

## THE REACTIONS OF TEACHERS TO THE JUNIOR CERTIFICATE GEOGRAPHY COURSE

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**Abstract.** Following informal contacts with teachers of Geography which revealed both positive and negative responses to the introduction of the Junior Certificate [JC] course in Geography in 1989, teachers in all second level schools in the Republic of Ireland were asked to complete a questionnaire to identify more formally their reactions to the change. This paper presents the results of the survey, in relation to some specific aspects and more general reactions to the JC course, and seeks to outline the implications of the findings for the success of both the JC and for future curriculum development in Ireland.

### Introduction

As part of a larger research project undertaken between 1990 and 1991 (Waddington, 1995) teachers in second level schools in the Republic of Ireland were asked a series of questions about their reactions to the new Junior Certificate Geography [JC] course. This new junior cycle course was introduced into Irish second level schools in September 1989, to be examined for the first time in 1992. The examination was a replacement for the Intermediate and Day Vocational Certificates, and, like its predecessors, was taken by candidates at approximately 15 years of age.

To gather information about teachers views on the curriculum change a questionnaire was circulated to all second level schools in the Republic of Ireland, addressed to the principal teacher of Geography in each school. The questionnaire was completed by teachers in 231 schools (a response rate of approximately 30 percent). These teachers included both men and women who were teaching in both single sex and co-educational schools. The schools varied in size from the smallest in the State (with 14 students) to one with over 1000 students and included secondary, vocational, comprehensive and community schools and colleges.

Six questions were asked which solicited comments on various aspects of the JC curriculum. Five of these had an initial closed question and all six invited respondents to explain their answers in detail. The present report examines the responses to these questions individually and then explores the more general findings from this study, both as applicable to the JC and to future curriculum development in Geography.

## **1 Should objectives other than those specified on the Junior Certificate syllabus be added to the JC course?**

The objectives of the JC specify the range of knowledge, concepts, skills and attitudes which the students should acquire through participation in the course. Only 15 percent of the respondents considered that further objectives should be added to the 36 already included in the syllabus (An Roinn, 1989). These new objectives mostly related to locational knowledge or regional geography, particularly in relation to Ireland and/or the E.U. It must be acknowledged that this could merely reflect an innate conservatism amongst these respondents, as one of the major criticisms of the predecessors of the JC was their concentration on these aspects of the subject. However, similar sentiments have been expressed in relation to similar courses in other education systems and elsewhere in relation to the JC (Fahy, 1990). A cause for concern was raised by the answers of some respondents who suggested either that the objectives were more suitable for Leaving Certificate [LC] geography than for a junior cycle course or that the JC objectives should be changed to resemble those for LC more closely. Since the organising concepts for the two courses are identical, these comments would appear to suggest a lack of familiarity with the basis of the long-established LC course on the part of these respondents, almost all of whom were teaching LC geography at the time of the study.

## **2 Do you feel that any other changes should be made to the JC syllabus?**

Despite a fairly high percentage of respondents (38.4 percent) wishing for changes to the JC syllabus, only three specific areas were suggested by more than a very small number of respondents. The most common of these was that the course should be shortened, although, with the exception of the removal of the Demographic Transition Model, no suggestions were made as to how this might be achieved. As in Q1, teachers again argued for a clearer regional emphasis on Ireland and/or the E.U. The third area of concern was fieldwork, but no clear finding can be reported, as almost equal numbers of respondents expressed the desire for it to be a compulsory element of the JC as for it to remain as an optional aspect. A more definite finding was a perceived need for clearer guidance about the required organisation of the course. The documentation was clear that the syllabus was not designed to be taught in a linear manner, but respondents considered that only very limited guidance had been given about how to plan a course which involved the "linkages" mentioned (NCCA, 1989). One respondent went so far as to suggest that the syllabus should be "more practical and include less waffle".

## **3 Do you feel that inservice provision is adequate for the JC?**

One hundred and sixty eight (i.e. almost 75 percent) of respondents were dissatisfied with inservice provision [INSET] for the JC. The causes of this dissatisfaction

included quantity of provision, quality and content, and administrative arrangements for the INSET. One fundamental problem reported by a number of people was that they had been unable to attend all (or even any) of the INSET for geography as the equivalent courses for their other teaching subject(s) took place at the same time.

Three particular areas of concern were identified by those who *were* able to attend. The most common was the very limited attention paid to assessment at these sessions. While it could be argued that it is educationally more important in the early stages of change for teachers to be made aware of details of the course than details of the terminal examination, it is also essential that this issue is addressed. Teachers are always going to be conscious of their duty to ensure that their students are properly prepared for the final examination. They are likely to be particularly aware of this during the first cycle of any course. In the case of the JC, the sample examination questions were only issued part way through the first cycle which probably increased anxiety about this and so reinforced this desire for guidance, as reflected in dissatisfaction expressed in the answers to this question. It would be likely that with increased experience of the course this anxiety would be reduced, but it would clearly be a major cause for concern if teachers were still expressing this view after several years.

The second specific area of concern was the perceived lack of INSET dealing with field and/or project work. Several respondents considered that actual examples of possible exercises should have been provided, while others wished for even greater guidance, almost to the point of being told what to do with particular class groups. While most respondents both in this question and elsewhere acknowledged the general educational importance of fieldwork, many appeared to regard it as very difficult to carry out in schools.

A number of respondents also suggested that more INSET dealing with methodology was required. Some related this to particular types of student, e.g. mixed ability classes, while many others contented themselves with references to the need to deal with practicalities. Few specific suggestions were made about types of methodology, with only a few suggesting topics such as project work, use of cartoons or group work.

A frequently stated requirement for respondents was the general need for more INSET, or for more *satisfactory* INSET or for more information to be provided during INSET. While it could be reasonable to assume that the passage of time would allay some of the general anxiety revealed by these comments, it is clearly important that teachers receive the maximum amount of guidance at the start of the course, when they are most likely to lack confidence in their ability to understand requirements and to deliver the course to their students. Some teachers also expressed the view that the guidance which they had received was unsatisfactory in

some way. For example, some complained that there had been changes in official thinking between one session and the next, while others considered that the amateurs had not been clearly briefed. Some respondents felt that An Roinn did not acknowledge sufficiently the feedback on the JC provided by the teachers. No respondent gave details of the comments made and so it is impossible to assess the general utility of these. It is possible that An Roinn had noted these suggestions and would act on them in due course or that they were totally impractical or unacceptable. The lack of acknowledgement did, however, lead to a small number of teachers expressing cynicism about the consultation process. They suggested that it could be just a method of defusing criticism rather than a serious attempt to involve teachers in the curriculum development process.

One potential approach to curriculum development which could be of considerable use in the implementation of a new syllabus requiring a new approach to course planning, that of co-operation between groups of teachers, was only mentioned by eight respondents in total in response to this question. This was despite the obvious potential for use of INSET days for establishing appropriate groups and carrying out at least the basic stages of such planning. It is possible that this lack of apparent interest may be related more to the lack of any great tradition of such co-operation and it could be that many teachers would be interested in doing this if it was suggested to them.

#### **4 Do the resources currently available in your school adequately meet your requirements for teaching the JC?**

Less than half of the respondents (47.2 percent) regarded resource provision in their schools to be adequate for their requirements. This may, of course, merely reflect a degree of realism about what is *actually* attainable, as very few teachers ever express this view in casual conversation. It would, however, be interesting to visit these schools to find out exactly what resources are available.

Most of those who considered resources to be inadequate listed a relatively small number of requirements. Most of these were relatively inexpensive, e.g. class sets of maps, videos dealing with particular aspects of the course or reference books. Fifteen people did, however, require a dedicated Geography room, 10 their own photocopier and an unlimited supply of paper, while one person required "everything!"

As maps would be generally acknowledged as a major tool of the geographer it could be regarded as unsurprising that their provision was regarded as inadequate by 40 respondents. Geography teachers would be likely to be more conscious of deficiencies in this area than others because of their specialism.

In view of the increasing stress on Information Technology and the electronic media in general, it may be regarded as somewhat surprising that only two respondents

considered that they required additional computer software for their JC teaching. As relatively few schools could be regarded as having 'state of the art' computer hardware or software at present, and in even fewer would geography classes have unrestricted access to these resources, this lack of reference could be due either to a lack of knowledge of the materials or to a realistic assessment of their likely availability, rather than an inadequate provision.

Interestingly, one tenth of respondents listed "more time" as their major resource requirement and others merely specified that they would like "more money", but did not give details about how it might be used.

## **5 Have teachers in your school encountered any difficulties in teaching the JC?**

One hundred and six respondents (45.9 percent) reported difficulties in teaching the JC course. As revealed in the answers to other questions a major problem noted here was related to course completion, stated either in terms of lack of class time or length/breadth of the course. Various suggestions were made by teachers for alterations to the course, including one that the local focus should be much reduced (on the grounds that this required local knowledge which teachers might not have!). It would be unreasonable in the view of the present author that material should be omitted from a course because it might involve teachers in further learning. It would, however, be reasonable to suggest that this was an area of the syllabus particularly suited to co-operation between geography teachers and with those of other subjects to build up a bank of resource materials and exercises.

Once again, assessment and fieldwork emerged as areas of concern in this question, with similar concerns being expressed. References were also made to possible difficulties encountered by teachers of weaker students, particularly in relation to the development of understanding of some of the organising concepts of the syllabus. Interestingly, when teachers were asked to rate the difficulty of achieving the syllabus objectives, they considered on average that the concept objectives were easier to achieve than the others stated in the syllabus document. Some respondents also reported problems with text books, mainly in relation to the level of reading skill which they required. This anxiety about reading and comprehension skills was also expressed in relation to the type of question used on the terminal examination paper.

## **6 Please make any general comments which you have about the JC course in terms of strengths/weaknesses, content, Guidelines for JC Geography, general guidance available or any other important aspect.**

Of the 193 different comments made on the JC by 106 respondents, one quarter were classified as favourable and the rest as unfavourable. A difference was

observed between comments on the syllabus, of which two thirds were unfavourable, and on the course itself, a majority of which praised the course. Some respondents did, however qualify their praise, for example one stated that the course would develop a more thoughtful approach to physical and social problems, positive self-esteem and empathy with others, but would not foster the development of literary/descriptive skills as well as the previous course did.

Lack of time, assessment and fieldwork again figured in responses to this question and several people made reference to a desire for an increase in the amount of locational/regional geography involved. Interestingly, the only positive comment in the questionnaire about assessment was made in response to this question, with one respondent suggesting that the new format reduced the possibility of teachers being able to 'spot' questions, thus making it a fairer test of student ability.

While 15 comments were made about the relationship between JC and senior cycle, only one was made about the relationship between the JC and the primary geography course. While it may be understandable that second level teachers would tend to focus on the two courses in which they were likely to be involved, it is interesting to note an apparent lack of interest in the prior learning of JC students, since this must surely be relevant to their success in tackling at least the initial stages of the JC course.

Only three of the 15 comments about the linkage between JC and LC were favourable, suggesting that JC formed a suitable foundation for more advanced study. In the other comments teachers did acknowledge the continuity of organising concepts between the two courses (not noted in answers to Q.2). They did, however, suggest that either JC students lacked the intellectual maturity required for understanding or that students would become bored during their LC course because it would necessarily be repetitive as it had the same foundations as the JC. Concern was expressed that if this problem was not addressed then participation in LC geography would be adversely affected.

Thirteen respondents expressed opinions in relation to student ability level, mostly involving less able students. It was suggested that difficult vocabulary should be avoided, a Foundation Level examination should be introduced (similar to those for Irish, English and mathematics), and that there should be an increased amount of factual/concrete knowledge required from these students. There was no common theme to comments about the JC in relation to more able students.

A wide variety of other aspects of the curriculum change were also mentioned by small numbers of respondents, e.g. lack of resources in Irish, the need for overcoming the innate conservatism of the teaching profession, and the essential need for greater guidance from An Roinn.

## Conclusions

### Implications for the Junior Certificate Geography Course

The study of which these questions formed a part did not reveal an overall dissatisfaction with the JC syllabus or the course as a whole, but a number aspects of the development clearly emerged as being worthy of further consideration.

*Time Availability* The problem of lack of time for the JC (or of too much being included in the course) is clearly an area of considerable concern in relation to the success of the curriculum development. While shortening the course would, obviously, provide a solution to the problem, the whole study did not produce suggestions for which aspects of geography should be abandoned. Indeed, all of the objectives were rated as being at least "fairly important" by the respondent teachers. It would appear unlikely at present that more time will be made available at junior cycle for the study of geography. Moreover, pressure to reduce the time is likely to increase as more stress is laid on pupils learning about Information Technology, and other technical and life skills, as suggested in the recent White Paper (An Roinn, 1995a). The only possible way to increase time available for geography would appear to be for it to become a full subject, rather than sharing half-subject status with history, but to lose its compulsory 'core' status. This change would be, in the opinion of the present author, likely to be resisted by a large majority of teachers of the subject on the grounds that it would be undesirable for any child to receive no education about the world, its environment and their relationship with it after they enter second level education.

While this study was based on responses to the JC geography course, many of the findings have implications which are generalisable not only to other geography courses but also to curriculum change in Ireland in general.

*Assessment* While it may be assumed that many of the initial specific concerns about assessment in the JC have been allayed during the years following the study, as four cycles of the JC have now been completed, the more general causes of anxiety about the assessment process still largely remain. Availability of information and guidance about the examination process is still very limited. It is only in 1995 that brief Chief Examiners Reports were produced for the Certificate Examinations (An Roinn, 1995b). While these certainly provide more information than was previously available, they lack detail and in some cases are of limited use unless readers have access to the related mark scheme or detailed knowledge of the marking process. It could be argued that wider involvement of teachers in the assessment process and/or the publication of the mark schemes after the examination period (both of which occur in other examination systems) would go some way towards improving teacher confidence and satisfaction in this area.

A more controversial way to increase teacher involvement in the assessment process would be through some form of school-based assessment. While accepting the administrative difficulties involved and the need to avoid the development of a system which places intolerable burdens on teachers, it must surely be a reasonable solution to the problem of assessment of fieldwork raised in relation to the JC. This problem caused considerable distress to respondents (and, no doubt, to other geography teachers) during the first cycle of the JC when the assessment status of fieldwork changed radically from compulsory school-based assessment, through an optional question on the terminal examination paper, to not being assessed at all. A similar move to school-based assessment for LC work would lead to the removal of some of the doubts expressed about the current question on the examination paper, relating to prepared answers not based on real fieldwork. It must be stressed that the introduction of such a system would require teachers to be given guidance on methodology, otherwise instead of providing increased confidence it would become another major cause of insecurity and dissatisfaction for teachers.

*Fieldwork* was widely accepted by respondents as being an important aspect of any geography course in theory, but many considered the present system did not facilitate its being carried out in Irish schools, particularly at JC level. Three main concerns appeared to influence this perception:

- (a) Despite guidance from An Roinn, the AGTI and many other sources suggesting local fieldwork, a sizable number of respondents appeared to regard fieldwork as being possible only in some distant and spectacular location, such as the Burren. Clearly within the already pressurised timetable it may be virtually impossible for students to be removed from school for several days, but it would be practical for work to be carried out close to the school for shorter periods. The development of local fieldwork resources would be a fruitful area for INSET or for other forms of co-operation between teachers. This could lead to more general co-operation, which would facilitate curriculum development more widely within both geography and the school system in general.
- (b) As also noted in other studies (e.g. Kelly, 1991), in some schools the necessary support from Principal and Board of Management for fieldwork is not forthcoming. It may be suggested that unless this work is made a compulsory part of the assessment process, those who are reluctant to allow this type of work because they foresee organisational or other problems will continue to prevent the full development of this aspect of geography courses.
- (c) Many teachers feel that they lack expertise in organising fieldwork and, thus lack confidence, leading to a reluctance to undertake the work. Clearly, if fieldwork was made compulsory they would have to enable their students to do this, but it would be essential that they were given appropriate training and guidance during the initial period or their confidence in their teaching in general would be likely to be diminished, to the detriment both of themselves and of their students.



## **General Implications for Curriculum Development**

One clear finding from the study undertaken was that many teachers felt generally 'uninvolved' in the JC curriculum development process. The syllabus was perceived to have been produced by unknown 'others' who were not particularly in touch with the needs and feelings of either teachers or their JC students. Indeed, some respondents seemed to feel either disregarded or even patronised by those who were involved. This general detachment from the JC development is to be regretted as little evidence was found in the study to suggest that the teachers considered the geography syllabus to be unsuitable or irrelevant for their students. Indeed, they generally regarded its objectives to be important for education of their students. It has been suggested in some studies of curriculum development that "If curriculum and assessment reform is to be successful...it must have the backing and involvement of teachers" (Moon & Mortimore, 1989). It is quite possible that if more teachers had been involved in the early stages of the JC syllabus, then the level of dissatisfaction would have been much lower. While it must be acknowledged that views were sought from a number of sources, there was no attempt to involve all teachers, as has been done in some other education systems. It must be admitted that many teachers would probably not wish to be involved, but if the opportunity could be offered in future developments it may lead to the avoidance of many of the problems encountered in relation to the JC.

This feeling of alienation was heightened in the case of the JC by the perceived lack of clear guidance and apparent changes of policy by those directly involved in the process of implementation. For example, the change in assessment of field-work and the absence of any sample examination questions until part way through the first cycle of the course. While it must be acknowledged that some changes will almost invariably be necessary during the initial stages of implementation of any curriculum development as some problems will only become apparent at this stage, they do not encourage teachers who already feel somewhat uninformed (since they were uninvolved in the initial planning) to feel confident that they are assisting their pupils to be successful in their studies. It is to be hoped that these communication problems can be overcome in future curriculum development.

### **Acknowledgements**

Financial assistance towards the cost of production and postage of the questionnaire was provided by the Trinity Trust and the Department of Geography, Trinity College, Dublin. The assistance of the second level Geography teachers who devoted their valuable time to completing the questionnaire is very gratefully acknowledged. I would also like to thank my supervisor, Professor Desmond Gillmor, for all his help and guidance.

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