

Effective Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education: A Review of Literature and Implications for Practice in Infant Classes in Primary Schools in Ireland

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Introduction

Pedagogy may be defined as the practice (or the art, the science or the craft) of teaching (Siraj-Blatchford, 2004). In recent years, mainly as a result of the interest in the articulation of learning theories, we are increasingly able to differentiate pedagogical strategies by reference to developmental levels of children (Bowman *et al.*, 2001). This implies serious re-consideration, in the Irish context, of the nature of the role of the teacher in young children's learning. Adams *et al.* (2004: 81) describe aspirations for early years practice as practice wherein

"...learning is seen in a holistic non-compartmentalised way, where play, first-hand experiences and talk are the principal means of learning, where children's capacity to explore and imagine for themselves is nourished by open-ended invitations to engage with the world, and where observation of individual children is the key to developing both curriculum and pedagogy."

Current Pedagogical Practices in Infant Classes in Ireland

A number of recent reports (Coolahan, 1998; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2004) are highly critical of the sometimes overly formalised pedagogical practices that are generally observed in infant classes in Ireland.

The overall impression gained by the OECD Thematic Review team (2004: 58) was one of *"...whole class teaching, with children sitting quietly at tables. The approach appeared to be directive and formal compared to practices observed and theoretically underpinned in other countries..."*

The team observed what they described as *"...a predominately didactic approach towards early learning"* (2004: 84) in infant classes. They suggested that the model of the teacher as the source of learning from whom young children receive knowledge is still strongly felt within the system. They noted that notions such as the well-being and involvement of children, or the construction of knowledge through play, participation and choice, all needed to be developed.

Arising from the OECD's observations, teachers are urged to adopt pedagogical styles more suited to the characteristics of young children. In recent years there has been a theoretical shift in how we perceive teaching and learning. This shift is keenly felt in early childhood education as elsewhere, where ideas about individualistic learning and

development have now been replaced by ideas about the social and cultural nature of learning (Anning *et al.*, 2004). In particular the idea that interactions (between adults and children and between children themselves) are at the core of the teaching/learning process is influencing the debate about quality practice in early childhood education (e.g. Fleer and Richardson, 2004). Teachers of infant classes in primary schools are themselves becoming increasingly aware of recommendations for a re-examination of pedagogy for young children at school (Irish National Teachers' Organisation [INTO], 2006).

Underpinning Principles

An analysis of the principles for learning in the primary school curriculum (Government of Ireland, 1999) reveals a high level of coherence between these principles and the aspirations for early childhood practice as articulated above by Adams *et al.* (2004). The principles explicitly refer to issues such as

- the integration of learning (and the irrelevance to the young child of discrete subjects);
- the fostering of the child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity and the exploration of this through play;
- the importance of environment based learning and first-hand experiences that actively engage the child with the immediate environment and those who live in it;
- the centrality of language for learning and the incorporation of talk and discussion as a key learning strategy;
- the recognition of the innate creativity of each individual and the individuality of creative responses and expressions;
- the necessity to select methods of assessment that best suit needs at a particular time.

While teachers of infant classes in Ireland have traditionally worked with the statutory curriculum for primary schools, specific guidance for those responsible for the development and learning of children in the age range birth to six years is currently being prepared by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA). Responses to *Towards a Framework for Early Learning: A Consultation Paper* (NCCA, 2004) indicated considerable support for this development (www.ncca.ie). The framework will state principles of early learning and development and the assumption is that they will be entirely consistent with those which underpin the primary curriculum.

Alongside the principles of learning underlying *The Primary Curriculum* (Government of Ireland, 1999), teachers working in early years classrooms now also have the benefit of *Síolta*, The National Quality Framework For Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006). The set of inter-dependent principles on which *Síolta* is premised is designed to underpin and provide the context for quality practice in early education and care settings in Ireland. These two sets of principles

can be seen as complementary: the latter focused on the context *for* learning, and the former on the principles *of* learning.

Researching Effective Early Years Pedagogy

The *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education* (EPPE) project was a recent large-scale longitudinal study of effective pre-school provision carried out in England (Sylva *et al.*, 2004). It identified the most effective strategies that are applied with children in the age range three to six years, in order to best support the development of skills, knowledge and attitudes and to ensure a good start to school. Researchers identified those strategies through a process whereby they first identified effective settings and they then focused on the features of these settings. Effective settings, i.e. those which improved children's developmental outcomes (social/behavioural and cognitive) beyond that which would have been expected given the child's developmental profile at age three and their social background, were characterised by a number of features. In particular, high quality adult-child verbal interactions and child-initiated activity balanced with adult-led activity emerged as critical. It was observed that child-initiated play often provided the best opportunities in which adults could extend children's thinking. The most effective pedagogy for young children was seen to be one that combines both 'teaching' and the provision of freely chosen play and potentially instructive play activities. The most effective settings were found to be those where the quality of the adult-child interactions was such that 'sustained shared thinking' was a feature. Such thinking was most likely to occur in one-to-one interactions between adult and child or during the course of focused group work. Sustained shared thinking is defined by Sylva *et al.* (2004: vi) as occurring where

"...two or more individuals work together in an interrelated way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate an activity, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding."

The *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years* (REPEY) Report (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002) presents findings from intensive case studies of fourteen of EPPE's highly effective settings (including two reception classes). The report focused on findings with respect to adult-child interactions as an area of particular impact. It was reported that while the authors concluded that *"...periods of sustained shared thinking are a necessary pre-requisite for the most effective early years settings..."* they did not happen very often, even in effective settings. The analysis also led the authors to conclude that *"...knowledge and understanding of the particular area that is being addressed is vital A good grasp of appropriate 'pedagogical content knowledge' is a vital component of pedagogy."* (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.*, 2002: 11). The most highly qualified staff were found to be the most effective in their interactions with the children, using the most sustained shared thinking interactions.

Moving Forward with Effective Pedagogy

In relation to principles, infant teachers should re-visit those principles of learning in the primary curriculum and reconsider how they may be realised in early childhood education, where the particular characteristics and the learning needs of young learners must be foregrounded above other considerations.

Findings from the EPPE study provide clear signposts for infant teachers regarding effective pedagogy. Other research reiterates these findings. For instance, as a result of their examination and explication of what effective teachers of young children in England actually *do*, Moyles *et al.* (2002) emphasise certain aspects of pedagogy: the quality of the teacher-child interactions; the importance of the provision of opportunities for play; and the establishment of a playful ethos. As a result of their in-depth study of pedagogy in a small sample of reception classes, also in England, Adams *et al.* (2004) urged those teachers to review the balance of time they spend on the real 'basics' of the early childhood curriculum. These they identify as sustained, shared, purposeful talk; complex, imaginary experiences; and authentic, engaging, first-hand experiences.

With respect to the first of these imperatives, i.e. talk and discussion, Adams *et al.* (2004) observed relatively infrequent opportunities for children in the nine reception classes they studied to engage in sustained talk and interaction with adults and other children and indeed they cited other evidence that this appears to be the case, generally. In the most effective settings the importance of the teacher extending child-initiated interactions was also clearly identified. These findings and those of other studies (e.g. Norman, 1992) suggest that when teachers plan and organise to work with children on a small-group basis, then sustained shared interactions, extensions of thinking and cognitive challenges are more likely to occur. In the Irish context then, teachers need to consider when and how in the course of the infant-school day, such pedagogical opportunities can be identified. Teachers need to re-appraise the importance, for learning, of opportunities for complex and imaginary play. However, provision alone will not guarantee learning (Moyles *et al.*, 2002) and unless teachers understand the purposes of various types of play and the different roles they themselves must assume in relation to such activities, they may not result in cognitive challenge and worthwhile learning.

With respect to the third imperative i.e. authentic, engaging, real-life experiences, Adams *et al.* (2004) found these to be relatively rare events in the experiences of young learners in their case study schools. Rich *et al.* (2005) define such experiences as ones in which children handle authentic things for real purposes, go to places and meet people and are out and about. They argue that such experiences are essential since otherwise children have little to draw on in their talk or storying, in their drawing and creative work, or in their play.

Respecting young children's unique learning and developmental needs then, requires a pedagogy that has distinctive aspects and is clearly differentiated from that which sometimes dominates schooling for older children. The above research indicates that if teachers and others concerned with the effectiveness of early years pedagogy in infant classes in primary schools in Ireland were to 'audit' (Adams *et al.*, 2004) the time that children in their classes spend engaged in sustained, purposeful talk, complex imaginary experiences and authentic, engaging, real-life experiences then they would have a very good yardstick with which to measure the appropriateness and effectiveness of the pedagogy.

The current advice available to infant teachers (Government of Ireland, 1999) is in some ways entirely consistent with a number of aspects of effective pedagogical strategies for early childhood. However, imagination, creativity and daring in the interpretation and implementation of the curriculum would greatly enhance the quality of young children's learning experiences in infant classes in primary schools. There is an urgent need to balance the systematic curriculum recommended with an emergent curriculum based on children's immediate interests and the experiences encountered by them in their daily lives. In essence, pedagogical practices in infant classes need to be 'child-centred' in the sense that the first concern of the teacher, in efforts to support young children as learners, must be young children's particular learning characteristics and their specific learning needs. Teachers' legitimate concerns for the development, with respect of different curriculum areas, of young children's skills, knowledge and understandings and attitudes can only be accommodated within the broader considerations of young children as learners.

Conclusion

It is argued that changes in curriculum have only an indirect effect on teaching styles and pedagogy and that particular pedagogical strategies that teachers employ

"...will be determined by a whole range of factors, including their previous experiences and training, their individual personality, their conception of childhood and learning, as well as the particular contexts in which they work, the accommodation and resources that are available and the influence of co-workers."

(Siraj-Blatchford, 1999: 23)

Changing and developing early childhood pedagogy in infant classes is ultimately in the hands of teachers. However, teachers cannot do this alone. They need support, both in terms of in-service, and in terms of support for the provision of appropriate learning experiences for young children. Lack of opportunity for teachers to engage in reflection and, consequently, their limited understanding of the principles underpinning change are concerns that need to be addressed in efforts to develop and enhance early childhood pedagogy in primary schools in Ireland. Support from fellow teachers and especially from principal teachers and from Department of Education and Science inspectors is crucial.

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