

*Open your geography books; we're on page 37 ...* Sound familiar? There will be few teachers who do not use this type of statement daily in the classroom. But did you know that more and more primary schools are having a rethink about their use of textbooks?

## **Ditching the textbook**

### **One school's story**

Five years ago St. Patrick's NS in Slane, Co. Meath did just that in SESE. We went along to find out more.

#### **Tell us about your school.**

St Patrick's is a co-educational school with nine classes—six single grade and three multi-grade. We have thirteen teachers including an administrative principal, two Learning Support teachers, an EAL teacher, and two SNAs.

#### **Why did you decide to review your use of textbooks in SESE?**

It all started about five or six years ago when we sat down as a staff to do our Plean Scoile for SESE. Working with the curriculum documents for history, geography and science we set out what we wanted to focus on at the four class levels. The next big question was, *how do we resource this learning?* So we looked at all the textbooks on the market and reviewed these in light of what we wanted to do in our school.

#### **And the conclusion was?**

We decided that no single textbook 'fitted with' what we wanted to do. Were we to work with a textbook, we would have been doing so for the sake of having a textbook! In our opinion, this was not what good teaching and learning was about.

#### **Having decided to ditch the textbook, what did you do next?**

The school's locality is a treasure trove of resources for history, geography and science. The challenge was to bring these resources and the children together. Our solution lay in cameras! On one of our planning days and armed with a camera, each staff member photographed the rich environment around us. We printed the photographs and used

them to create topic packs such as *Myths and Legends*, *Slane Village*, *Newgrange*, *Local Wildflowers*, *People and Communication*, *Settlements*, and *Environmental Awareness*. While our packs have a strong SESE focus, we also use them in areas such as oral language development, and responding to art. A real multi-purpose and crosscurriculum resource!

### **Can you tell us more about the packs?**

They're essentially a collection of teaching and learning materials around a topic. So, any individual pack might contain photographs, posters, books, CDs, DVDs and so on. Importantly for us as a staff, the packs do not contain lesson plans. We see the packs as a tool or an aid for teaching and learning, and only that. Each teacher and his/her children use their own experiences, skills and interests to shape their learning using a given topic. The most important resource in our work is the **Primary School Curriculum**.

*I have a set of curriculum documents in my classroom and another set at home because I use them constantly to plan my work.*

(Joann Mulligan)

### **What have been the greatest benefits in moving away from the textbook?**

Opportunities for differentiating learning ... We can shape and tailor learning to meet the needs, interests and experiences of the children in our classrooms. The packs also offer a wonderful solution for teaching multigrade classes. They enable us as teachers to tap into our own strengths and skills. We are more creative and adventurous in our teaching. Because, essentially we are now making the decisions about the content, the pace and sequence of the children's learning, and the methods and organisational settings we use—decisions that were previously 'made' by the textbook. The children are involved in their own learning. They're motivated. They're enjoying learning.

*The topic packs have enabled us to use ICT across the curriculum; we're also able to focus more on developing children's research, decisionmaking and high-order thinking skills.*

(Seán Flanagan)

## Supporting teaching and learning

### **How have parents responded?**

Having no class textbook for SESE means less financial expense for parents. And that's good news for everyone in the current climate! Our school has a tradition of active, nonbook based learning, for example, we're involved in the Comenius project. We're also a Green Flag school. So moving away from a textbook has been welcomed by parents.

### **What about SESE homework?**

We ask the pupils to use research skills to find information on a particular aspect of a topic, or they might write up a piece on what they have learned about the Vikings, for example. Teachers might create a worksheet or questionnaire or pupils might write a poem/story/report/interview/letter/poster on the topic.

### **You've mentioned benefits. What about challenges?**

The photocopying bill! But we accept these costs and work with them. Because we place such a high value on non-textbook based teaching and learning, we prioritise funding to build our bank of packs and to replenish resources such as batteries in the Electricity pack.

*The packs are critical to what we do as professionals and so as principal, I find ways to ensure the staff have the resources they need.*

(Elizabeth Sheridan)

Storage and the management of resources can be another challenge but again we've found ways around this. We use our staffroom as a resource centre. Sourcing resources is an ongoing activity. We're always on the look-out, even when on holidays! But aren't all teachers like that anyway.... The internet too is a wonderful resource.

### **How do teachers joining the staff respond to not having a textbook?**

*I joined last September. I have to admit I was a bit anxious at first as I imagined myself being a regular visitor to the photocopier! The reality has been quite different. Having no textbook for SESE has given me considerable flexibility in how I work with the curriculum objectives. I ask probing questions; the children ask probing questions; we work together to find answers; we use ICT. I also find myself using a good combination of group-work, paired work and whole class teaching, project-based learning, reading, writing and discussion.*

(Rachel Brown)

### **Have you collaborated with others?**

*As we became more confident in our own understanding of the process we talked to others about how we use the packs. While looking for resources in the county library I explained the idea of the packs to the archivist. The County Library staff were very taken with this idea and have just published a Local History Resource pack for schools using the archive material they have. We are also working with a publishing company to 'test' resource packs for multi-grade classes.*

(Elizabeth Sheridan)

### **If you were to go back five years, would you do anything differently?**

Probably not. We made the planning process our own. There's no point being handed packs or plans and told, *off you go and use them!* You need to go through the process which we've been through. Since we made the change in SESE we've turned our attention to other subjects including music, visual arts, drama and English.

### **What advice would you give to other schools thinking about leaving the textbook aside?**

Start small and take things slowly. Pick one subject. Work as a staff and use the curriculum as your map. Ask yourself, *what do we want the children in whatever class, to learn?* Watch out for progression in learning—it's crucial. The thought of working through the curriculum might be off-putting initially as there's a lot in there! But there are good ideas there. Working with them takes planning. We had the benefit of having done a lot

of work on school planning and so we had a strong tradition of planning as a staff and using the curriculum as our reference point.

**Any concluding remarks?**

The more we planned with the **Primary School Curriculum**, the more we questioned the role of textbooks. We felt constrained by them and under pressure to get to the last page by the end of the summer term! We questioned the value of this for us as teachers and for our children as learners. In response, we have emphasised the importance of teacher professional judgement and flexibility in working with the curriculum. This requires you to think differently about teaching and learning, to think about it in a creative and innovative way. While this can be demanding initially, it's also very exciting and empowering.

The NCCA would like to thank Elizabeth Sheridan (principal), Joann Mulligan, Seán Flanagan and Rachel Brown for taking time to share their experience.