

# Relational Pedagogy in Primary School: What Can We Learn from ECEC?

Relational pedagogy is about what happens among and between all the people in a class group. This falls outside the remit of curriculum-focused pedagogy, although a classroom's curricular and relational demands are deeply intertwined. Early childhood education and care (ECEC) in Ireland has undergone immense change in the last 20 years, with two significant emphases: that early childhood is a time of profound educational development, and that a relational approach must be the starting point for any caring and educational endeavour with a child.

Nóirín Hayes, who has been to the forefront of changes in provision, argued from the start that the caring relationship was also educational, and that the educational relationship should be one of care (Hayes, 2008). She developed the concept of a nurturing pedagogy to encompass both the caring and educational nature of the relationship between children and early years caregivers. This emphasis centred the child in all educational and caring decisions.

This aligns directly with the centrality of the child in the 1999 revised Primary Curriculum Framework and the new framework, and calls to mind the influence of Montessori, Dewey, Froebel, Freinet, and Pestalozzi on 20th-century primary pedagogy. Aistear, the play-based curriculum framework for early childhood, was the first pedagogical project in Ireland that operated in both ECEC settings and primary schools (NCCA, 2009). Bridging this divide brought Ireland more in line with provision in most of Europe, where official school does not start until the child is seven. However, I would argue that the educational needs of early childhood do not stop at this artificial age limit.

Looking at Our School 2022, the Department of Education Inspectorate's key-performance-indicator document for schools, refers repeatedly to quality, without defining what it is. Hayes (2013) contends that quality requires



**Emer Byrden**

Deputy Principal, Carlow ETNS, and PhD student, Maynooth University

---

**Nurturing pedagogy has been used to describe the slow relational pedagogy that best suits early childhood. This article argues that a similar approach is also desirable in primary school but is not currently viable. The fundamental needs of belonging and play do not stop at an arbitrary age in childhood but remain throughout our lives. This must be acknowledged when considering the infrastructure required to support quality primary education.**

---

space and time, particularly relational space and time in the childhood context. Increased student–teacher ratios in ECEC allow for a flourishing of the relational space in which quality education and care can take place. This ratio changes completely in primary schools, which has an immediate detrimental effect on the space and time available to teachers to develop the secure relational bonds with students in which education thrives.

Belonging, being held in positive regard by another, and play are identified in ECEC as fundamental needs of the child. These needs do not stop at the end of early childhood but remain throughout our lives. The structure of our primary provision has not altered much since 1831. Despite the recognition of childhood as a distinct developmental phase, we still educate young children largely in confined spaces for much of the day, with little space or time for a healthy relational environment beyond the magical age of seven. Our desire for quality primary education needs the infrastructure to support it, and can learn from ECEC how to truly develop a child-centred pedagogy.

---

## REFERENCES

Hayes, N. (2008) 'Teaching matters in early educational practice: The case for a nurturing pedagogy', *Early Education and Development*, 19(3), 430–440. DOI: 10.1080/10409280802065395

Hayes, N. (2013) *Early Years Practice: Getting It Right from the Start*. Gill & Macmillan.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022) Looking at Our School 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools and Special Schools. [www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/232720/c8357d7a-dd03-416b-83dc-9847b99b025f.pdf#page=null](https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/232720/c8357d7a-dd03-416b-83dc-9847b99b025f.pdf#page=null)

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA.