

Research Digest **Standard 7 Curriculum**



Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

Introduction

Curriculum ‘...refers to all learning experiences, whether formal or informal, planned or unplanned, which contribute to a child’s development’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2004:2). The most widely referenced curriculum in Ireland currently is the Primary School Curriculum (Department of Education and Science [DES], 1999). It celebrates the uniqueness of the child and seeks to nurture the child in all dimensions of her/his development: moral, spiritual, creative, aesthetic, cognitive, emotional, physical and social. The emerging *Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004) is underpinned by the following principles:

- The child is a ‘whole’ individual learning in context
- Early childhood care and education should be child-centred
- Early learning and development are holistic
- The child is an active participant and ‘meaning maker’
- Play is the natural medium for learning
- Adult participation aids learning
- Learning occurs through interaction
- Curriculum is a process
- Parental involvement is central
- Curriculum should promote equity and diversity (French, 2007)

From the practitioner’s perspective, a curriculum should guide her/him in their teaching aims, help her/him to keep progression in mind and enable her/him to provide structure to the child’s day. At a broader level, the holistic development and learning of a child should be encouraged through the implementation of a well-referenced curriculum or programme, based on established and verifiable principles of child development. This implementation should be achieved through a variety of adult strategies, close and supportive relationships within the setting and a wide range of experiences which are made available to the child.

Recent Research

Verifiable implemented curriculum

Siraj-Blatchford (1998) highlights the defining features of an effective curriculum as:

- Its focus on learning
- Its relevance, breadth and balance of knowledge, concepts and skills
- Planning for individual children's abilities
- Assessment
- A developmental approach to learning, building on prior knowledge and interests

Furthermore, variety and pace within the curriculum, and attention to children's ability to concentrate and persevere, is required.

There are many comprehensive and documented educational approaches to promote learning and development in the early years. Pioneers who have significantly influenced mainstream education in Europe and North America include Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, Malaguzzi (Reggio Emilia) and Weikart (High/Scope). All were concerned with respect for individual needs, world citizenship, poverty and the concept of community (French, 2007). Some countries have adopted a National Curriculum (*Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning* [UK]; Te Whariki [New Zealand]) and shortly Ireland will launch its own *Framework for Early Learning* (NCCA, 2004). Documentation of the curriculum and its implementation '*adds enormously to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process and is necessary for curriculum planning*' (DES, 1999:11). Curriculum planning ensures that there is something deliberately intended for each child every day to purposely enhance her/his growth, with increasing levels of challenge and complexity as the year progresses. Daily or weekly planning can be recorded using a variety of methods (Neaum and Tallack, 2000). Recording those plans requires staff to think

through the purposes of their curriculum carefully and share curriculum information. Engaging with parents about their child's progress on a weekly or monthly basis is a key indicator of professional practice (Taggart, 2007).

Differentiated and integrated experiences



Meaningful childhood assessment is an integral part of the education process and is informed by observations of children in action, and conversations with children while they are reflecting on their actions. A system for recording significant observations and conversations must be established ensuring that records are used to inform and influence future planning (Neaum and Tallack, 2000). These observations and conversations enable practitioners to match their provision to the individual and idiosyncratic learning needs, abilities and developmental level of children. This results in the development and delivery of an Individual Plan for each child, particularly those children with special needs (French, 2003). The contribution of each child and her/his innate abilities is the starting point of the curriculum which is delivered to support the distinctive thought processes, learning style, understanding and developmental profile of the child (French, 2007). Getting to know the child's parents will enable practitioners to get to know the child and her/his 'natural curriculum' which supports practitioners in differentiating their planning. As Siraj-Blatchford (1998) points out, when children arrive into the setting, they assume we know everything they do.

The *Framework for Early Learning's* thematic approach to presenting children's learning and development '*conveys successfully the integrated and holistic development of the young learner and the totality of his/her learning needs*' (NCCA, 2004:22). The themes are:

- Well-being
- Identity and Belonging
- Communication
- Exploring and thinking

For the young child, the distinctions between subjects such as maths or art are not relevant: what is more important is that she/he experiences a coherent integrated learning process that accommodates a variety of elements (DES, 1999:16). The 'whole child' approach is centred on:

- Empathising with fellow human beings
- Cultivating a sense of aesthetics and wonder
- Thinking and developing observation skills
- Engaging in language, music and movement
- Learning experientially through play

This is in contrast to pre-determined subject content to be taught to young children (French, 2007). Curtis and O'Hagan (2003) stress that if play is to be seen as a process that will promote learning and development, it must be of high quality. This quality is nurtured by adults providing a rich environment and guiding children so they can develop their confidence as players and learners ( Research Digests/Standards 5: Interactions and  6: Play). This way of thinking continues to support children to grow and develop socially, cognitively and so forth, but in a way which is more natural, more meaningful and more enjoyable for them.

Care-giving routines as a context for learning

Practitioners who understand that care-giving routines provide ample opportunities for learning, also need to consider how greetings, eating, resting, going outside, tidying up, departures and the periods between activities may be conducted to further children's learning about themselves and others. Nappy changing, for example, presents opportunities for warm interactions. Mealtimes are wonderful occasions for social interaction and learning about texture, taste and colour. Children learn healthy habits through washing their hands before meals and brushing their teeth after meals. Children learn independence and problem-solving when doing things for themselves, such as pouring drinks or distributing snacks (French, 2003). In addition, there are daily spontaneous events which are significant for particular children and require support, recording and development. Young children need opportunities for new and

self-directed challenges, co-operative ventures, and sustained projects. Practitioners need to provide resources, challenges, and support for children's widening interests, creative and symbolic expression, representation and problem-solving capacities, geared to their developmental levels (French, 2003).

A consistent feature of contemporary early childhood curriculum models, such as those from New Zealand, Australia, the USA and Italy, is that learning is mediated through warm, complex, responsive, collaborative and reciprocal relationships. Attending to children's emotional state, slowing down and adapting or tuning in to how they see the world is crucial, particularly for young babies. This requires adults to take a more active, participatory role in supporting children's learning (French, 2007). Lessons from Sylva *et al.* (2004) and Taggart (2007), drawn from case studies of settings that had proved successful in promoting children's learning and development, found that effective pedagogy was characterised by:

- The quality of adult-child verbal interactions through 'sustained shared thinking'
- Staff knowledge and understanding of the curriculum
- Knowledge of how young children learn, which is mainly through play
- Adult's skill in supporting children in resolving conflicts
- Helping parents to support children's learning in the home
- Skilled diagnostic assessment of children's learning and consequent strategic planning for a wide range of curriculum experiences

Linking all of the components above, the adult role can be described as a curriculum planning-implementation-observation/evaluation cycle.

Implementing the Standard



From the research, it is evident that a child's learning and development are holistic experiences, that play is central to integrated learning and development and to curriculum/programme implementation. It is therefore necessary for the practitioner to explore her/his understanding of holistic learning and development within her/his setting, and consider how such learning and development is being integrated into everyday practice. The practitioner might consider:

- Learning processes, dispositions and contexts
- Links between developmental domains
- Relationships
- Language
- Socialisation
- Creativity
- Gross/fine motor skills, etc.

In order to ensure effectiveness and validity, the curriculum must be reflected in, and implemented through, the child's daily routine. It should accommodate spontaneous learning opportunities, structured activities, and activities initiated by the child. The practitioner could ensure this by considering:

- How the daily routine, including care routines, is used to implement the curriculum – arrival in the morning, play time, meal times, transitions, etc.
- Aspects of the curriculum that lend themselves to responding to spontaneous learning opportunities which occur during the daily routine – open-ended play items, prompting the child to draw on her/his previous learning in a new context and encouraging the child to recreate and replicate the learning that has taken place in one play area in another

- The extent to which the curriculum can be adapted to support the learning and development of all children, including those with special needs

Planning for curriculum or programme implementation ( Research Digests/Standards 4: Consultation and  8: Planning and Evaluation) should be based on the child's individual profile, which is established through systematic observation and assessment. The various components of these processes include:

- Observation
- Parents
- Child's self-assessment
- Participation in play
- Interactions
- Listening
- Consultation with colleagues
- Reflection
- Ongoing cycles

Conclusion

The concept of curriculum can be quite contentious – different curricula are underpinned by different values and principles, and are informed by diverse assumptions and beliefs about children and their learning capacities. Perhaps bearing in mind where the word comes from might serve as a reminder to how it should be used: 'Curriculum' originates from Latin and translates literally to mean 'racing chariot'. From this, the notion of a racetrack was derived, leading to the meaning 'a course to be run'. For early years practitioners, it is a course which they run everyday, as they encourage and support the holistic development and learning of each child. In order to stay on track, they must ensure that the



curriculum or programme they are working from is verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible.

Resources for Curriculum

Curtis, A. and O'Hagan, M. (2003). *Care and Education in Early Childhood: A Student's Guide to Theory and Practice*. London: Routledge Falmer.

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

French, G. (2003). *Supporting Quality: Guidelines for Best Practice in Early Childhood Services* (2nd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos' National Children's Resource Centre.

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National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2004). *Towards a Framework for Early Learning - A Consultative Document*. Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

Neaum, S. and Tallack, J. (2000). *Good Practice in Implementing the Pre-school Curriculum* (2nd Ed.). Cheltenham: Stanley Thornes.

Siraj-Blatchford, I. (1998). Criteria for Determining Quality in Early Childhood Curricula (in) Siraj-Blatchford, I. (Ed.) (1998). *A Curriculum Development Handbook for Early Childhood Educators*. London: Trentham Books, pp. 3-14.

Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I. and Taggart, B. (2004). *Technical Paper 12 - The Final Report: Effective Pre-School Education*. London: Institute of Education.

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The National Quality Framework
for Early Childhood Education

