

REACTING TO THE WEATHER

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In this article Richard explores how we can use topical weather events to teach pupils both how physical processes work and how humans respond to such events.

Introduction

I deliberately waited until I was sitting in The Lodge at Port Howard in the Falkland Islands to write this article. On the bus from the airport to Stanley, the capital, a child had said to me, 'you can experience each of the seasons in a single day on the Falklands!' This made me to think it was the perfect location to write an article on weather.

Weather interested me as a pupil in school and this interest continued when I became a teacher. I have found that by using the weather we can teach pupils not only how physical processes work, but also how humans respond to them. The recent (September 2017) Hurricane Irma was a perfect example of this; it showed clearly the link between human and physical geography.

In the news

Coming into school over the days after the hurricane emerged; the pupils talked about it. Irma had been in the newspapers, on the television news and on the internet: it was a hot topic. In fact, Hurricane Irma caught the attention of my pupils more than other natural disasters we had explored. I came to two conclusions as to why: the hurricane had affected British Overseas Territories (and the pupils were keen to find out about them) and the storm was unfolding right in front of them. This was not something that had happened five or ten years ago, it had happened last week and they were reacting now. In Wales, the National Curriculum for Geography (see web panel) notes that pupils must carry out investigations of 'geography in the news', topical events and issues in the local area and the wider world. The work I planned linked perfectly with this requirement.

Human and physical

It was essential to find a starting point that would help provide structure when learning about the weather. We could choose from myriad video clips on the internet and in the news. We began by breaking the reports on Hurricane Irma



Creativity was at the fore as groups developed their hurricane posters. Photo © Jodie Martin.

down into 'physical' and 'human' activities and impacts. The pupils worked in groups using newspapers, online sources and their own understanding to note the things that could be classed as 'physical' (the hurricane itself, flooding and wind) from the 'human' (electricity supplies down, roads breaking up and airports closing). From this, we worked as a class highlighting those impacts that were primary and those that were secondary and decided which of these were having the biggest impact on the people in the Caribbean.

Developing critical thinking

Over the course of the recovery effort, we regularly tuned into BBC Newsround. The pupils had developed an array of video clips, reports and photos to show the aftermath of Hurricane Irma. As the recovery progressed, they watched and posed questions and we used 'hot seating' in an attempt to understand the thoughts and feelings of those involved. This was a great opportunity for the pupils to develop their critical thinking skills. They were keen to find out about the impact of the recovery, how prepared the islands were for hurricanes and how the inhabitants could be better equipped in future. Incorporating critical thinking skills brings me back to the importance of providing a structure for the pupils' learning. This work certainly reflected the University of Hong Kong's description of critical thinking: 'the ability to think clearly and rationally. It includes the ability to engage in reflective and independent thinking'.

After looking at physical and human, primary and secondary impacts and developing questions to promote critical thinking, the pupils formed their top six

questions using a 'Who? What? When? Where? How? Why?' framework. They then used these questions to find more detail about the hurricane and the impact it was having. The pupils also began developing maps of the world and the Caribbean to follow the path Hurricane Irma took as well as which countries were providing relief effort.

Creative thinking for global citizenship

Following this work, the pupils' creativity really came into its own. Working in groups of four or five, they had to take their learning further to develop a poster all about Hurricane Irma (Figure 1). The groups spent a day doing this, accessing newspapers, computers and books as necessary. I was extremely proud not only of their ability to work independently (to know when to resort to ICT and when to present detail by hand), but also the way they wove in their use of critical thinking skills. The result was seven very different, very informative posters, each of which told the story of Hurricane Irma, its impacts and how the relief effort was handled.

Work such as this helps to develop responsible global citizenship in our pupils and fosters empathy and a deeper understanding of the environment. It adds excitement to teaching and learning as well as helping to meet one of the purposes of the proposed new Welsh National Curriculum: to develop pupils who are 'ethically informed residents of Wales and the wider world'.

WEB RESOURCES

Geography in the National Curriculum for Wales: <http://learning.gov.wales/docs/learningwales/publications/130424-geography-in-the-national-curriculum-en.pdf>
New School Curriculum for Wales: <http://gov.wales/topics/educationandskills/schoolshome/curriculuminwales/curriculum-for-wales-curriculum-for-life/?lang=en>
University of Hong Kong: <http://philosophy.hku.hk/think/critical/ct.php>

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