

In the rapidly changing landscape of early childhood education in Ireland, this article looks at how to develop continuity in curriculum and pedagogy in progressing children's communication, language, and literacy skills as they transition from early learning and care settings to primary school.

The landscape of early childhood has changed significantly for Irish children in the last decade. 2019 marked the tenth anniversary of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. Both were significant catalysts for change in Irish education. This article explores how their potential is being realised in the development of children's capacity and skills in communication, language, and literacy. It considers the features of effective classroom pedagogy that develop children's capacity and core skills while building on their prior learning experiences in the home and in early learning and care (ELC) settings.

Early childhood education sets the foundation for lifelong learning. Immersion in high-quality early learning experiences that encompass play, social interaction, communication, language, thinking, and problem-solving skills is critical for later learning and development. Aistear regards play as a key methodology that underpins a holistic learning experience for our youngest learners. Significantly, it emphasises an appropriate balance between adult-led and child-led activities. Both Aistear and the Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) 2019 identify that children's development and learning are best supported through engaging experiences that are mediated by skilled adults. These experiences are thoughtfully curated to stimulate and build on children's innate curiosity and interest in understanding the world around them.

First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028 (DCYA, 2018) recognises the importance of continuity in curriculum and pedagogy in progressing the learning of children as they transition from ELC settings to primary school. Positive transitions in education have been identified as an important predictor of children's future success in terms of social, emotional, and educational outcomes (NCCA, 2016). A school's readiness to accept a child is much more significant than the child's readiness to start school (Clarke, 2016).

Effective Practice in Progressing Communication, Language, and Literacy

Developing
continuity in
curriculum and
pedagogy from
early years to
primary education



Noreen Fiorentini

Primary Divisional
Inspector,
Department
of Education
Inspectorate



Imelda Duffy

Early Years
Inspector,
Department
of Education
Inspectorate

Many junior-infant teachers have identified the need to adjust their pedagogical practice from an emphasis on the subject content of children's learning to a more nurturing, play-based, and integrated approach so as to ease children's transition to school (Hayes, 2008). Teachers increasingly use *Mo Scéal* transition materials to gain insights into children's prior learning and achievements.¹ This supports planning and contributes to greater coherence in learning. Teachers are also looking to the Aistear Síolta Practice Guide (NCCA, 2015) for inspiration in providing child-centred, playful learning experiences. Many have engaged in summer courses and other programmes of learning on play-based pedagogy while anticipating the finalisation of the Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020).²

The Primary Language Curriculum (PLC) 2019 supports the positive dispositions towards language and literacy developed at home and in preschool. Learning outcomes for the infant classes reflect Aistear's principles, while the use of the phrase 'Through appropriately playful learning experiences, children should be able to ...' indicates that a playful approach to language learning is required. An online toolkit, including materials such as *Infusing Playfulness into Language Learning and Teaching*, provides support for teachers' practice. Among the features of the PLC in practice that extend children's communication, language, and literacy skills are the following:

- Playful, child-led learning experiences

Playful learning makes a major contribution to the development of language and provides rich opportunities for reading and writing (NCCA, 2019). Child-led, playful learning facilitates children to have a greater say in planning learning activities. This in turn supports motivation, confidence, and positive learning dispositions. Playful teachers inspire confidence in their pupils. They follow children's interests, adopting a 'have a go' attitude, which children enjoy.

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As language is closely linked with thinking, feeling, imagination, and innovation, there is a high awareness of the importance of fostering these competencies. Role-play scenarios provide a purpose for children to develop early literacy skills, including writing shopping lists, reading menus, and collecting passenger information, for example. By getting involved in children's play and acting as a scribe, the teacher can capture children's imaginative stories and read these back to the children, thereby fostering a love of language that can be sustained throughout schooling and into adulthood.

- Talk and rich language input

The importance of early childhood experiences, with rich language input and appropriate exposure to the use and functions of print, is widely recognised (Dickinson and Tabors, 2001). Modelling and extending language, introducing new vocabulary, and promoting emergent reading and writing skills are of critical importance in both English and Irish. The PLC envisages children as confident communicators, having fun with language in classrooms that are places of talk, creating stories, reciting

rhymes, and singing songs frequently throughout the day. A classroom song/rhyme book with illustrations allows children to choose poems to recite or songs to sing.

Encouraging children to create and record their own rhymes and stories supports phonological and phonemic awareness and provides opportunities for creative language learning. Teachers tune in to children's interests; they talk to them and extend and develop their language registers. They add rich, unusual vocabulary and discuss the meanings of words, their synonyms and antonyms. Regular use of open-ended questioning stimulates critical thinking and encourages fluency of speech.

- Reading aloud

Reading aloud high-quality books to children is an extremely valuable exercise. It gives them opportunities to hear more complex syntax than that used in typical conversations (Dickinson and Morse, 2019). Reading aloud is important not just for establishing nurturing relationships and developing language and a love of books and reading, but also for sensitising children to features of written language through print (Clark, 2016, p. 133). The most effective way for young children to become familiar with high-frequency words is to see them in print in a story, as it is easier for them to negotiate words in context (*ibid.*, p. 134). Dialogic, dynamic, and interactive reading, where the teacher engages the children in conversation during the reading, supports prediction, recall, and visualisation and helps children to listen attentively and make connections with the real-life experiences.

- Creative environments

The role of early years educators in recognising and developing opportunities for creativity in learning is very significant. Creative, print-rich environments can stimulate young children learning to read and write (Clark, 2016). Resources such as photo and word labels, a daily routine chart, a jobs board, signs, and a message board support early literacy skills. A book-rich cosy corner with a wide range of reading materials, including catalogues, fact books, manuals, comics, and homemade books, promotes conversations and the handling of books and encourages children's attempts at reading independently or to their peers and teacher. A variety of drawing and writing tools, digital devices, and magnetic whiteboards, when freely available, encourage early writing skills.

- Thematic approaches

Thematic approaches help children to make meaningful connections in their learning, giving them an opportunity to draw on multiple sources of knowledge and skills (NCCA, 2020). In observing the children at play, the teacher listens to them, converses with them about what they are doing, follows their lead, and identifies their interests. This allows the teacher to introduce new vocabulary relating to a topic that emerges from children's interests – a powerful way of developing language.

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A topic-based approach also supports curriculum integration. For example, by engaging in a language theme around travel, learning can be easily extended into the second language, and into Social, Environmental and Scientific Education to learn about people and places in other countries. The children can learn songs and listen to music from other cultures. In Visual Arts, children can interpret the travel theme in drawings, clay, and mixed-media collage. In Social, Personal and Health Education, they can explore how to appreciate cultural differences and learn how to treat others with dignity and respect. The possibilities are endless and make for creative, challenging, and enjoyable learning experiences.

- Promoting multilingualism

Citizenship is an important goal of education at all stages. As the social fabric of our country is enriched by newcomer families who bring many languages and exciting cultures and heritages to classrooms, the potential for children to be multilingual has never been greater. Representing and exploring home languages is a wonderful way to develop an appreciation of many cultures. In capitalising on this rich language resource, teachers can expose children to rhymes, songs, and greetings in other languages and introduce stories and children's books from other cultures. Such active language acquisition has enormous potential to build on learners' receptive language capacities, facilitate the transfer of language skills, and support the learning of Irish.

Looking forward

In conclusion, let us consider what is required at the system level to further progress communication, language, and literacy learning from early years to primary education. In the first instance, young children require professional, nurturing practitioners and teachers who believe that the possibilities for language learning are truly endless. There is a key role for our higher education institutions in preparing educators to mediate creative learning experiences and to progress higher-order literacy skills.

Bringing early years practitioners and primary teachers together in central and local networks for joint professional learning activities in communication, language, and literacy learning would build strong connections between the sectors. This in turn should facilitate professional conversations about the children's language dispositions and skills, and these insights will ease transition to primary school.

Progressing language and cultural awareness enables and supports multilingualism and will also help to create Irish citizens who have an appreciation for linguistic diversity, increased acceptance of cultural difference, and better understanding of and empathy for each other.

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ENDNOTES

1. *Mo Scéal* templates provide an opportunity for Early Years practitioners to tell the story of the child's interests, strengths, and challenges. The reports are shared with parents and with the child's primary school, with parental consent.
2. Summer course provision for primary teachers in *Aistear: Play, Literacy and Numeracy* has been provided by the Association of Teachers/Education Centres in Ireland in collaboration with the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

New Solar Panels for Clontuskert School



Students at St Augustine's National School, Clontuskert, Co Galway, in front of newly installed solar panels sponsored by Microsoft SSE Airtricity and Activ8.