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THE IMPORTANCE OF CLASSROOM RESEARCH IN PRIMARY GEOGRAPHY

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Introduction

In 1998 two reports (Tooley & Darby, 1998; Hillage, Pearson, Anderson & Tamkin, 1998) raised the issue of the effectiveness of much research undertaken in education. The Tooley report was concerned to show how poor and of limited value much educational research is. The Hillage report focused on the nature, role and quality of, as well as access to, research in informing both policy and school and classroom practice. Hillage concluded that this is weak and to some extent driven by researchers’ agendas rather than the needs of practitioners and policy makers. Indeed, it concluded that only half of educational research relates directly to school and classroom practice.

Extrapolating from the Hillage and Tooley analyses, it can be argued that in terms of curriculum subjects and planning, classroom teaching and pupils’ learning, the conclusion to be drawn is that much of the research undertaken:

- Is not well constructed or grounded in current knowledge,
- Is too small scale to generate reliable and useful findings,
- Does not really advance understanding of curriculum, teaching or learning,
- Is not interpreted by the researchers involved so that it is useful for policy makers and practitioners,
- Is rarely made accessible through publication to those who need it.

The Hillage report makes recommendations about how to tackle these concerns:

- Practice should be based on evidence from appropriate research.
- There needs to be a strategic approach to the research agenda.
- Research should be more practice oriented.
- Researchers need better training to improve the quality of research.
- The dissemination of research into practice must be a high priority.
The issues raised are fair and important. Both reports acknowledge that the range of research referred to, including a minority of school and classroom research, is essential to research. However, what is not identified is the variation in research activity across, for example, curriculum subjects and their teaching. While it can be noted that there is funded research in mathematics, literacy and science, what is not made plain is that this is minute in subjects such as geography and negligible in some subject curriculum phases, including primary geography. This not to say that there is no research activity, but it is ad hoc, poorly financed and small scale. To be realistic, given the political agenda in education, primary geography is not going to be offered the opportunity Hillage appears to be arguing for - a coherent research agenda - from the limited funding pot. To a large extent, primary geographers are going to have to do it themselves. We need, therefore, to identify our own agenda.

The role and value of classroom research

What do we mean by classroom research? Is it the same as action research? Does it only include research undertaken in a classroom? There is much advice to be drawn on (eg Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993; Bassey, 1999; Cohen & Manion, 1994; Greig & Taylor, 1999- McKernan; 1996; McNiff, Lomax & Whitehead, 1996).

In essence, classroom research is research into what teachers do that affects their teaching of children, of what children bring to the learning environment and of how they are affected by teaching. It is about the school as the centre for enquiry (McKernan, 1996), and it underpins the professionalism of teaching (Millett, see above). Thus, classroom research covers areas such as the following:

- Teachers’ knowledge, understanding, decisions, values, experience, confidence, etc
- Children's learning, responses, understanding, values, development, etc
- Teaching approaches and interactions
- Curriculum organisation, content selection, scheme and lesson planning
- Subject resources, their quality, appropriateness and use

This places research in geographical education in the hands of practitioner researchers, that is those who have a direct interest in understanding and improving the geography curriculum and children's learning in geography in primary schools. There are two groups of primary practitioner researchers:

- Classroom and field centre teachers (essentially those who have a responsibility for teaching geography to children and a keen interest in improving it)
- Teacher educators (in initial and in-service education: geography tutors in higher education and advisors in local education authorities).

The major focus of their work for both of these groups lies in primary classroom practice in geography teaching. But class teaching is set in the context of school policy and local authority and national requirements and guidance.
Focal points for primary geography classroom research

The three key components for schools and classrooms in the educational enterprise are curriculum, teaching and learning.
In essence, curriculum is about what children will study; teaching is about how children are taught; and learning is about what it is that children gain and can use from their experience. In this context, we need to remember that curriculum, teaching and learning can be explicit (what is on paper about curriculum, teaching strategies and what children show they have understood) and hidden (the unstated teacher attitudes and values underpinning curricula, personal variants of strategies used in teaching and what children really think and take into their lives from their experience). What we decide to do, how we then go about it, and the way we come across as teachers are vitally important in terms of the impact we have on children's experience and learning.

In its evaluation of the first inspection cycle of all of England's primary schools, Ofsted (1999) outlines the achievements and shortcomings of schools in primary geography. In analysing the relevant sections of the report, it is possible to identify several factors which appear to contribute to the quality of curriculum planning, geography teaching and progress in children's learning in primary schools [Figure 1]
It is not clear that these are the only factors that might affect the quality of primary geography, but the Ofsted report notes that children make good progress in geography where there is high quality present in many of these factors, and that there are weaknesses in children's geographical learning where curriculum planning and teaching are poorly prepared. None of this is surprising, but the question arises, of course, about what 'high quality' is in relation to each of these factors and what is meant by 'good progress' in children's learning, something which Ofsted is remarkably poor at supplying, almost inferring it is simply 'understood'. This indicates that further research is needed, not least to outline in some depth what it is that schools do where they achieve well in their geography teaching and children's learning.

Drawing on the Ofsted and other analyses (Bowles, 1997. Catling, 1999a, 1999b), a number of key areas for primary classroom geography research can be identified. These are outlined in Figure 2.
**The quality of geography teaching is affected by the quality of these factors**

### In relation to the primary geography curriculum:
- How well planned and how detailed schemes of work are
- Teachers' depth of subject knowledge and the strength of their confidence in teaching geography
- The INSET which school geography subject leaders and teachers have had
- Teachers' knowledge about their local environment and of the distant place case studies they use

### In relation to primary geography teaching and learning
- How teachers use fieldwork and practical activities to develop children's geographical skills
- How teachers engage children in using geographical terms and vocabulary
- What use is made of investigative and enquiry approaches and skills, particularly in developing communication and geographical skills
- What opportunities children have to discuss geographical matters and issues
- How stimulating and challenging geographical tasks are for children
- The extent to which teachers foster children's retention and subsequent use of their geographical knowledge

**The nature of the classroom geography curriculum**
- Teachers' beliefs about geography in the primary curriculum: personal and educational values and aims
- What teachers select to teach, both topics and content: attitudes to and knowledge of geography
- Why and how teachers organise their geography planning as they do: planning skills
- The classroom environment teachers provide for children in class

**The teaching of geography in the primary classroom**
- Why and how teachers select their teaching approaches
- Ways in which teachers plan their use of teaching strategies and then carries these out
- How teachers capitalise, or not on children's experience from outside and in school
- The types of questions teachers and children ask
- The way teachers respond to children's questions, including the explanations given and approaches to drawing out description and analysis from children
- How teachers use teaching resources

**Children's learning of geography through taught educational activities**
- What children do and learn in geography sessions
- What children think about geography and aspects of geography
- How children relate their in-school experience and learning to out-of-school experience and learning, and vice versa
- How the geography of the school environment affects their learning
- Clarity about children's conceptions and misconceptions

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**Figure 2: Foci for classroom research in primary geography**

The agenda this creates needs to be directed into more specific research topics relevant to the classroom. Drawing on, but extending, interests identified by primary geography teachers (Catling, 1999b), the following list offers a starting point. It is by no means complete.
In relation to the geography curriculum
- The value and importance of the geography curriculum
- How teachers' perceptions and knowledge affect their planning and teaching
- Strategies to develop teachers' geographical understanding
- The impact of the introduction of national literacy, numeracy and ICT strategies on the time given to geography in the primary curriculum
- How teachers display 'geography' in their classrooms and schools
- The variety of opportunities available for informal geographical learning

In relation to teaching
- What teachers perceive children to understand and be capable of
- The impact of whole class and group teaching approaches
- Teaching strategies used in enquiry-led geography teaching, including children's direct involvement in planning enquiry activities
- Strategies for effective questioning by children and teachers
- Learning through the use of ICT
- Strategies for introducing geographical ideas through stories
- Strategies to use children's understanding of urban and rural landscapes alongside their local area knowledge and in the wider geography curriculum
- Ways geography teaching can help stimulate and develop learning in children with learning needs, behavioural problems and social difficulties
- How teachers use specific resources with what impact on children's learning
- The impact of high quality INSET on teachers' effectiveness and children's attainment
- Identifying children's geographical misconceptions, and developing teaching strategies to overcome these

In relation to learning
- The development of children's spatial awareness
- How children respond to the school environment and its geography
- The impact of external factors on the development of children's personal geographies, e.g. travel, roaming restrictions and media representations
- How children's local knowledge and perceptions of other places affects the learning of graphicy skills
- Children's perceptions of nearby large cities, tourist/holiday areas and distant places
- Identifying and assessing children's skill competence
- Children's understanding of specific geographical concepts, e.g. land use, settlement, landscape
- Children's understanding of environmental matters and issues, sustainable development and citizenship as cross-curricular ideas
- Children's ideas on what 'geography' is about

What else could be added to such a list? How can the focus of these topics be sharpened?
Such lists are valuable, but they beg the question of priorities and personal interest. If there is to be any coherence to the development of research into primary geography, there is a need to identify a small number of key areas for research in classrooms and schools and to undertake this research in a co-ordinated way across schools, education authorities and higher education institutions. However, this is inevitably tempered by the personal interests of those wanting to research, whether informally or formally. It may be that a national approach needs to be co-ordinated, if not directed, by an organisation such as the Geographical Association or through a primary geography research centre in higher education.

**Undertaking classroom research**

There are a variety of techniques to use in classroom research. Such research might well be focused on a particular classroom as a case study, or the interest may be in what goes on throughout a school or group of schools, focused on one or more age groups. It may sample groups at a particular point in time or it may be a longitudinal study. Whichever focus will involve the consideration of ethical issues in the research (Cohen & Manion, 1994), decisions about appropriate research foci and techniques, clarity about the purpose of the research and understanding of what value it will be on completion. Whether undertaking a research study for a postgraduate degree or focusing 'informally' on an aspect of one's own or someone else's geography teaching and/or its context, research needs to be carefully thought through. (Cohen & Mannion, 1994; McKernan, 1996)

The key decisions to be made concern:

- **What exactly do I want to examine or find out about?**
  - The focus of an enquiry
  - The key question(s) to ask
- **What do I know about what has been done on this before?**
  - In the same area,
  - A related area,
  - Or a way that is informative but in an unrelated area
  - Information that can be useful to deciding what to do and how to do it
- **What is the best way to research what I am interested in?**
  - The alternative approaches available
  - The outcomes they lead to
  - What is appropriate to do
  - What I can manage?
- **What am I going to do?**
  - Decisions about which approach, doing what, who with, for how long?
  - Ways to analyse the outcome and use the results
  - What support is available, if needed
Making these decisions is essential before the research is undertaken. Though they might appear low key in a personal project, they are important because you need to have a good idea that the data you gather has validity, that it can be analysed appropriately and will be useful to you in future teaching. Once you feel confident in your decisions (or at least confident enough to give it a go), undertake the study.

There are many techniques which might be used in classroom research. The Appendix: Collecting Evidence outlines some that might be used, but the list is not exhaustive, nor does it do more than illustrate the techniques. Its purpose is to indicate the choice available in undertaking research. It will be important to become much more informed about these and other techniques (for example, see: Bassey, 1999. Cohen & Manion, 1994; McKernan, 1996). None of the techniques is likely to be used on its own. The choice of these and other strategies will depend on the purpose of the research. For example, a study of children's understanding of the idea of a settlement may use

- document analysis (children's research writing and maps about the character of particular settlements),
- assessment task (a set task classifying types and sizes of settlement and explaining these),
- field notes (made by the teacher immediately after sessions about how different children responded to the activities set)
- interviews (by the teacher with children to clarify points about their understanding arising from analysis of the previous three research techniques)

to help tease out what the children in a class understand a settlement to be, their appreciation of different types and sizes of settlement and what it means for a settlement to have a particular character.

Practical classroom research in primary geography

The following four examples illustrate a variety of foci for primary geography research and some of the many ways in which classroom research can be carried out,

Children's ideas about geography

Set the children a context, for example, that a stranger is coming to their classroom and wants to find out what geography is about. Ask the children individually to prepare a poster which would show the stranger what they think. Alternatively, ask them to write a definition as an entry in a new dictionary or encyclopaedia, or to record an interview on tape, perhaps with yourself.

Using sources you think are appropriate, identify what you think would make a suitable definition of geography. You might draw, for instance, on national curriculum geography documents. In analysing the children's ideas, consider the extent to which the posters, definitions or interviews provide a
reasonable account of the nature of the subject. Can you identify any threads running through the definitions? Are there any appropriate overall definitions? Do some definitions emphasise specific aspects of geography? What indication do they give that children have an idea of what geography is about? Match their ideas with the documentary information about the curriculum they have covered to date. Consider if there are other things you know about the children which might have influenced their statements, and so on.

Use the outcome of your analysis to consider what might need to be addressed for some or all of the children either later that year or in the next year.

Teachers' strategies for developing children's enquiry questions

Chapman (1999) provides an example of a way to structure the planning of a geography topic to study the impact of teacher input on children's enquiry approaches. The class should be divided into three 'equal' ability groups. Ask all three groups to devise and respond to their own questions about the topic. Give limited resources and provide little support to one group, including leaving the children to identify their own questions. Provide some resources to the second group, and give them a variety of questions to initiate work. The third group should be provided with a wide variety of information for the topic and stimulated to examine the material, with supportive prompts about asking questions.

Observe how the different groups respond to the three strategies. Make field notes on their ways of working. Ensure you note what your interventions are and when they are made. Note comments the children make. Examine the outcomes of their work. Ensure that you keep the notes and work of the groups separate for analysis. In your analysis consider the quality of response of each group and use your data to attempt to explain any variations you find.

Use your findings to identify teaching strategies which you can use for all the children to develop the quality of their enquiry questioning.

Children's geographical images and knowledge

It is important to gather information about what children already know or think they know about a geographical theme or a place. Almost certainly they will have some ideas and images about the topics we will teach them (Palmer, 1998). These might be wholly or partially accurate or complete misconceptions.

For the topic plan a variety of activities in sequence which will involve eliciting children's images and knowledge before undertaking research tasks to develop their understanding and widen their perspective. The approaches you use might include a variety of documentary activities, such as word association, drawing a picture, making a map, devising a concept map and describing their experiences, for example of a city (Baldwin & Opie, 1996).
In analysing the documents the children produce, compare for each activity across the children and for each child between their products. Look for where children have given appropriate images or information or shown some or much sense of understanding. Identify where there are partial or clear misconceptions. You may find that children contradict themselves in different tasks!

Identify where there may be generally sound areas of understanding and those aspects which need to be addressed in teaching. Reconsider your planning of the topic in order to address the concerns that you identify.

While such an approach is helpful to use at the start of a topic, it can also be used at the end in order to identify what children may have learned as a result of teaching. If pre- and post-tasks are used, a comparison may be possible to show what children have gained from the topic and to indicate where there are needs still to be addressed.

'Mapping' your approach to planning your geography teaching

How do you go about planning your geography teaching? Do you use the same approach for each topic, whether in one year or year to year? How are you influenced by colleagues, by the resources available, by your own geographical knowledge and confidence, by your knowledge and understanding of the children, or by the latest government missive on what to do in your curriculum?

When its time to start the planning for your next geography topic, begin to keep a journal of your ways of working, your hopes and fears, what affects you and so forth. Open the journal by setting out how you hope to go about planning and developing the work you want to do with the children. Be as honest, as full and as frank, as you can be. A detailed account of everything that you can include will be most helpful. Date your entries. Maintain your journal every time you plan, teach, assess, discuss in the staff room or at home - whatever, wherever - your geography topic. At the end of the topic, complete the journal with a reflective account of what you think happened and how it felt for you, but do not look back when doing this; write it how you see it. Then put the journal away for a while! During the topic keep copies of all your planning notes - indeed, any notes that are pertinent - even the odd scraps of paper. Try also to keep any other items that influenced you, such as newspaper or journal articles on teaching geography. It is helpful to date them and keep them in a folder in sequence.

To analyse your journal and the additional materials, read your material and try to identify the key influences on your planning. Rather than simply describe what influenced what, attempt to dig out explanations for your decisions. See if common threads begin to appear, such as, the impact of access to resources, how you responded to the children's questions, interruptions to afternoon teaching, your moods - whatever they may be. From your findings, identify what can be tackled by you to improve your planning, whether for yourself (e.g. knowledge of the subject) or with others (e.g. interruptions).
Conclusion

Fundamentally, the value of primary geography classroom research is that it improves the quality of curriculum planning, teaching and children's learning in geography. Whether it is carried out by the teacher herself or is undertaken and communicated to others by, for example, university researchers, it needs to provide insight into ways in which children's geographical understanding can be improved. It is about developing in children their greater awareness and understanding of places, of environments, and of the world about them. It should help teachers to leave them better informed, more thoughtful and curious, inquisitive and little sceptical, capable of decision making, caring, and skilled enough to set about enquiries and to draw appropriately on their geographical understanding and their intellectual skills.

The importance of good quality research is that it can identify effective approaches that improve practice. Shared through publications read by teachers, this benefits children's learning directly, laying the foundation for an evidence-based approach to primary geography teaching. Using research enhances the understanding and knowledge on which teachers draw in their day-to-day planning and teaching of geography and provides the basis for secure and well-judged decisions about directions and activities in the classroom.

All of this can appear daunting. Time is precious and short. Why research primary geography rather than other subjects? There is plenty of research underway about the core subjects. It is both a matter of having a go at what interests you and recognising that if you do not do it, who will? If you are interested give it a try. Perhaps these ten rules for a novice researcher will help:

- Do not be afraid to have a go - give research a try
- Undertake an enquiry you feel is worthwhile - you need to want to do it to keep you going when the going gets tough
- Ensure it is of value - that you learn something from it and can use this
- Read around - learn from the work of others. Don't just make it up
- Seek advice and support - get help with your ideas, and even to carry it through
- Select what is manageable - what you can carry out and can analyse during and after
- Plan your 'tasks' carefully - what is being studied and how the research is undertaken
- Keep a record of what you do make a research diary about what you do, think and feel
- Write it up - in note form or as a report
- Share it with others - with colleagues, future teachers and teacher educators in a presentation or an article

There is a final rule, more a matter of principle. You should not be afraid to be on the side of primary geography and to privilege it above research into other aspects of your classroom. After all, you want fairness and justice for this subject in the curriculum, so be honest about your bias and stance (Griffiths, 1999). You can still do worthwhile, honest and good quality research. For the geography community and for children, it is important.
References
Baldwin, H. & Opie, M. (1996), Child's eye view of cities, Primary Geographer 26, pp. 16-20
Catling, S. (1999b), Developing Research in Primary Geography, Primary Geographer 38, 15-17
Chapman J. (1999), Stimulating curiosity, Primary Geographer 38, pp. 18-19
Millett, A. (this volume) Action research in the Classroom: What is to be done? keynote address to the Primary Geography Research Conference: Action Research in the Classroom, 4 March
## Appendix  A sample of techniques to use in research activities

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technique</th>
<th>Outline</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Journal/Diary</td>
<td>Narrative account of thoughts, feelings, views, ideas, values, about oneself, the activities or the children, made immediately.</td>
<td>Writing up how a geography lesson went, what happened, who did what, why you think so, how it felt.... ...</td>
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<tr>
<td>Field Notes</td>
<td>Descriptive, contemporaneous account of what happened or was observed, and heard.</td>
<td>Describe the sequence of a geography lesson, what did what, what the outcome or impact was...........</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action/interaction log</td>
<td>List, on a time chart, activities undertaken by yourself or a group of children to see what happened, with whom, &amp; when,</td>
<td>List in sequence, with the time or, for example, every 5 minutes, the activities undertaken during a geography lesson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Audio/video record</td>
<td>Make an audio or video recording either yourself (or use a colleague) to hear/see what happens during a class lesson, focussed on the children or yourself</td>
<td>Set up a cassette tape for a group during a discussion about an environmental issue, then analyse the conversation to see how they used language to express their knowledge, understanding and values...</td>
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<td>Photographs</td>
<td>Provide photographs for children to respond to, either open-ended or with a specific task, to identify the knowledge or attitudes they bring to the image</td>
<td>Give individual children a photograph each about which they have to write down what they think the place it shows is like, what life is like in that place....</td>
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<td>Interview</td>
<td>A face-to-face interview can be structured, semi-structured or open-ended, depending upon your purpose and the type of questions you want to ask and follow up.</td>
<td>Conduct a semi-structured interview with colleagues about their geography planning, with the same questions to ask every one but enabling you to use supplementary questions to clarify or explore points</td>
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<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>Use a stimulus to encourage a group of staff or children to</td>
<td>Set up a discussion about the kind of approaches colleagues use to teach</td>
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<td>Method/Approach</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>discussion/review</td>
<td>Discuss or evaluate a topic, value, resource and so on about places, to identify the variety of strategies used.</td>
<td>Record a discussion between yourself and two children about how a river flows and what happens as it does, then analyse to identify the type of discussion such as defining, describing, explaining, evaluating.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Episode/incident analysis</td>
<td>Examine a typical episode during a lesson e.g. a dialogue between two children, about a topic, to analyse the nature of the discourse involved.</td>
<td>Record a discussion between yourself and two children about how a river flows and what happens as it does, then analyse to identify the type of discussion such as defining, describing, explaining, evaluating.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Draw and Write</td>
<td>Ask children to draw a picture or a map to show a place or a perspective, then use a semi-structured interview to find out further about what they want to show.</td>
<td>Children sit individually to draw a picture of a hot/cold place, or a map of their local area. Ask questions about what they have included. Analyse the drawings with their conversation to identify their main ideas about such places or their map drawing skills and knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artefact study</td>
<td>Examine children’s written, drawn and rough work which are discarded to see how they inform you about the nature/process of their thinking and working.</td>
<td>From a session in which children have been planning an enquiry their rough working notes and analyse these to identify aspects of how they went about their planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Document analysis</td>
<td>Analyse documents concerned with planning or teaching e.g. minutes of planning meetings for the curriculum or children’s completed work in a folder.</td>
<td>Read through the minutes of meetings on planning of the school geography curriculum to establish what information exists about its development.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Resource Use</td>
<td>Observe the way in which particular teaching resources are used by children in tasks they undertake to identify how they go about using them.</td>
<td>Watch and note the way a group of children use a set of materials from a locality pack to do the set task; note reading, search, classifying skills used in the process.</td>
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<td>Assessment task</td>
<td>For a topic that has been studied, set a variety of types of question/task (identification, description, explanation,</td>
<td>Give individual children a map and three photographs and set them questions that require them to describe what they can see, match</td>
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<th>Method</th>
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<td>Problem survey</td>
<td>Set up a survey to be undertaken by children, for which there is no one right way, and observe how the children respond to the task, what support is needed by whom.</td>
<td>Children plan and undertake a local study enquiry in which you observe who provides what sort of contribution and how they set up, undertake and evaluate the enquiry.</td>
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<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td>Devise a set of questions to find out specific information, views, experience, depending upon the purpose in mind.</td>
<td>Use a questionnaire to find out the impact of changes by the literacy and numeracy curriculum on geography teaching in partnership schools.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Checklist</td>
<td>Devise a checklist for use in a structured lesson in order to record what is seen to be happening or to list evidence.</td>
<td>Create a checklist of behaviour expected to be seen, in sequence, during a fieldtrip then use to monitor children in action.</td>
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<td>Rating scale</td>
<td>Use a rating scale to evaluate an activity, e.g. how often a resource was used, how helpful texts were, how imaginative a topic had been.</td>
<td>Ask children to rate the helpfulness of resources used in a settlement study and the different aspects of the unit planned by the teacher.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attitude scale</td>
<td>Used to identify the extent to which we agree, disagree or are uncertain/ambivalent about particular topics/values, using statements to which a response is made.</td>
<td>List a number of statements to do with attitudes to geography in the school curriculum, teaching it, collecting resources. Ask colleagues to complete the attitude scale anonymously about whether they agree, are uncertain about or disagree with the statements.</td>
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**Note:** For detailed outlines on the use of these and other techniques, see, for example, Aldridge & Wood, 1998; Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993; Bassey, 1999; Cohen & Manion, 1994; McKernan, 1996.