Critical Hope: Meaningful Inclusion through the Primary School Curriculum Framework

Possibilities and practicalities

Introduction

The challenges for children as they transition from a play-based curriculum in early childhood to a subject-laden curriculum in primary school are well documented (e.g., Gray & Ryan, 2016). Following calls to align the infant curriculum in primary school more closely with *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, the newly published Primary Curriculum Framework (DoE, 2023) can potentially transform infant pedagogy in primary schools (Moloney, in press).

This article, which focuses on children with additional needs, examines the Primary Curriculum Framework from an ecological stance (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), discussing possibilities and practicalities in its implementation.

Microsystem: Children at the centre of learning

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which has informed much policy governing inclusive education policy and practice, permeates the Primary Curriculum Framework. In keeping with Article 12, and consistent with *Aistear*, the framework reinforces the need to value the voices of all children. Further aligning with *Aistear*, the child's right to play (Article 31) is embedded in the curriculum specifications for stages 1 and 2: Junior Infants to Second Class.

Consistent with *Aistear*, the framework places children at the centre of their learning, providing for a holistic approach to their education (DoE, 2023, p.3). Equally, the principle *Inclusive Education and Diversity* notes that inclusive education 'provides for equity of opportunity

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and participation in children's learning' and 'celebrates diversity and responds to the uniqueness of every child' (ibid., p.6).

Since each child's learning journey is different, curriculum areas recognise their ages and stages of development. Emphasising teacher agency, the framework affords 'greater choice in preparing for and facilitating rich learning experiences through playful and engaging approaches' (ibid., p.16). Unlike the current prescriptive curriculum, the framework serves as a scaffold to help teachers develop a curriculum for all children.

Microsystem: The agentic teacher

At micro-classroom level, the agentic teacher is indispensable, making 'professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs', ensuring an inclusive curriculum and pedagogy for all (DoE, 2023, p.5). Pedagogy, a core principle underpinning the framework, calls upon the agentic teacher to:

> *use appropriate and evidence-based pedagogical approaches and strategies to foster children's engagement, ownership, and challenge . . . [that] connect with children's life experience, circumstances, strengths, and interests. (p.6)*

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This pedagogical responsibility creates endless possibilities for the agentic teacher to reform infant pedagogy: to become pedagogical leaders and agents of change, moving away from the much-used, discrete *Aistear hour*, to embedding play and integrated learning in their teaching. Certainly, Lynch (2017) argues that instances of good practice typically rely on individual pedagogical leaders recognising their role as 'an important agent of change' (p.61).

The Teaching Council (2020) describes agency as a teacher's understanding of their 'status as autonomous professionals' (p.3) and their capacity to make decisions based on this. Both aspects of this agentic identity are discussed in terms of their relational nature. This presents agency as something a teacher does, rather than has; something that informs, and possibly transforms, every interaction and experience (Block & Betts, 2016).

The concept of agentic teacher is not new. In fact, the individual agentic teacher has effected change in Irish inclusive education, sometimes within a collaborative framework (e.g., the Access and Inclusion Model (DCYA, 2016)), sometimes acting alone (Leonard & Smyth, 2020). Certainly, the responsibility of the individual teacher is undeniable. While this presents many possibilities for inclusive education in Ireland, it unearths potential practicalities, as discussed later.

Mesosystem: Relationships and partnerships

The culture of individual settings and the actions of individual teachers generally determine if children are included and supported to meaningfully engage in the curriculum (Moloney & McCarthy, 2018). The role of individual teachers in implementing inclusive theory into practice in Ireland is accepted (NCSE, 2014; DoE, 2023), as is their role in bridging the child's experiences across early childhood and primary school contexts (O'Leary & Moloney, 2020).

Caring relationships are the bedrock of quality education (ibid.). Such relationships in the school 'support and impact positively on children's engagement, motivation, and learning' (DoE, 2023, p.6). Embracing the value of caring relationships across educational contexts shows an understanding of the dynamic continuum that is the lived experience of the young child. Navigating across these contexts can be difficult for children with additional needs. Their parents or guardians are often the only constant available to them as they cope with often-tumultuous change.

The Primary Curriculum Framework recognises parents as the child's primary educator, a role first outlined in the Irish Constitution. Aligning with *Aistear*, it emphasises the importance of 'positive relationships and proactive communication between parents and schools' (ibid., p.34) to effectively support all children's holistic development. Such power-sharing partnerships are paramount to inclusive education. They allow parents to transition from wanting successful outcomes for their children towards the more holistic action of working in partnership, ensuring a more positive educational experience for their child (O'Leary & Moloney, 2020).

The role of governing bodies in such inclusive, power-sharing partnerships is also paramount. If the framework's positive impact is to outweigh the potentially challenging practicalities, it is imperative that the agentic teacher, meaningful child participation, and playful pedagogy be understood within the broader landscape of education policy in Ireland.

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Macrosystem: Implications for resourcing and teacher training

The ideology underpinning the framework is commendable. Nonetheless, in the context of current class sizes, the practicality of meaningful child participation, agentic teaching, power-sharing partnerships, and so on is problematic. Class sizes in Ireland remain the highest in Europe (OECD, 2021). There is widespread agreement that for a quality education, younger children need more time and interaction with teachers (OECD, 2023). Furthermore, smaller classes may benefit children with additional needs and those from

disadvantaged backgrounds (ibid.), children who may experience the most difficulty when transitioning across educational contexts (OECD, 2019).

In addition to consolidating an educational continuum for children, the framework outlines the continuum of lifelong learning for the teacher – a journey that 'begins with initial teacher education (ITE) and evolves and deepens' through reflective and collaborative practice and a commitment to continuing professional development (DoE, 2023, p.23). Critically, ITE must offer pre-service teachers opportunities to develop their agentic competence, especially with inclusive education. Likewise, practicum experiences during ITE must be premised on agentic teaching.

While the development of competencies is an accepted element of ITE, when it comes to inclusive practice, such competencies can be fostered only through experience in 'the contextual challenges and possibilities' that exist in inclusive education (Walton & Rusznyak, 2020, p.26). Providing opportunities for pre-service teachers to recognise and interact with all voices of inclusive education can increase their confidence as reflective and inclusive pedagogical leaders who can support all children. A 'critical hope' (ibid.) can thus be developed in pre-service teachers, leading to pedagogical reform during the most vital time in a child's educational journey in stages 1 and 2. It is with this same 'critical hope' that many await the impact of the framework – hopeful that it might be a catalyst for constructive action.

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Conclusion

Curricular alignment across early childhood and primary school offers much hope for children and families. It places children at the centre, conceptualising their right to participation and to play, scaffolded by an agentic teacher. The Primary Curriculum Framework therefore presents endless possibilities for all children, while curricular alignment holds hope for teachers too. The framework may free teachers from the shackles of a prescriptive, subject-laden curriculum, instead fostering confidence and competence to make 'professional and informed decisions in response to the children's learning needs', thus ensuring inclusive curriculum and pedagogy (DoE, 2023, p.5).

While the curriculum framework may emerge as a catalyst for constructive action, this will take time. The training and resource implications are considerable and cannot be overlooked.

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