

DEALING WITH CHANGE: A NORTHERN IRELAND PERSPECTIVE

Karen Kerr talks to Joan Shine, a science adviser who works with the 'World Around Us' learning area in Northern Ireland

KK: *What are your experiences of the impact of recent curriculum change in Northern Ireland on teachers? What obstacles have you met?*

JS: Teachers in Northern Ireland accept that change has become part of the educational climate; however, the revised curriculum currently being implemented has brought about change on a scale not experienced since the introduction of the Northern Ireland Curriculum in 1990. The phased implementation of the curriculum has meant that training has been happening on an ongoing basis since 2006. For some, this has been beneficial in that it has provided the opportunity to engage in professional dialogue and begin to reflect on practice. For others, however, there has been frustration in not being able to have training when they felt ready for it.

In terms of science specifically, a learning area entitled 'World Around Us' has been created with the express purpose of fostering closer links between history, geography, science and technology 'where appropriate'. Teachers are encouraged to make connections with the other areas of learning through a topic-based approach. The statutory content has been reduced to allow for a stronger focus on skills and enquiry-based learning. This gives schools considerable flexibility and allows teachers to take account of the needs and interests of their pupils and to use their locality in a meaningful way.

KK: *What is your initial response to the Rose report?*

JS: I have not studied the review of the English primary curriculum in depth, but note that there are many similarities with the Northern Ireland curriculum. However, from a science point of view, the English curriculum proposes to keep a stronger focus on science with scientific and technological understanding as one of the six areas of learning; whereas here in Northern Ireland science and technology sit alongside history and geography as contributory elements to the *World Around Us* learning area.

KK: *How do you respond to abolition of the literacy and numeracy strategies in England? Is this good or bad for science?*

JS: Schools have been spending much curriculum time developing literacy and numeracy, but now that these strategies have been abolished they will be able to focus on other areas of learning, such as science, and use these as a vehicle to apply and enhance the skills and knowledge they have acquired.

KK: *What is your response to the increased emphasis on ICT?*

JS: Information and communication technology has the potential to empower and enrich pupils' learning experiences. It can promote positive attitudes to learning and create opportunities to allow pupils to become independent, flexible learners. ICT is a way of life for our young people, so schools need to capitalise on this to enrich and extend pupils' learning experiences. In science, ICT offers so many meaningful opportunities to engage in close observation and measurement, to explore and interrogate data, to research, present and exhibit information in a wide variety of ways, to communicate results and findings and to collaborate within and beyond their own schools.

KK: *Finally, what is your response to the apparent 'decoupling' of science from environmental matters?*

JS: Within primary schools I think that subject boundaries should not create barriers to learning. As the United Nations has designated 2005–2014 the decade of Education for Sustainable Development, we have a responsibility to educate the next generation about the true meaning of this. Therefore, whether it is through science, geography, history or citizenship, the important thing is that it is a key focus.

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