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Making a Difference: AIMing for the Stars in the Age of Inclusion

By: **Dr Emer Ring**

I have been asked to present a Masterclass at the Early Childhood Ireland Conference on April 1, on the topic of Implementing the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). In preparing for that session I got to reflecting more on this subject. There are numerous books written about inclusion in the early years and beyond, what works and what doesn't work, but we continue to struggle with how to do inclusion well. What we do know is that inclusion doesn't happen automatically – it requires commitment, enthusiasm, perseverance and a willingness to accept that we don't always have all the answers. The Better Start *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM), with its focus on universal and targeted supports is a welcome initiative, grounded in what research tells us is the key to including children with additional needs in our settings. However we also know that unless AIM is adequately resourced and supported, its effectiveness will be diminished and it will become just another initiative in early years' education that looked good but didn't work.

Critically, inclusion requires a commitment from government, focused on

- adequate resourcing;
- inter-governmental collaboration;
- the development of a continuing learning framework supporting the professionalisation of early years' educators;
- an acknowledgement that effective inclusion must be supported by a range of other professionals such as special needs assistants, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists
- and a forensic evaluation of how inclusion is working or not.

Research continues to tell us that inclusion is excellent in some situations and not so good in others.

This Master Class on implementing the AIM will provide an opportunity for us to stop and ask ourselves what exactly makes inclusion excellent in some situations and not so good in others. We will look closely at the AIM and consider each of the seven levels for our everyday practice. The Masterclass will focus in particular on the principles of an inclusive culture and identify a range of tried and tested practical strategies that we know work for including children with additional needs in the early years.

Adapted from: <https://www.earlychildhoodireland.ie/blog/making-a-difference-aiming-for-the-stars-in-the-age-of-inclusion/>



We will ask if the child is the starting point, the centre and end of what we do, then how are we listening to, valuing and responding to all children's voices and specifically the voices of children with additional needs.



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Opportunities provided by the Early Years' Education-Focused Inspections to promote the principles of inclusion in our settings will be explored with reference to the inspection framework. I suggest that providing the best possible experiences for children with additional needs in the early years is both a serious responsibility and a chance to make a real difference in the lives of children and their families both now and for the future, but only if the AIM is pointed to the stars and underpinned by a meaningful government commitment that acknowledges the support required for each and every setting in including children with additional needs.

Bio

Dr. Emer Ring is Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Course Leader for the Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Care and Education Level 8 degree programme and a member of the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme Steering Committee/Consortium with Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University.