachers need to agree a more consistent approach to assessment procedures. In many schools, the outcomes of assessment do not sufficiently influence or guide teaching and learning. While the work of the pupils is often checked, marking for improvement is generally underdeveloped; for example, the strengths and weaknesses in the pupils' work are not adequately highlighted and work of poor quality is not followed up with sufficient rigour. There is insufficient departmental analysis of examination results and the setting of realistic targets and procedures for improvement is rare. While many pupils are benefiting from more advice on improving their examination performance and examination techniques, more effective use could

be made of past paper questions throughout the teaching of the course, and there should be more systematic and open sharing of mark schemes and examiners' reports with the pupils.

3. Priorities for Action

Given the areas of weakness outlined above, and to promote improvement in the teaching and learning of geography, there is a need for teachers and geography departments to:

- 3.1 focus on broadening the range of case studies, examples and locations, and on ensuring that, through judicious reference to maps and atlases and other resources, the pupils are encouraged to develop both a sound locational knowledge and a more precise understanding of the interrelated nature of the geographical themes, phenomena and issues which are being studied;
- 3.2 further the pupils' interest, concern and sense of responsibility for the sustaining of the environment through a more careful study of both local and global issues;
- 3.3 ensure that fieldwork and other types of investigative work are integrated with the work in the classroom and exploited fully to develop further the pupils' mathematical, linguistic and reasoning skills;
- 3.4 continue to broaden the range of teaching strategies in use including the further integration of audio visual equipment and ICT so as to meet more fully the needs of all of the pupils;
- 3.5 develop more systematically the pupils' independence in their personal writing, note-making, research and investigative skills, their competence to initiate debate and engage in discussions and enhance their willingness to offer personal views on the issues or themes under discussion;
- 3.6 place more emphasis on consolidating the pupils' geographical knowledge and learning both during and towards the end of individual lessons and at the completion of a theme or topic which has been taught over a period of time;
- 3.7 share with the pupils the criteria against which their work is being assessed; mark key pieces of work regularly and systematically with the main focus being on encouraging the pupil to improve his/her own work.

CONCLUSION

Schools and the Inspectorate recognise the importance of self-evaluation as a basis for improvement and development. It is intended that this publication, and the publication 'Evaluating Geography', will support geography teachers and departments in their evaluation and improvement of their teaching and of the pupils' learning and standards of achievement.

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