

GEOGRAPHY

A portrait of current practice in Scottish secondary schools

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1. Introduction

Geography - a portrait of current practice in Scottish secondary schools is one of a developing series of publications by HMIE, designed to reflect current good practice in subjects and aspects of Scottish education and identify areas for further improvement. The portrait series is a new initiative by HMIE, flowing from the *Improving Scottish Education* report¹. It is intended to promote improvements in Scottish education through illustrating effective practice, raising current issues, and stimulating reflection and debate.

An important purpose of the portrait series is to relate existing pedagogy and curricular provision to the aspirations of *Curriculum for Excellence*. By stimulating debate about pedagogy, the portraits will challenge educators to review the extent to which current practice is successfully promoting the four capacities in all young learners.

This portrait is based on evidence obtained from HMIE visits to secondary schools during the period April 2004 to June 2007. These visits included 32 general inspections, in which geography was one of the four subjects inspected, and other visits to examine effective practice. Inspectors evaluated the quality of learning, teaching, meeting pupils' needs and achievements. A number of visits to schools specifically designed to identify and exemplify aspects of good practice in geography have focused closely on evaluating the effectiveness of the use of information and communications technology (ICT) and education for sustainability and citizenship.

2. Improving Scottish Education

Improving Scottish Education was published by HMIE in March 2006. This report highlighted the need to build on the strengths in Scottish education to meet the needs of learners for the challenges of a rapidly changing global society and broaden the range of their achievements.

Improving Scottish Education indicated that pupils in secondary schools were often motivated and willing to learn, but were sometimes passive learners. There were many strengths in the secondary sector, but more sustained encouragement was needed for pupils to be independent learners and creative thinkers, actively involved in and responsible for their learning. Schools were increasingly effective in promoting the personal and social development of pupils. Not all had consistently capitalised on opportunities for pupils to understand different societies and their varying responses to the environment. They did not always take suitable opportunities to develop views on environmental and ethical issues and enhance pupils' understanding of their potential role in shaping society and the world around them. A more consistent approach could develop pupils' independence, self-confidence, ambition and personal values and beliefs further.

These aspects are explored in greater depth in this portrait of geography in the secondary sector. In particular, there is a focus on developing young people's capacities to think critically and independently and to express their views with confidence. The importance of learning beyond the classroom is emphasised.

¹ *Improving Scottish Education*. HM Inspectorate of Education 2006

3. A portrait of current practice in teaching for effective learning

Geography teachers are aware of their potential contribution to the development in young people of the four capacities of *Curriculum for Excellence*. They are increasingly considering how to extend pupils' learning experiences through innovative, stimulating and challenging activities designed to extend and develop pupils' awareness of the environment and the consequences of human interactions with it. Learning experiences typically balance physical and human geography using case studies and contexts for learning from the local to global environments.

In studying geography, learners have opportunities to develop skills in interrogating and interpreting a range of sources of geographical information. Increasingly, at S1/S2, more account is now being taken of pupils' prior learning in primary school to ensure appropriate challenge for all pupils. At S3/S4, learners have been encouraged through more appropriate pace and challenge for all and better progression to their future learning. At S6, learners undertaking the Advanced Higher course develop collaborative and independent learning skills which serve those moving to higher education very well.

In recognising that geography contributes holistically to the development of individual learners, the next section of this portrait explores how successfully pupils develop the four capacities identified in *Curriculum for Excellence*.

How can geography help to develop responsible citizens, successful learners, confident individuals and effective contributors?

Responsible citizens

What do we do well currently in geography to develop responsible citizens?

Pupils' experiences in geography and aspects of environmental education make a significant contribution to developing knowledge, understanding and skills and help pupils to make sense of an increasingly complex world and humankind's place in it. Currently it raises pupils' awareness of political, social and economic issues at home and abroad, and helps put these issues into context. Many geography teachers promote responsible citizenship well. Some of the key characteristics which are currently developing responsible citizens include the following.

- At S1/S2 in all schools, learners' experiences include studies of the local area, aspects of the geography of Scotland and the UK, and areas of the developed and the developing world. Such experiences develop knowledge, understanding and skills in the context of issues such as the use of natural resources and associated tensions, natural disasters, man-made disasters and climate change and its effects. They encourage responsible attitudes to the environment, and are developed in other contexts at later stages.
- Pupils develop their awareness of the contrasting lifestyles of peoples in many different parts of the world, and teachers encourage tolerance and respect by developing pupils' understanding of the reasons for social, economic and cultural differences. In particular, pupils' activities and experiences at S3-S6 develop understanding of the reasons for differing attitudes and responses, for example, to population growth in other parts of the world.
- In most schools, pupils develop an awareness of the environment and the need to preserve and protect species and landscapes. Increasingly, pupils learn about climate and the atmosphere in approaches that take account of the impact of humans on global climate change.

Signpost to responsible citizens

Responsible citizens often display the following characteristics.

- They have an awareness of Scotland's geographical location and its inter-relationships with other countries in Europe and across the world.
- They understand the impact of humans on the landscapes in which they live, and the implications for the sustainability of such interactions.
- They use this knowledge to develop an ethical stance and promote greater awareness of environmental issues and the need for conservation for sustainability.

- In a few secondary schools, geography pupils and their teachers play a lead role in *Eco-Schools Scotland* initiatives, and engage other pupils, staff and parents in environmental projects such as energy conservation, recycling and the development of school grounds. In one secondary school, geography pupils not only led and organised such activities, but also gave presentations on environmental issues to groups of pupils in their associated primary schools.

How might geography contribute more to developing responsible citizens?

Increasingly, geography teachers recognise the important role that they can play in developing pupils' awareness of aspects of citizenship. However, they do not always exploit the range of opportunities to develop citizenship awareness that exist throughout the curriculum, and do not routinely plan for the progressive development of pupils' understanding across the stages. As geography teachers continue to improve their approaches, they should consider the following questions.

- Has our current curriculum been evaluated to identify those areas where we contribute to the development of pupils as responsible citizens? Have we built in sufficient opportunities of this type at each stage, and are these experiences progressive and more challenging as pupils move up the school?
- Is there appropriate emphasis on developing pupils' awareness of environmental issues at all stages?
- At S1/S2, is sufficient account taken of pupils' prior learning, particularly where they have moved from primary schools which have received environmental awards?
- At the upper stages, do pupils' experiences take account of our rapidly changing understanding of the causes and implications of global climate change?
- Do we work with colleagues, for example in biology, to ensure that pupils develop a balanced and planned overview of environmental issues and their impacts on humanity?
- Do we take a lead in sustainable development education initiatives in our school?

For further information about citizenship, you may wish to refer to HMIE's recently published portrait on Education for Citizenship.

Successful learners

What do we do well currently in geography to develop successful learners?

Effective geography teachers offer a variety of progressive learning experiences which enable pupils to develop their knowledge and understanding of an increasingly complex world and a range of appropriate skills. The key characteristics of geography teaching which encourage successful learning include the following.

- Learners make effective use of high quality modern textbooks, maps at a variety of scales, workbooks, posters, slides and videos.
- Learners work collaboratively, notably in investigative projects, and use such activities to develop independent learning skills. They develop investigative skills such as map reading and interpretation progressively across the stages. Increasingly, for example, pupils are making very good progress in developing these skills through using digital map resources.
- Learners evaluate the information they research and question the assumptions and perceptions of people and places elsewhere in the world. For example, teachers in one school used role-play very effectively to develop pupils' decision-making skills in an exercise on the potential benefits of eco-tourism to indigenous peoples.
- Learners gather and interpret first-hand data and evidence in carrying out research and investigations, for example involving external visits and fieldwork activities to promote such learning. Despite some constraints, including concerns about conducting risk assessments and pressure on time from other subjects, an increasing number of schools provide a progressive and well-planned series of fieldwork activities.
- Learners and teachers develop productive links with schools in less economically developed countries in order to share experiences and extend their learning. These links, and in some cases exchange visits, have enabled teachers to set learning in real world contexts and challenge preconceptions.

Signpost to successful learning

Successful learners often display the following characteristics.

- They gather relevant information from a wide variety of sources, including first-hand evidence from research in the field.
- They work enthusiastically in collaboration with others to complete investigative tasks, solve problems and make reasoned evaluations.
- They collate and present information well, and express their findings and opinions concisely.
- They use ICT effectively to research, process, present and communicate the outcomes of their work.

- Learners benefit from very effective use of ICT, particularly web research and digital presentations. The wealth of images, video and interactive teaching materials appearing on educational websites is testament to the enthusiasm of geographers for the use of these types of resources in the classroom.

How might geography contribute more to successful learning?

The extent to which teachers incorporate high quality practices to build effectively on prior learning is inconsistent from school to school. As geography teachers continue to improve their approaches, they should take account of the following questions.

- Is too much time spent, especially at the upper stages, on the didactic delivery of large amounts of information? Are sufficient opportunities provided for pupils to evaluate information, thus contributing to their skills as learners and their developing awareness of the world?
- Do pupils progressively build up a more comprehensive picture of the world and Scotland's place within it as they move from stage to stage?
- Are pupils made aware of the relevance of the skills they have learned, such as map interpretation and statistical analysis, by applying them in other contexts?
- Do teachers and pupils make the most effective use of ICT for researching, processing and presenting information? Are difficulties in gaining access to technology or slow network speeds hampering the appropriate use of a valuable resource?
- Are pupils at all stages offered sufficient opportunities for activities outwith the classroom? Is the programme of fieldwork planned progressively across the stages?

Confident individuals

What do we do well currently in geography to develop confident individuals?

Many geography teachers make full use of the range of opportunities that help pupils develop self-confidence. Some of the key characteristics which are currently developing confident individuals include the following.

Signpost to confident individuals

Confident individuals often display the following characteristics.

- They are prepared to express their views on contemporary local, national and global issues encountered in their learning.
 - They display competence and self-assurance in preparing their evidence and expressing these views.
 - They discuss issues of global importance with assurance, taking account of the different priorities of other countries and societies.
- The frequently very positive ethos and good relationships between teachers and pupils ensures a productive environment for learning within which pupils can contribute and develop confidence. Some teachers organise geography clubs, for example, and many take a lead role in organising trips abroad.
 - Pupils take responsibility for their own learning through investigations and research tasks. These activities also provide a suitable context for collaborative working.
 - Role-play and debates engage pupils directly in developing and communicating their views. In some cases, visiting speakers such as university staff or representatives of aid organisations address groups of pupils on topical issues. Pupils often respond very positively to these opportunities and engage more readily in discussion.
 - Pupils use self-evaluation as a means of understanding more about their own learning. Pupils also evaluate each other's work and offer constructive feedback where appropriate.
 - Decision-making exercises raise the levels of challenge, especially for higher attaining pupils.

one school, for example, pupils worked in competing groups to identify the best location for a new leisure development in their local area. They used opportunities between tasks in class to analyse a map and prepare their arguments.

- Opportunities for developing higher level skills increase as pupils progress through the stages. At Advanced Higher, pupils are regularly required to work independently and exercise informed choices. They are expected to work collaboratively with others and present to the group in seminar sessions.

How might geography contribute more to help develop confident individuals?

The extent to which geography teachers encourage pupils to develop the confidence to arrive at and express a point of view on, for example, environmental issues or solutions to rural poverty varies significantly. As geography teachers continue to improve their approaches, they should consider the following questions.

- Are the contributions of pupils to discussions and debates valued and used to stimulate further learning?
- Do pupils at all stages develop skills in independent and collaborative learning? Are pupils working in groups to develop skills such as respecting the views of others?
- Do our approaches enable pupils to present the results of their investigations to other members of their class, or to a wider audience?
- Do we teach pupils to assess their own and other pupils' work and provide feedback to each other?

Effective contributors

What do we do well currently in geography to develop effective contributors?

In many geography experiences both in class and through participation in clubs and activities, learners are developing skills which encourage them to become more effective contributors. Some of the key experiences which are currently helping to develop them as effective contributors include the following.

- Pupils exercise choice and take some responsibility for their own learning. This often occurs in investigative tasks at S1/S2, where pupils research a selected topic in greater depth.
- Pupils develop their enquiry and problem-solving skills through individual or group activities which may also include fieldwork.
- Individuals and groups present the results of their research activities to the rest of the class, or indeed to a wider audience. As well as motivating pupils, such approaches can raise awareness of the issues raised in the topics being researched.
- Pupils role-play very effectively, enabling them to gain a fuller understanding of current issues such as planning inquiries into new urban or industrial developments. In one example, pupils took responsibility for deciding how funds raised for charity should be used in a developing region.
- Pupils experience an increasing demand to express themselves clearly in writing. At Higher, this can mean producing extended pieces of highly structured writing.
- At Advanced Higher, pupils research extensively to present extended essays on topics of their own choosing. Often these essays are of very high quality.

Signpost to effective contributors

Effective contributors often display the following characteristics.

- They apply their acquired knowledge and skills in new contexts to solve problems.
- They communicate effectively with others through debate and discussion, in writing and through the use of ICT.
- They participate and take leading roles in school councils, clubs and special interest groups.

How might geography help develop more effective contributors?

The extent to which pupils have opportunities to participate in debates and contribute to discussions varies significantly from school to school. As geography teachers continue to improve their approaches, they should consider the following questions.

- Do teachers engage pupils often enough and deeply enough in discussion and debate about contemporary issues?

- Do our approaches encourage pupils to plan their own investigations and pursue their own choice of topics in their research? Are the guidelines for such tasks flexible enough to encourage creative thinking?
- Do we enable pupils to present their work to other pupils in and beyond their own class? Is ICT used effectively for such presentations?
- Do pupils get enough help and guidance in developing their skills in extended writing for specific purposes?
- Do teachers encourage pupils to apply and extend their learning in activities outwith the classroom?

Conclusion

Learning through geographical contexts has immense potential for developing in children and young people the four capacities of *Curriculum for Excellence*. The very wide range of knowledge and skills encompassed within geography includes the collation, synthesis and presentation of information and data from both the sciences and the humanities. As a result, geography teachers can put the impact of human activity into context, giving insights into how landscapes have played a crucial role in the development of agriculture, industry and settlements, and have affected patterns of economic growth across the world. Learning experiences include case studies and contexts that encourage tolerance and respect and make pupils aware of different cultures and lifestyles in other parts of the world.

Geography teachers can also make an important contribution to sustainable development education. Collaboration between geography teachers and those from other subject backgrounds can lead to productive sharing of interdisciplinary contexts for learning and ensure that pupils learn about environmental issues and the need for conservation and environmental stewardship. Until recently, however, there has been very little evidence of such collaboration and liaison. In many schools, subject departments have planned in isolation, with teachers taking insufficient interest in school-wide environmental activities.

Partly as a result of recent heightened public awareness of the threat of global environmental issues, more geography teachers are now taking greater interest in school-wide activities such as *Eco-Schools Scotland* initiatives, as well as reviewing the environmental content of courses. Implementation of *Curriculum for Excellence* will place greater emphasis on the need to make young people much more aware of this key aspect of citizenship. Outcomes and experiences relating to geography therefore have an extremely important role to play in the development of confident, enlightened and effective young people in 21st century Scotland.