

# **An Appropriate Curriculum for 4-5-Year-Old Children in Northern Ireland: Comparing Play-Based and Formal Approaches**

**Walsh, Sproule, McGuinness, Trew, Rafferty, & Sheehy (2006)**

## **Overview**

Views on curriculum vary among educators, including those who find play-based approaches more successful than formal ones. Those who prefer formal approaches advocate for the promotion of academic skills. The quality of learning experiences is the focus of this research, with a specific cohort of 4-5 year old children in Northern Ireland. Observations were done with children in the play-based context and those in the formal context. The Enriched Curriculum, a play-based and child-centered approach, appears to provide children with a better-quality learning experience.

## **The Northern Ireland Context**

A formal model of curriculum has been the standard in Northern Ireland for many years. The content of the curriculum is divided into nine subjects, with a recent focus on literacy and numeracy. This context of early childhood education is said to be too heavily focused on academic achievement too early in the lifespan, which takes away the enjoyment of learning.

## **The Enriched Curriculum**

The Enriched Curriculum focuses largely on the importance of play, oral language and phonological awareness for the development of literacy, attention, concentration and memory skills, physical confidence and competence, and the children's ability to build social relationships and to cooperate with one another. The focus of this curriculum is on building the child's self-esteem.

## **Aims and Research Design**

The focus of this research was to compare and assess the quality of learning experiences among traditional Northern Ireland Curriculum classes and Enriched Curriculum classes.

## **The *Quality learning instrument* (QLI)**

The QLI is a classroom observation schedule that is used to evaluate the quality of children's learning experiences. The focus of the QLI is based on one of four perspectives, the bottom-up perspective. This perspective assesses how it might feel to be a child in the learning environment. Piagetian learning theories are the model underlying the QLI, claiming that children construct their knowledge through their interaction with the world around them. Within the QLI, nine indicators of quality are used to evaluate the learning experience: motivation, concentrations, confidence, independence, physical well-being, multiple skill acquisition, higher-order thinking skills, social interaction and respect.

## **Results**

The traditional classes were described as subject oriented, with a focus on reading, writing, and arithmetic. The formal activities were very structured throughout the day. The children in the formal classrooms were expected to conform to a more traditional, school-like environment. The Enriched Curriculum provided a more varied curriculum in which activities were shorter in duration and practical in design. Children had more choice in which activities they participated in throughout the day.

## **Conclusion**

The results of this study suggest that the Enriched Curriculum offers 4-5 year old children higher-quality experiences than the traditional context. Through observation of the two contexts of curriculum, the Enriched Curriculum appears to be the most appropriate for this age group.

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