



Changing Lives: The Transformative Possibilities of Blended Learning: Initial Findings from a National Programme in Ireland

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Abstract

The significantly positive impact of high-quality early years' education on children's immediate and long-term development and the associated benefits for families and society continues to be highlighted in research [1]. These benefits become even more pronounced for children with additional needs, when they are provided with access to high-quality early intervention in inclusive pre-school settings. Ensuring early years' teachers have the requisite competencies related to knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions to provide high-quality early intervention for children with additional needs in the early years continues to challenge education systems internationally [2]. These challenges can be related to a range of historical social, political and economic factors specific to different contexts and education systems. In 1994, the Salamanca Statement explicitly associated the success of the inclusive school with the early identification, assessment and stimulation of the very young child with additional needs. While Ireland was one of ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organisations subscribing to these principles, it has taken twenty-two years for the government to respond to, and invest in a national early years' policy for inclusion. In June 2016, the Irish government launched the Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which finally presents an opportunity to redress the gap in providing high-quality early intervention programmes for children with additional needs. A central element of the AIM is the Leadership for INclusion in the early years (LINC) programme. The LINC programme is a one-year blended-learning teacher education programme, delivered to 900 early years' teachers annually to enable them to lead inclusion in the early years and adopt the role of Inclusion Co-Ordinator (INCO) in their settings. Initial findings from a contemporaneous evaluation of the programme suggest that the impact of the programme is potentially transformative in terms of its impact on enabling participants to promote inclusive cultures and pedagogies for children in the early years.

1. Introduction

We are currently in the age of inclusion and education systems are expected to respond to, and meet the needs of all children. This concept is not unproblematic as demonstrated by the uneven achievement of inclusion across and within education systems [3]. Research consistently indicates that effective inclusive practice is inextricably linked with teacher competency, however teacher education remains challenged with adequately preparing teachers for inclusive classrooms [4]. While there is an increasing focus on inclusive pedagogy at initial teacher education (ITE) level, it is unrealistic to expect that newly qualified teachers (NQTs) have developed a complete pedagogical repertoire to support and lead inclusive practice. This article reports on the genesis, development, implementation and evaluation of a blended-learning teacher education programme in Ireland, focused on providing early years' teachers with the requisite competencies related to knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions to lead inclusive practice for children with additional needs in the early years. Initial research findings suggest that a blended-learning approach, incorporating key principles of instructional design combined with a programme content that focuses on bridging the inclusion theory and practice divide, has the potential to transform the lives of children and families while simultaneously contributing to the professionalisation of early years' teachers.

2. The Better Start Access and Inclusion Model

The *Inter-Departmental Group (IDG) Report on Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme for Children with a Disability* was launched by the Irish Government in November 2015 [5] to provide for new model of Government-funded supports aimed at enabling the inclusion of children with additional needs in mainstream early years' settings. The seven-level model is based on national and international research evidence and adopts a child-centred approach through focusing on identifying and responding to each individual child's developmental level, abilities and

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needs rather than relying exclusively on formal diagnoses [6]. The seven levels of support detailed in Figure 1. below range from universal (Levels 1-3) to targeted supports (Levels 4-7) and reflect the key components of quality early years' provision for children with additional needs.



Figure 1. The Access and Inclusion Model

For the purposes of this article, a focus is maintained on Level 3 of the model, which refers to the importance of a qualified and confident workforce. It is within this context that the Irish Government awarded a tender of 5.4 million euro to a Consortium led by Mary Immaculate College (MIC) and including Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University to deliver a National Higher Education Programme for INclusion Coordinators (INCO) in Early Years Settings. This programme focuses specifically in facilitating the creation of a new role of INCO, with successful graduates of the programme acquiring a Level 6 (Higher Education) Special Purpose Award on the National Qualifications Framework valued at 60 European Credit Transfers (ECTS).

3. The Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years' Programme

The Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme commenced in September 2016 with a current enrolment of 886 early years' teachers. The programme is being delivered in nine regional centres in Ireland through a blended format and also includes mentoring visits to support teachers in translating the theoretical foundations of the programme to their role in leading inclusion in their respective settings [7].

Aligned with early years' curricular and quality frameworks in Ireland, the programme is embedded in best practice with regard to the indicators of high-quality early years' education and maintains a particular focus on listening to, and responding to the voice of the child [8]. Critically the programme modules are underpinned by the key principles associated with developing inclusive cultures in early years' education summarised in Figure 2. below and include child development; inclusive concepts, curricula and strategies for children in the early years; promoting collaborative practice, leadership for inclusion and developing a personal portfolio. [9] [10].



Figure 2. Principles of an Inclusive Culture in Early Years' Education

The programme is specifically designed to ensure that early years' teachers' competencies reflect the understanding, knowledge, skills, dispositions and emerging research on effective practices for leading inclusive practice in the early years [12]. The development of the programme was informed by best practice in instructional design and harnesses the powerful opportunities digital media and technology provide in enhancing teacher-education programmes. A programme and module design continuum was devised with reference to the ADDIE (analyse, design, development implement and evaluate) model [13]. Instructional design fundamentals related to programme structure; learning objectives; learning theory; academic integrity and utilising the visual, auditory, read/write and kinaesthetic (VARK) sensory modalities to optimise learning in a multi-media environment were adhered to [14].

4. Programme Evaluation

A comprehensive multi-methodological approach to programme evaluation was developed, comprising a dual-focus linked to both the blended learning component and the impact of the programme on teachers' competencies in leading inclusion in their settings [15] [16]. Through a combined qualitative/quantitative approach, comprising eight inter-related strands, it is envisaged that diverse types of data will be generated to provide an in-depth understanding of programme impact [15]. See Table 1. below.

Strand	Research Technique	Summary	Time-Frame
Strand 1	Literature Review	Inclusive practice; teacher competency for inclusion and innovative technologies in teacher education.	2016-2020
Strand 2	Survey of participant evaluation of each individual module	On-line survey.	2016 - 2020
Strand 3	Annual participant evaluation of the programme linked to the competency focus of the programme.	On-line survey.	2017 - 2020
Strand 4	Stakeholder consultations	Semi-structured interviews	2019-2020
Strand 5	Individual interviews with Tutors	Semi-structured interviews	2019-2020
Strand 6	An analysis of programme materials, documentation and assessment data	Documentary Analysis	2017-2020
Strand 7	An analysis of quality control visits to face-to-face delivery sessions	Documentary Analysis	2016-2020
Strand 8	Compilation of final report		Summer 2020

Initial findings from strand 2 of the research programme (individual module evaluation) suggest that the programme is having a significant impact in preparing teachers' to lead inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in their settings. See Figure 3. below. A total of 372 students undertook the first module (as many were exempt through recognition of prior learning), with a total of 138 completing the survey, indicating a 37.2% response rate.



Figure 3. Students' perception of the programme's impact to prepare them to lead

Students' ability to lead an inclusive culture is identified with children being welcomed and valued, as evident in the preschool environment, the setting's policies, and partnership with parents [17]. Over 85% of students indicate that the programme is preparing them well or very well, with less than 1% indicating a negative response to this question. In relation to leading inclusive practice, where children's transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years' team is utilised and enhanced by training opportunities, 83% of students indicated that they felt well or very well prepared by the programme to lead this critical area, with only 1% indicating dissatisfaction in the preparation they received. The final area relates to leading inclusive pedagogy whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner, and are documented effectively to identify needs. Over 86% of students were satisfied with their preparation in this area, again with less than 1% not satisfied with the preparation. Some of the students commented on the impact the programme was having on their practice and further corroborate the survey findings in Figure 3. above: " I feel the areas covered helped build confidence in my own ability as an educator for all children"; "The content was interesting and made me reflect on my practises"; "Excellent delivery of information that is current and up to date. Implementing/changing policies and all paper work is still daunting but definitely feeling confident about the delivery of an inclusive setting now"; "I am now transitioning into a new approach on my curriculum: This course has opened my eyes on the importance of children's emerging interests" and "I believe all theory covered can be applied in practice".

The evaluation survey (n=138) also requested participants to evaluate the programme and how the content delivered might be applicable to their practice. See Figure 4. below. Over 81% of students were satisfied or very satisfied that the content of the programme was applicable to their practice. Again, very few students (n=2) indicated that they were dissatisfied, with no student indicating that they were very dissatisfied.

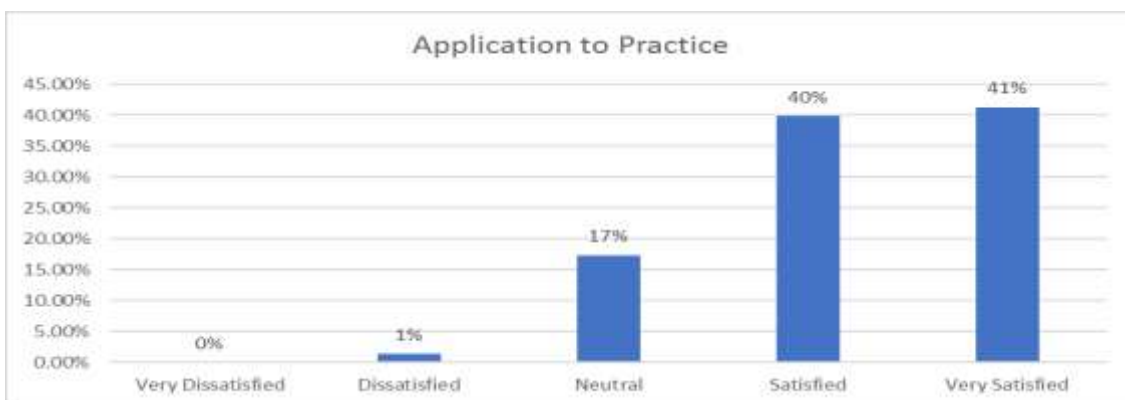


Figure 4. Students' perception of the programme content and its applicability to practice

An important element of the evaluation is the extent to which students feel supported in their learning, considering that the LINC programme is a distance blended-learning programme and in this context a dedicated tutor is available to all students, with each of the 9 tutors managing a centre of approximately 100 students each. Students indicated a significantly high level of satisfaction with the support being provided by their tutors, with almost 90% of students indicating that they were satisfied or very satisfied, and, importantly not one student indicated that they were dissatisfied in any way. See Figure 5. below.

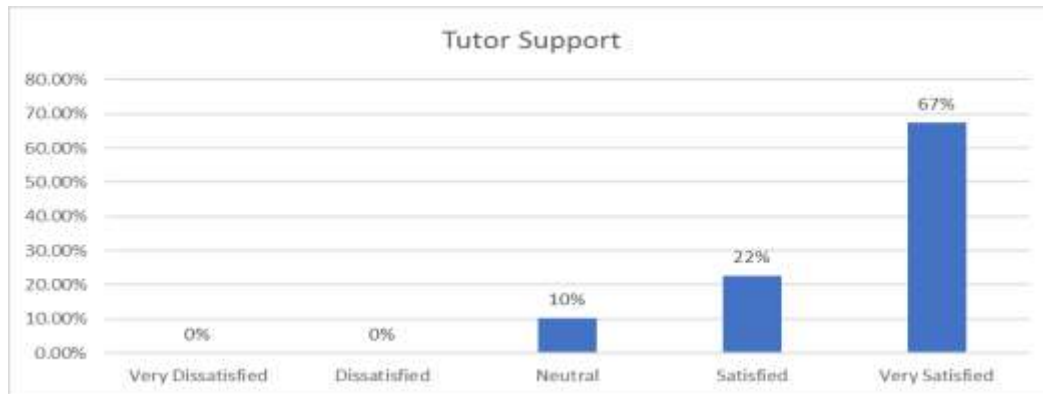


Figure 5. Students' satisfaction with the support provided by their tuto

7. Conclusion

Ensuring that teachers have the requisite competencies in terms of understanding, knowledge, skills and dispositions to provide for the inclusion of children with additional needs continues to be identified as one of the main barriers in providing for effective inclusive practice internationally. At the same time governments continue to exert pressure on teacher-education providers to improve quality with ever decreasing financial resources. In this context, initial findings from the research suggest that innovative e-learning programmes embedded in robust theoretical and pedagogical frameworks have the potential to increase teachers' confidence in including children with additional needs and make a real difference in the lives of children, their families and society.

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