

Universal Early Education for 4-6 Year Olds in Ireland: The Experience of the Irish Primary Teacher

Angela Griffin, Anne Fay and Deirbhile Nic Craith

Introduction

Young children of pre-compulsory school age have traditionally attended primary schools since the foundation of the National School System in 1831. It was common for three year old children to attend infant classes in primary schools until the *Rules for National Schools* were changed in 1934, stating that a child must have reached the age of four before he or she could be enrolled in a national school. The majority of four and five year olds are enrolled in infant classes in primary schools, even though it is not compulsory to attend school until the age of six. Primary schools (including special schools) currently cater for 80,732 children under the age of six years, with the four to five year olds found in Junior Infants and the majority of five to six year olds in Senior Infants (Department of Education and Science [DES], 2002a). 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 childcare workers.

The Primary Teacher

The majority of primary teachers in Ireland are graduates with a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) degree. It is also possible for graduates of other disciplines to become a primary teacher, by taking an 18-month postgraduate diploma in Primary Teaching. Minimum standards in the Leaving Certificate Examination,¹ which include minimum standards in Irish, English and Mathematics, are required for entry to the Colleges of Education. In practice, because of the competition for places, the standard is much higher, and generally higher than the standard for entry to a University Arts Degree. The B.Ed. degree currently takes three years, though it has been recommended that the degree be extended to four years (DES, 2002b). The B.Ed. degree is specifically designed to meet the needs of the primary school teacher and is a professional qualification. In general, all B.Ed. students undertake a study of the general principles of pedagogy relative to the teaching of school pupils from the age of four to twelve, engage in teaching practice at the levels of early, middle and senior classes in both urban and rural settings and study philosophy of education, history of education, sociology of education and psychology of education.

Early Primary Education

The primary school curriculum is considered appropriate to the developmental and learning needs of the young child. A commitment to life long learning is nurtured from the earliest years. The curriculum is based on the uniqueness of the child and on the individual needs of the child in the early stages of development. Primary teachers aim to

nurture in children the confidence, self-reliance, initiative, imagination, independence and sense of responsibility that will enable them to engage with the world of which they are a part and contribute towards shaping it. While respecting the individuality and universality of each individual child, teachers see individual integrity being largely realised in a context of community. The nurturing of relational capacities, together with the provision of opportunities for self-fulfilment, are equally important for an individual child's growth and development. Socialisation therefore, and occasions for dialogue, as well as opportunities for active exploration, discovery, and problem solving, are the foundations on which provision for early childhood education is constructed in primary schools.

The processes of exploration, activity, discovery, investigation, play and problem-solving can only take place within a particular curricular framework. 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 (DES, 1999). Curriculum content is presented in seven curricular areas, some of which are further subdivided into subjects. These are as follows:

● Language	English and Irish
● Mathematics	
● Social, Environmental and Scientific Education	History, Geography, Nature Study and Science
● Arts Education	Visual Arts, Music and Drama
● Physical Education	
● Social, Personal and Health Education	
● Religion	

Infant teachers plan for learning experiences for their pupils through the various curriculum areas and the greatest degree of flexibility is utilized in selecting material best suited to the needs of each individual child. There is constant overlap between these areas which is used to reinforce and enrich the learning experience. Structured play has a role in all aspects of the curriculum. Developmental play leads to cognitive and emotional growth, stimulates linguistic growth, assists in the development of social skills, allows for the exploration of possibility and certainty and encourages creativity. Listening skills, which play such a significant role in learning, are developed through music, poetry, rhymes, stories, play and exchanging daily news – activities which also assist the development of language. Visual art activities, which are primarily aimed at the development of creativity and colour, form, line, pattern and texture awareness, also give rise to discussions on the environment or story, while the use of crayon, brush and scissors develop hand-eye co-ordination and motor skills. Pattern, shape and area are elements of environmental studies, mathematics, PE and visual arts. Language development is a

feature of all curriculum areas, while health and physical development are the primary objectives in the PE curriculum. Teachers find ample opportunity during physical education classes to use music, rhythm, poems and mathematical language. While this integration of subjects may seem obvious, it is most effective when the curriculum in each area is deliberately structured in a manner which ensures that the pupils benefit from all opportunities to reinforce learning. Infant classrooms, by their very nature, are structured environments.

All children are recognised as complex human beings with unique physical, social, emotional and intellectual needs and due allowances are made for individual differences (DES, 1999). The emphasis in the infant classes is on guidance. The child is seen as a key agent in his or her own learning situation. Children learn best when they direct their own learning and when they have connected experiences, which allow them to build a framework of understanding. All aspects of the child's development are catered for within the classroom scenario – in particular, the aesthetic, creative, cultural, emotional, intellectual, moral, physical, political, social and spiritual aspects of a child's growth. Each child is also regarded as having unique aptitudes and interests, and brings different backgrounds, interests, experiences, learning styles, needs, and capacities to learning environments. In order to address the complexity inherent in any teaching-learning situation, a variety of effective pedagogical approaches are employed. Children are generally grouped in accordance with their ability and readiness and their zones of proximal development. Whole class activities are regularly practised in areas such as Irish conversational activities, singing, music, drama, physical education and story telling. Children may be active in a physical sense or cognitively engaged through dialogue, listening, watching others, repeating, memorising or participating in a variety of other ways.

Teachers are very aware that the child's experience of learning in the infant classroom will have a major effect on his/her life long learning. They advise, guide and help their pupils along the road to discovery when they consider such assistance necessary, a process which has often been described as 'contingent teaching' or 'scaffolding'. The ideas of direct discovery, exploration, contrived encounters, instruction and communication lie at the core of infant education as practiced by teachers in primary schools in Ireland. The success of any programme of early childhood education will depend on the quality and expertise of the teacher, the development of curricular guidelines and the evolution of the appropriate classroom scenario that is conducive to how young children think and learn. This paper now focuses on two infant classroom contexts; one of a junior infant classroom in Dublin and the other of a multi-grade infant classroom in Co. Cork.

A Junior Infant Classroom – One Teacher’s Experience

The following is an account of the experience of one teacher starting back to school in September with a new class of Junior Infants. The class described here is in a well-resourced school, in a middle class area, in Dublin. There are twenty-seven children in the class.

Anxiety and anticipation are some of the emotions that coming back to school in September brings – and not only for the children. Anxiety for the infant teacher centres around the new children, and how they will settle into their new environment. There is anticipation about the personalities involved. It is as if the teacher has been presented with a small library of thirty brand new books all waiting to be opened with the reverence that brand new books deserve! There is anticipation about how each new plot will develop, how the characters will develop, will it be a thriller, a horror story, a family saga or a romance, and of course, will there be a happy ending? No two classes are ever the same and new challenges constantly face the teacher. However, it is these challenges that keep many teachers teaching throughout their careers.

Infants come to school in September like sponges. They soak up the variety of experiences presented to them. Many junior infants in middle class areas will have had an opportunity to attend a private playschool for a year or two before they attend primary school, which goes some way in preparing them for their experience in primary school. The infant teacher in September needs to be very creative in organising exploration and discovery activities for the children whose concentration span is quite short at this time. Interaction patterns differ as children interact with the teacher, with each other or not at all. Groups are formed and reformed – rather like a bunch of small puppies as they tumble around.

The integration of children with special needs is one of the more recent challenges faced by many infant teachers. In this particular Junior Infant class, a child with Down’s syndrome had been enrolled for the first time. A special needs assistant had been allocated to support the child, and in addition, the child was entitled to resource teaching provision for five hours per week. A second child with special needs – from Romania – had also been enrolled, and she was entitled to resource teaching for two and a half hours per week. The first time a teacher experiences children with special needs in the classroom places extraordinary demands on the teacher in terms of meeting the needs of the children, but also in terms of working with a second adult in the classroom. This is a new experience for many primary teachers who are used to working in isolation from their colleagues.

As the year progressed, the children settled in. The child with Down’s syndrome developed a friendship with the special needs assistant and got used to leaving the

classroom for her intensive learning sessions with the special needs resource teacher. In addition, the teacher developed a positive working relationship with the special needs assistant and came to the realisation that having a supportive adult working in the classroom was of benefit to all the children in the class. Having an assistant in the classroom allowed the teacher to focus on teaching rather than on crowd control and facilitated increased observation and consultation with individual and groups of children.

The daily arrival of the resource teacher to collect the children with special needs also impacted on the classroom, as the junior infant children delighted in having an additional person with whom to share their stories and news. The resource teacher readily engaged in informal conversation with the pupils, further enhancing their learning opportunities. Similar learning opportunities were provided through visits from the occupational therapist, speech therapist and the visiting teacher.

The need to develop additional communication processes with parents became clear after a while, in that messages didn't always reach home. A newsletter was devised, consisting of information for parents on the work of the class, enabling parents to be more involved in their children's education. Infant teachers are in an ideal situation to ease parents into the life of the school, as they meet them informally on a daily basis. Opportunities to share observations, clear up misunderstandings and nip problems in the bud are provided through this daily contact. Parents are more likely to be supportive of the school when they know how their children are doing and when they are reassured that their children are in a happy and caring environment.

By the end of the school year, it is a pleasure to look back at the achievements of a challenging year. The twenty-seven personalities who arrived the previous September had become a cohesive group, many of whom would be together for years to come. And not only had the pupils learnt, the teacher had too. As professionals, teachers continue to learn. Life never remains static when one is dealing with young children.

All over Ireland, there are infant teachers in classrooms dealing with similar situations. They do not all have the same resources in terms of personnel and equipment. The children too are from a variety of different social backgrounds. But what the teachers do share is quality and expertise, an integrated curriculum which allows them to be professionally free to make decisions regarding each individual child, a commitment to infant education and a willingness to be flexible, to rise to new challenges and to be enthusiastic.

Infant Teaching in Multi-grade Classrooms – One Teacher’s Experience

Infant teachers in multi-grade settings are presented with different challenges. The school described here is a two teacher school in Co. Cork. The infant teacher teaches twenty-four children, ages four to nine, in junior and senior infants, first and second class. She is also the principal teacher of the school, responsible for the overall administration, management and leadership of the school community. The school is situated in a disadvantaged area, and the majority of the children do not have an opportunity to attend play school before they start in primary school.

There are particular challenges when infant classes are taught in the same classroom as older pupils, particularly in relation to the organisation and management of play and activity based learning. Despite such challenges, young children benefit from the presence of older children in the classroom, as the older children often scaffold learning opportunities for the younger children. The opportunity for social interaction with older children helps the infants adjust more easily to school and class conventions. Pupils in multi-grade classrooms develop independence at an early age, as they need to cultivate habits of responsibility for their own learning. The atmosphere in the classroom and the whole school is familial.

The management of a multi-grade learning situation creates new challenges for teachers moving from a single grade to multi-grade situation for the first time. Teachers often feel guilty about the lack of time available to give attention to all the infant children in the classroom, although on the other hand, teachers welcome the opportunity to spend four years with the pupils, as they can plan for their progression. An additional feature of a four-grade classroom is that the children in second class need to be prepared for the sacraments of First Confession and First Communion, creating particular organisational and planning challenges during that period.

This particular class had a child who had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and had been allocated a special needs assistant and ten hours per week of resource teaching. While the pupils attended resource teaching, the special needs assistant remained in the classroom and was available to assist other children. Her presence greatly enhanced the lives of the infant pupils – she assisted in supervising and working on activities which were prepared and organised by the teacher. While she did not ‘teach,’ she interacted with the pupils and facilitated learning experiences as they explored, experienced and investigated with a variety of materials.

Many of the pupils came from educationally disadvantaged backgrounds and many of the parents found it difficult to help their children with literacy and numeracy, although they were willing to help in any way they could and were very supportive of the school. The

infants left the school an hour before the older pupils and so the parents were in daily contact with the classroom. Effective implementation of the infant curriculum needs positive parental intervention and daily contact with parents, as well as an annual formal meeting. In the first term, the parents were met after school on an individual basis, and also in a group, to discuss the curriculum and how they could best further their children's education. This communication helped teachers and parents to work together in partnership.

It is particularly challenging to provide appropriate learning experiences for infant pupils in multi-class settings and there are times when the lack of appropriate resources and the large number of children in the class can be frustrating. However, the support of a trained assistant is invaluable to the multi-grade infant teacher in that it can enhance the learning of the pupils by allowing for more play and activity based learning experiences. Small class sizes, adequate materials and resources are also necessary if the infant curriculum is to be experienced as it should by all pupils in multi-grade settings.

Conclusion

The Irish State is to be commended for providing for universal early years education for all children of four and five years of age in the primary school system. Nevertheless, there are many issues that need to be addressed in order to ensure that the learning experience of four and five year old children in the primary school is of high quality and appropriate to their developmental needs at this age. The value of carefully structured, well-focused learning opportunities for young children provided by experienced and qualified professionals, is supported by a growing body of research evidence in the field of early childhood education. Qualified teachers, an abundance of appropriate materials and equipment, suitable classroom facilities and a child centred curriculum are prerequisites of high quality early years education.

As evidenced by the personal 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. The average class size in primary schools is thirty pupils. Schools in the 'Breaking the Cycle' scheme – a scheme to help combat educational disadvantage – have a maximum of fifteen pupils (INTO, 2004) in the infant classes. It is government policy (DES, 2002) that all classes for pupils under nine years of age should have less 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.

However, in addition to the class teacher, there should be a qualified childcare worker assisting in all infant classrooms. The benefits provided by the special needs assistants, whose primary functions are to support children with special needs who are integrated in mainstream schools, have been invaluable to infant teachers. Primary teachers who have worked in Early Start, a special primary school initiative for three year old children in certain schools designated as disadvantaged, have also highly commended the support provided by qualified childcare workers.

It is unfortunate that not all schools have appropriate classroom facilities to implement the infant curriculum. 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, and it is regrettable that not all schools are equally well provided for. It is inequitable that schools in more affluent areas will be better equipped as a result of parental efforts than schools in areas designated educationally disadvantaged. Adequate state funding – both initial and annual – is necessary to address this issue.

Primary schools are fortunate to have well-qualified, committed and dedicated teachers. All primary teachers study infant education as an integral part of their pre-service education. However, as teacher education is seen as a continuum, and a life-long process, additional opportunities for continuous professional development are required to enable primary teachers to increase their knowledge of how young children think and learn and to enhance their pedagogical skills in the area of early years learning.

The INTO also supports continuing research in the field of early learning in Ireland. Primary teachers have much to offer in this area, as evidenced by research carried out to date (INTO, 1995). There is also no reason why universal provision for three-year-old children could not be provided in primary schools, using the Early Start model as a basis for further development. Notwithstanding the fact that there are issues to be addressed – class size, materials and equipment, classroom and school facilities, professional development – teachers 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.

References

Department of Education and Science (1999). *Primary School Curriculum*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2002a). *Statistical Report 2001-2002*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2002b). *Preparing Teachers for the 21st Century*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Department of Education and Science (2002c). *Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage*. Dublin: The Stationery Office.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (1995). *Early Childhood Education, Issues and Concerns*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (2003). *Teaching in Multi-Classes*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

Irish National Teachers' Organisation (2004). *Giving Children an Even Break by Tackling Disadvantage*. Dublin: Irish National Teachers' Organisation.

Notes

- 1 Final examination sat by Second Level Students at age 17/18. Students sit an average of six subjects.