

The Curriculum in the Infant Classes in Primary Schools in Ireland - Creating Learning Experiences

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Introduction

Children in Ireland can attend primary school from the age of four until twelve, and although compulsory attendance does not start until six years of age, traditionally the majority of four and five year olds have always enrolled in infant classes in primary schools (Coolahan, 1981). Primary schools (including special schools) currently cater for 80,732 children under the age of six years in Junior Infants and Senior Infants (Department of Education and Science, 2006). Some national schools in areas designated as disadvantaged cater for three year old children in 'Early Start' programmes, taught by primary school teachers with the assistance of qualified childcare workers.

This paper looks at the revised curriculum as it is implemented in the infant classes in primary schools, and draws on some of the findings of a national curriculum survey conducted by the Irish National Teachers' Organisation (INTO) in 2005 (INTO, forthcoming) and a focus group conducted with infant teachers which further explored the methodologies employed in implementing the curriculum in the early years.

Early Primary Education

The Primary School Curriculum is designed to nurture the child in all dimensions of his or her life - "*spiritual, moral, cognitive, emotional, imaginative, aesthetic, social and physical*" (Government of Ireland, 1999: 6). The principles underlying the primary curriculum in Ireland are based on theories of child development and growth, including the theories of Piaget, Bruner and Vygotsky on how children think and learn. The curriculum's vision of education is expressed in the form of three general aims:

- *"To enable the child to live as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual*
- *To enable the child to develop as a social being through living and cooperating with others and so contribute to the good of society*
- *To prepare the child for further education and lifelong learning."*

(Government of Ireland, 1999: 7)

The curriculum accords equal importance to what a child learns and to the process by which he or she learns it. A key principle is that there are different kinds of learning and that children learn in different ways (Government of Ireland, 1999). The curriculum, therefore, articulates a wide range of approaches to learning and seeks to enhance children's enjoyment of learning and motivation to learn. The curriculum is characterised by breadth and balance, is relevant to the developmental and educational needs of

children and reflects a developmental approach to learning. Concepts and skills are developed through the exploration of the content of the curriculum, and integrated learning experiences are provided to children through planning at school level to facilitate the adaptation and interpretation of the curriculum to meet the needs of the children. A number of pedagogical principles characterise the learning process envisaged by the curriculum. The following are some of these principles:

- *"The child's sense of wonder and natural curiosity is a primary motivating factor in learning*
- *The child is an active agent in his or her learning*
- *The child's existing knowledge and experience form the base for learning*
- *Learning should involve guided activity and discovery methods*
- *Language is central to the learning process*
- *Social and emotional dimensions are important factors in learning*
- *Learning is most effective when it is integrated*
- *Collaborative learning should feature in the learning process*
- *The range of individual difference should be taken into account in the learning process"*

(Government of Ireland, 1999: 8-9)

Much consultation took place as part of the development of the primary curriculum, leading to a consensus on a number of issues of relevance to primary education. One such area of consensus was the crucial role of early childhood education (Government of Ireland, 1999). The primary school curriculum that developed, therefore, is considered appropriate to the developmental and learning needs of the young child. The processes of exploration, activity, discovery, investigation, play and problem solving are the foundations on which provision for early childhood education is constructed and take place within the curriculum framework (INTO, 1995). In addition, a commitment to life long learning is nurtured from the earliest years. The aim of the primary teacher should be to nurture in children the confidence, self-reliance, initiative, imagination, independence and sense of responsibility that will enable them to engage with the world in which they are a part and contribute towards shaping it (Government of Ireland, 1999: 7).

The Primary Curriculum is currently divided into four main segments, the first of which caters for the infant classes - children from four to six. Curriculum content is presented in seven curriculum areas, all of which feature in the infant classes - language; mathematics; social, environmental and scientific education; arts education; physical education; social, personal and health education; and religious education (Government of Ireland, 1999: 40). All aspects of the child's development are interrelated and the developmental process is interactive and complex.

Though the current primary curriculum caters for the four to six year old, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) is currently developing a curriculum framework for children from birth to six years, which will probably impact in some form on the current primary school curriculum for the infant classes (NCCA, forthcoming).

Curriculum Evaluations

The INTO Education Committee has carried out evaluations of teachers' views on curriculum and its implementation since the 1970s. Its first survey was carried out in 1975 (INTO, unpublished) following the introduction of the 1971 curriculum. Additional surveys were carried out in 1985 and 1996 (INTO, 1987; 1996). Following in the tradition of carrying out major curriculum surveys every ten years, the INTO Education Committee decided to issue a questionnaire to a random sample of teachers in 2005 in order to ascertain their views on the revised primary curriculum. This is the first survey carried out by the INTO in relation to the revised curriculum of 1999 (INTO, forthcoming). A total of 2,067 questionnaires were distributed in November 2005 to INTO members (all primary teachers) randomly selected from the membership database in the Republic of Ireland. There was a response rate of 35% (717 questionnaires). The questionnaire covered all seven curricular areas, and sought to ascertain teachers' views in relation to the implementation of the Primary School Curriculum. The data was analysed using SPSS. Over a third of the respondents (36%) taught children in the infant classes (INTO, forthcoming).

Findings of the 2005 INTO Curriculum Survey in Relation to Methodologies in Infant Classrooms

For the purposes of this paper, some of the main findings concerning the use of various methodologies in mathematics and in social, environmental and scientific education are presented. Respondents were asked to indicate the frequency with which they used various methodologies in mathematics and social and environmental studies.

Mathematics

In mathematics, teachers of infant classes were more likely than their colleagues in other classes to use investigation and the environment in their teaching of mathematics. They were also more likely to integrate mathematics with other subjects. These differences, outlined in the table below, were statistically significant. All class teachers frequently used talk and discussion and active, collaborative and co-operative learning.

Table 1: Frequency of Use of Methodologies in Maths

Methodology	Infant Teachers	Class Teachers 1st to 6th
Investigation	99%	84%
The environment	95%	69%
Integration	97%	84%
Talk and discussion	98%	98%
Active, collaborative and cooperative learning	98%	91%

In general, the responses show that overall the vast majority of teachers use a wide range of teaching methodologies for the mathematics programme.

Resources

Textbooks remain the most used resource for the teaching of mathematics with 99% of infant teachers using them often. Reasons for the high use of textbooks were not given, and further research would be required to explore this issue. All teachers of infants used concrete materials as did the vast majority of other class teachers (95%). Mathematics related games were more likely to be used by teachers of infant classes (91%) in comparison with other class teachers (83%). Though not as widely used, ICT games were used by 73% of infant class teachers and by 63% of other class teachers.

Constructivism

Almost half the respondents (49%) listed some problem in using a constructivist approach to the teaching of the revised mathematics curriculum, although teachers of infant classes were less likely than their colleagues (42% in comparison with 51% of teachers in first to sixth class) to experience difficulty. Reasons for such difficulty most frequently mentioned were: large class sizes, organisational difficulties, time constraints and a lack of resources.

SESE: Science

Science was included as a new dimension to the Primary School Curriculum in 1999. In terms of the methodologies used by teachers in teaching science, the use of exploration was the only methodology more likely to be used by infant teachers in comparison with their colleagues in other classes. All other methodologies, with the exception of ICT, were frequently used by all teachers. See table 2 below.

Table 2: Frequency of Use of Various Methodologies in Science

Methodology	Infant Teachers	Class Teachers 1st to 6th
Free exploration	89%	78%
Environment	99%	96%
Guided discovery	94%	92%
Practical investigations	92%	92%
ICT	36%	44%

Teachers of infants were also more likely than their colleagues to have a nature table in their classroom - 87% of infant teachers in comparison to 66% of other class teachers. Only one quarter (25%) of all teachers had an investigation table in their classrooms. Over a third of infant teachers (38%) and over a quarter of other class teachers (26%) took their pupils for walks in the school environment.

The Perspectives of Infant Teachers

In order to further explore the curriculum survey findings, particularly as they related to teachers of infants, the INTO decided to hold a focus group discussion with a cohort of teachers of infants. This focus group discussion took place in Cork with ten teachers of infant classes (one male and nine female) in a variety of types of schools, including large and small urban and rural schools. The discussion centred on open questions in relation to the implementation of the primary school curriculum in the infant classes. The discussion was transcribed and then analysed according to a number of themes which emerged. These themes included parental expectations, class size and classroom support (INTO, forthcoming).

Parental Expectations

All infant teachers indicated that they provided activities and play opportunities in the infant classroom. However, they stated that parents often didn't understand the importance of play as a central approach to learning in the infant classroom. Some parents expected the children to be reading and writing which is what they associated with attending school (INTO, forthcoming).

One teacher referred to the need to explain the Junior Infant programme to parents and recommended holding a meeting with parents to explain the process. She stated:

Any time I have a meeting in June or September I would say, this (play) is more beneficial for them. I would go through the benefits of each of those activities.

(INTO, forthcoming).

This is an indication of the frustration felt by infant teachers in relation to implementing a play-based curriculum.

Multi-grade Situations

From the focus group discussion, it emerged that teaching Infants in multi-grade situations creates particular challenges for teachers. One such challenge is facilitating a play and an activity-based programme for the infant children while teaching older children such as those in 1st or 2nd class, in a more formal manner. Teachers stated that they felt guilty that they could not provide a full Infant experience for the children in their classroom due to the large numbers, mixed classes and the lack of space. This guilt is illustrated by the following comment from one teacher:

I certainly feel that with four classes that my Junior and Senior Infants are robbed of an Infant's experience in school. I can't be doing songs and games and stories with them because I also have First and Second class and it breaks my heart.

(INTO, forthcoming).

Class Size

The numbers of pupils in the classes was an issue for all teachers. Whether children were in multi-grade classes or in single-grade classes, it was clear that there were too many children in the class with one teacher. Teachers pointed to the different ratios for three and four year olds in playschools and four and five year olds in primary schools, creating difficulties in terms of providing a continuity of education. According to one participant: *"This week in playschool it can be 1:10 and next week, let's face it, in primary school it can be 30:1 and they still have the same needs"* (INTO, forthcoming).

Group and Pair Work

As the survey showed (INTO, forthcoming), there is no significant difference between the methodologies used by teachers of Infants and primary teachers in 1st to 6th class. However, in the focus group discussion, the Infant teachers stressed that they did use group and pair work in the Infant class. One teacher introduced a 'buddy' system with the specific purpose of assisting an autistic child but stated that as a mechanism of working in pairs that it was a very valuable practice and one which she would continue. It is also evident that a lot of activities in the infant classroom are teacher-led, and it was commented upon that the methodologies in relation to the revised curriculum in general are the methodologies that infant teachers had always used.

Classroom Support

Teachers recognised the valuable support provided by assistants in the classroom. Special needs assistants are available in classrooms where pupils with special needs are enrolled. However, teachers of infants who have the experience of assistants have recommended that support personnel should be available in all infant classrooms and particularly in those of multi grade classrooms.

"When I started teaching I had four classes with no class assistant for the first six months and I used to go home and think I did nothing with the infants today, but since I got an assistant in my classroom I now feel that the infants are having an infant experience" (INTO, forthcoming).

Textbooks and Workbooks

The survey discovered that Primary teachers use textbooks and workbooks to a great extent in their classrooms. The teachers are well aware of the disadvantages of relying excessively on textbooks and workbooks but find them very useful in terms of classroom management particularly in multi-grade classes. Other benefits associated with the use of workbooks are that they can be useful in terms of keeping a record of what children have completed. In spite of their use of the textbooks the teachers did express reservations about them, but also pointed out that once workbooks were purchased, parents expected the workbooks to be completed.

Integration

One of the key methodologies of the revised curriculum is the integration of the various subjects. Integration is seen as a valuable mechanism for reducing the workload associated with many individual subject areas. However, the infant teachers expressed reservations about the planning demands of integration where they stated that in practice, teachers of infants taught according to themes drawing on the various subject areas.

I would personally find that it is not the subjects that are problematic but the segregation of the subjects, e.g. SESE, Geography and Science where you have to join them together and put them down together, it takes forever trying to integrate them. (INTO, forthcoming).

Integration, as a methodology, is supported by teachers of infants, as they usually teach thematically and welcome material supporting them with this process.

Conclusion

As evidenced by teachers' experiences outlined in this paper, there is a need for further investment in early years' education in the primary school. With few exceptions, the number of pupils in infant classes is far too large. It is government policy that all classes for pupils under nine years of age should have fewer than twenty pupils, but this has yet to be implemented. The particular needs of young children in disadvantaged areas and in multi-grade classes also need to be addressed with a maximum class size of fifteen pupils per class recommended in these circumstances (INTO, 2006). It is also INTO policy that in addition to the class teacher, there should also be a qualified childcare worker assisting in all infant classrooms (INTO, 2006).

Furthermore, not all schools have appropriate classroom facilities to implement the infant curriculum (INTO, 2006). Large classroom spaces, with access to water, areas for wet play, home corners and library areas, are required to implement a play and activity based curriculum. Equipment and materials, for both indoor and outdoor activities are required in all infant classrooms. Adequate state funding - both initial and annual - is necessary to address this issue.

Notwithstanding the fact that these issues remain to be addressed (i.e. class size, materials and equipment, classroom and school facilities, professional development), primary schools in Ireland are fortunate to have well qualified, committed and dedicated teachers, who have demonstrated their commitment over the years to providing high quality early education to three, four and five year-old children in Irish primary schools.

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