

# Editorial

The Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2013) states that respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for optimal development and learning. We know from research that children as young as two years of age are beginning to form their views about diversity and are developing both positive and negative attitudes to difference. Early years practitioners are well placed, therefore, to encourage respect for diversity in young children by actively providing all children with the opportunity to consolidate a secure sense of their own identities while also facilitating awareness of differences from others.

In this issue of *ChildLinks*, Colette Murray from EDeNn discusses diversity and equality from an Irish perspective, looking at the need for a comprehensive approach to diversity and equality in ECCE (early childhood care and education) and raises questions for the early years sector regarding future work for social justice and inclusion. Clare Childcare Committee give an overview of The Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups, which is the first time that a common approach and belief set in relation to diversity and equality training for ECCE practitioners and services, had been delivered at a national level.

The issue of diversity and equality is a global one, Louise Derman Sparks outlines the lessons that have emerged from the work of educators in USA and many other countries who have implemented the Anti-bias approach in diverse socio-political and cultural early childhood and care settings.

Barnardos Early Intervention Service Finglas tell us how they ensure that

Traveller children and families in the Finglas area receive needs-led services which enrich their lives through education and which support healthy development through valuing diversity.

Diversity is not, however, confined to cultural issues. This issue of *ChildLinks* also looks at how educating children with special needs in ECCE is more about 'catering for diversity' than it is about addressing specific issues relating to a disability or special needs. Joanie Barron highlights the importance for early years practitioners to work hard to ensure that boys and girls are given equal opportunities in the preschool setting. One of our first abilities to distinguish differences in people is based on their gender and this sets the stage for one of the most difficult forms of discrimination to eradicate. The need for respect for the diversity of families in Irish societies and the importance of ensuring that they are all visible in the early years environment is also highlighted.

SINEAD LAWTON

# Diversity & Equality in Early Childhood Education and Care: an Irish perspective

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I want to pay tribute to EDeNn and Start Strong for focusing especially on an approach to Early Childhood which is very close to my own heart. That is, bringing an equality perspective and diversity perspective into your work and really putting that lens on this issue. As our society becomes more diverse with greater cultural variation that becomes a more pertinent issue in many ways, but the whole point of the conference is not just about minority groups, not just about particular issues. It is about how an equality and diversity lens is so good for all our children. *Minister Frances Fitzgerald, EDeNn Start Strong Conference, June 2013*

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses diversity and equality from an Irish perspective. It looks at the need for a comprehensive approach to diversity and equality in early childhood education and care (ECEC). It begins with the current policy situation regarding ECEC and continues with an outline of some facts regarding diversity and equality including demographic changes, diversity beyond culture, discrimination issues and the dismantling of the equality infrastructure to address diversity issues in Irish society. The background to the development of diversity and equality work is outlined, followed by a discussion on what is meant by a diversity and equality approach. Finally, this article raises questions for the sector regarding future work for social justice and inclusion, as fundamental to our work with children, families and communities in Ireland.

## WHY A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY IN ECEC IS NEEDED IN IRELAND

The recent Report of the Expert Advisory Group on the Early Years Strategy 'Right from the Start' states that:

*'A comprehensive Early Years Strategy, backed up by national commitment, could shape a stronger and healthier society, and strengthen families. It could break cycles of **poverty and disadvantage, and remove barriers of inequality**. It could significantly reduce **anti-social behaviour, dependency and alienation**. It could help to build a stronger economy.'* (DCYA, 2013, Pg. 9)

The report goes on to say that to ensure the development and implementation of a comprehensive strategy it cannot be done 'on the cheap'. It requires a political purpose but also a re-orientation of structures, organisation, resources and policy priorities. One of the steps in the realisation of an Early Years Strategy in the Irish sector must be to have a very comprehensive focus on diversity and equality for the adults, children and the structures in all early years settings. When I mention adults I include all practitioners who are working to care, educate and support young children and their families within their communities. This does not mean a mere mention or a helpful point in the right direction, it means a comprehensive focus on diversity and equality which is both *relational* and *structural*. This requires the mainstreaming of diversity and equality at advocacy, training and practice levels, which, in practice, means embedded diversity and equality in **current policy**. As Minister Fitzgerald stated at the EDeNn/Start Strong Equality and Diversity Conference in June 2013 in Dublin:

*'From a policy point of view I do want to invite the network (EDeNn) to discuss with the staff in my own department the kind of things that you are exploring today and **how it can be introduced at a policy level.**'*

This is a very welcome invitation to advance the work for children in Ireland. The good news is that a lot of work around diversity and equality has been developed, piloted and evaluated over the past 15 years – trainers and practitioners have been trained and mentored, and resources have been developed. This work has been supported through various initiatives which included state funding. What is needed now is the mainstreaming of this work at national level structurally.

## DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY: AN IRISH PERSPECTIVE

In the struggle for more just and equitable experiences for *all* children, the diversity and equality journey in Ireland has, to date, been a choppy but also rewarding experience. Ireland has always been a diverse society and there have always been champions of human rights and anti-discriminatory practice for the most marginalised in society, generally emanating from the NGO community development sector. When we talk about diversity and equality we are talking about both the majority *and* minority groups in Irish society. Diversity work is not just about those who are perceived to be different or those who are discriminated against in society. Diversity and equality in ECEC is about a collective responsibility that includes ECEC NGO representatives and advocates, city and county childcare committees (CCCs), managers and practitioners and, fundamentally, the departments charged with supporting all families and children in ECEC in Ireland. Having a diversity and equality focus requires that, both individually and collectively, we reflect on what we want for the children and the society we live in for the future and create the conditions in ECEC practice for addressing diversity and equality. In order to do this we need to open up spaces for developing our own awareness, building our knowledge and supporting equitable practice at all levels in ECEC.

### Some Facts – Demographic Change

While Ireland has always been diverse, in the past 15 years we have experienced more visible diversity as a consequence of inward migration. The 2011 census shows inward migration to Ireland by foreign nationals in the year to April 2011 was 33,674. The data shows immigrants came from a large selection of countries with the largest groups coming from Poland, UK, France, Lithuania, Spain and the USA. Significant population growth occurred within most of the non-Irish ethnic groups. Between 2006 and 2011 the category 'Other White' rose by almost 43 per cent, largely due to immigration from Eastern European countries. An 87 per cent rise in the 'Other Asian' ethnic group included people of Indian and Filipino origin while there was 8 per cent more people of Chinese ethnicity. The number of Irish Travellers enumerated in the census has shown a significant increase of 32 per cent between 2006 and 2011 (CSO, 2011).

## DIVERSITY BEYOND CULTURE

Cultural diversity is the essence of a multicultural society, and it contributes to society in a myriad of ways. In recent years the impact of cultural diversity on Irish society has been significant and perhaps greater than other diversity grounds. Our identity, however, flows from a range of sources (Crowley, 2006) and includes gender, nationality, ability, ethnicity, skin colour, age, sexual identity, religion, language, geographical context, family background, and economic status. As such diversity is not confined to culture. When addressing diversity in ECEC it is important that we acknowledge culture not exclusively but as part of the whole identity of the child and family that attend the setting. Identity is changing and shifting all the time and that includes cultural identity shifts. Addressing diversity is important and working with parents to recognise and understand the complexity of identity development is essential in meeting the holistic needs of children and families.

A three-year-old black boy comes to the ECEC setting. He is Irish born, his parents are from Nigeria. His identity is therefore built on his Irishness and is influenced by his Nigerian heritage. His identity is also built on his gender, religion, interests etc.

## DISCRIMINATION AND RACISM

Diversity in all its forms *can* illicit many levels of prejudice and discrimination. The Equality Legislation, Equal Status (2000 and 2004) and Employment Acts (1998) prohibit discrimination on nine grounds. Class is not addressed under the grounds despite the experience of socio-economic groups. Discrimination on all grounds occurs in Irish society causing considerable grief to many citizens. The media portrayal of immigrants has often been unhelpful in its representation of new communities and reinforces prejudice and perpetuates myths about communities. Misinformation contributes to the stigmatising of individuals and groups and can lead to segregation and/or isolation and loneliness for individuals and communities, which can reinforce a lack of a sense of belonging for new communities and can lead to actions which can have detrimental effects on already marginalised children their family and their community (Murray, 2012). The recent removal of two Roma children from their families because their skin and eye colour was identified as different to the perceived 'norm' in a community is an example of ignorance, myth (Roma steal children), media misinformation, irresponsibility and prejudice (See Irish Times 22nd Oct, 2013).

In 2011 Mac Greil wrote that 'social prejudice is a universal phenomenon which has played a most destructive role throughout the history of humanity' (p.4). Addressing diversity and equality issues at a very early age is now recognised as

relevant and important. We know from research that children as young as 2 years of age are beginning to form their views about diversity and are developing both positive and negative attitudes to difference. Social prejudice influences how children learn and think about difference.

## DISMANTLING OF EQUALITY STRUCTURES

The current economic situation in Ireland has put pressure on resources at all levels of society. The equality infrastructure built over many years has unfortunately been largely dismantled. Organisations promoting equality in the statutory sector and in civil society hold public and private sector organisations to account in relation to standards of non-discrimination and equality, and in providing a voice for those groups experiencing inequality (Crowley, no date). Limitations on the equality sector will have ramifications for families such as the Roma family mentioned above. The mechanisms to protect the most marginalised in society need to be robust and easily available. ECEC services do not necessarily see the significance or relevance of such stories on their practice, regarding them as issues for other sectors such as the HSE or Equality Authority. Children and families do not exist in a vacuum, however, and all families are affected by the societal prejudices, be they from the majority or the minority. Having an understanding of equality legislation, being aware of misinformation and myths regarding different communities and knowing where families can go if they need support is all relevant to the work of ECEC managers and practitioners. (See <https://www.facebook.com/enar.ireland> for issues on racism in Ireland)

## ADVANCING DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY IN THE ECEC SECTOR

### Early Days to the Current Context

In June 2013, EDeNn and Start Strong hosted a Diversity and Equality Conference and Policy Forum. This Conference marked the achievements of work undertaken over the past 15 years since the 'Respect: Education without Prejudice' Early Years Conference hosted by Pavee Point in 1998. Louise Derman-Sparks, the author of the Anti-bias approach (1998), was the key note speaker at both events (see page 16). During these 15 years a great deal of work has been undertaken at advocacy, policy and training levels. Much of this work was undertaken by the 'éist' project (1998–2010) in Pavee Point and EDeNn (2006 to date) in collaboration with various agencies. Other activities and projects have also contributed to the development of the work nationally in ECEC.

The most recent, Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups (2011–2012), grew from an on-going collaboration between Clare County Childcare Committee, Cork City Childcare Committee and EDeNn (see page 7 for

further details). The Diversity and Equality work in the Early Childhood Programme in Pavee Point, initially funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation, laid the foundations for the 'éist' project. Following the 1998 'Respect' conference and advocacy and policy work by 'éist', the need to respond to the issues of diversity and equality in early childhood was recognised at government level and identified in the Expert Working Group on Childcare Report (1999). The 'éist' project was then funded under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) by the Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform and the Bernard van Leer Foundation (2000-2004). 'éist' developed, piloted, evaluated and accredited a diversity and equality training approach for the early childhood sector. The project continued to engage at advocacy and policy levels including consultation on the development of Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006), the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (2006), guidelines for CCCs to include a focus on diversity in their work-strategy, and equality proofing Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2010) for the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA).

In 2006 the Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network (EDeNn) was established linked to the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) European Network, funded by the Bernard van Leer Foundation. The Foundation also supported the development of the 'Ar an mBealach' Training of Trainers Programme which was delivered between 2007-2009 and accredited by NUI Maynooth. The delivery of the training was funded by CCCs, Border Counties Childhood Network, FÁS and the Bernard van Leer Foundation. In 2010 'éist' also worked with FETAC during the standardisation process for ECEC modules to support the inclusion of an elective diversity and equality module. This was successful and the module outcomes are based on the 'Ar an mBealach' diversity and equality training programme.

Following on from these key developments, the coordinator of the Equality and Diversity Early Childhood Network (EDeNn), Clare County Childcare Committee and Cork City Childcare Committee worked collaboratively to implement the work developed by 'éist' and to advance the equality and diversity focus in the early childhood sector in Ireland. The concept and proposal for the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups (YEYPU, 2011-2012) developed from their efforts. EDeNn's most recent initiative, the Traveller/Roma Early Years Network (TREYN) linked to the European Roma Early Years Network, was launched in June 2013, and we hope to develop it over the coming years (see [www.edenn.org](http://www.edenn.org)).

### The Approach

The 'éist' project developed a diversity and equality training approach based on the Anti-bias Curriculum developed by Derman-Sparks and the ABC Task Force (1989) in the United States and adapted it to the Irish context. The approach is relevant to both adults and children

The approach is not about implementing a series of activities or themes. It is not a technical approach. It is value based and focuses on the structural issues in the setting. It refocuses our thinking on the mission of the service in terms of justice, respect and recognition, and addresses policy concerns regarding stereotyping, prejudice and discrimination in terms of the materials provided for the children and actions pertaining to adults and children. It supports the building of a holistic approach to diversity and equality which is part of the daily practice of the setting. Identity is not a theme or once-off activity; it is on-going and present in the daily practice. The approach requires adults to critically reflect on their own thinking and practice in order for them to provide an appropriate environment for all children. It requires adults to look at their attitudes to difference, to build their knowledge base around diversity and equality issues and to develop the skills to embrace difference (Murray, Urban, 2013). This means moving beyond culture and celebration to actively providing all children with the opportunity to consolidate a secure sense of their own identities at the same time as enabling awareness of differences from others. Woodhead and Brooker (2008) contend that the 'extent to which this process has positive

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outcomes depends a great deal on how far and in what ways children's social contexts (whether families, preschools or wider society) respect diversity.'

The question is how do you 'open space' in an early years setting to address these issues in a comprehensive way. The approach offers practitioners the freedom to follow the child, to engage with parents, and to meet Aistear and Siolta requirements. We know that it is not only adults who inform how children look at difference. Recent research confirms the powerful role played by friends and peers in this process. Embracing a diversity and equality approach, therefore, offers an opportunity to demonstrate equality of respect and recognition for all children and families and, in effect, supports emphatic socialisation of children.

### CONDITIONS FOR EQUALITY AND INCLUSION

When we talk about equality we generally mean equality of opportunity, whereby each child, for example, is offered the same access and opportunity in a service. However, equality for children and families is more than simply offering opportunities in ECEC; it is also about the conditions we create within services and society. Conditions such as equality of respect and recognition of all families, and equality of resources. For example, do all services have resources to meet the needs of the children attending? Do all parents have the resources to provide equitably for their children on a day to day basis and to access opportunities within services? Lynch et al (2004) suggest that economic inequalities for children translate into attainment for children and progression within the education system. So the question is, can ECEC counter the inequalities in society?

Is it possible to discuss quality and equality in ECEC without addressing the need for recognition and respect for the ECEC profession in Irish society? Staff inequalities in terms of recognition, resourcing, economics and power significantly

affect the quality of ECEC. Staff training levels and wellbeing are affected by the positioning of ECEC in society. Equality of condition (Baker et al, 2004) is necessary for both children and staff. ECEC is a necessary human good (Irish constitution, Article 42, UNCRC) and is indispensable in realising other rights such as educational outcomes and employment. ECEC needs equality of recognition and respect in Irish society to meet the recommendation in the Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2013).

### THE FUTURE

The Early Years Strategy (DCYA, 2013) states that respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for optimal development and learning (p. 57). A key recommendation is the roll out of the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (2006) nationally, along with mandatory training and support for diversity and equality practice (p. 16). The diversity and equality approach developed for the Irish context and based on the anti-bias approach is embedded in the diversity and equality guidelines. The evaluated programme, accreditation, trainers and training resources are available to the Minister for implementation in the sector. Practitioners who participated in the Pre-school Education Initiative for Minority Groups were adamant that the training should be mandatory and clear that it made a difference in their practice. In their final analysis the participants stated that 'the consequence of ignoring the issues of prejudice and bias with young children was simply no longer an option in their practice'. This work needs to be embedded in practice without taking short cuts. The ECEC degree programme in Blanchardstown Institute of Technology is just one example of an institution beginning the process of embedding a diversity and equality approach using the anti-bias framework throughout the programme. It is time to embrace diversity and equality at all levels of the sector. EDeNn looks forward to working with the Minister and the departmental staff to explore how it can be comprehensively introduced at a policy level.

**See EDeNn ([www.edenn.org](http://www.edenn.org)) for details of EDeNn trainers.**

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# Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups



MIRANDA COOKE, Development Worker, Clare County Childcare Committee

Research reveals that children as young as 3 years display signs of prejudice and negative attitudes towards difference.

(Office of the Minister for Children [OMC], 2006, p. viii)

## THE CONTEXT TO THE INITIATIVE

The Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups (2011–2012) was funded by the Department of Education and Skills, Early Years Education Policy Unit under Dormant Accounts. This initiative grew from a wide variety of activities and projects undertaken by varying agencies and organisations back as far as 1998 with *Respect: Education without Prejudice for the Early Years* Conference organised by Pavee Point Travellers' Centre. The need to respond to these issues in childcare has been recognised at government level through both National and European funding for this work in Ireland. The 'éist' project (2001–2004) in Pavee Point developed, piloted, evaluated and accredited the diversity and equality training approach/module for the childcare sector funded under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) Department of Justice Equality and Law Reform. The Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network (EDeNn) was established and launched in 2006 funded by Bernard van Leer. 'Ar an mBealach' Training of Trainers Programme was developed and delivered between 2007–2009, accredited by NUI Maynooth funded by Childcare Committees, BCCN and the Bernard van Leer Foundation.

Following on from these key developments, the coordinator of the Equality and Diversity Early Childhood Network (EDeNn), Clare County Childcare Committee and Cork City Childcare Committee worked collaboratively to advance equality and diversity work in the early years sector in Ireland and the concept and proposal for this Initiative developed from their efforts (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013).

A place where difference is valued, where diverse groups interact and where this interaction is underpinned by equality, human rights, mutual respect and understanding. (OMC, 2006, p.viii)

As ECEC professionals we want all children to benefit from, and be secure, included and happy in our services.

(Murray and Urban, 2012, pxxiii)

The above statements present a vision of how diversity and equality should be addressed in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) services in Ireland and that attending an ECCE service should be a positive experience for all children. This article will outline the steps that were taken very successfully by the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups to ensure we are working towards this vision of Diversity and Inclusion for all children in

ECCE services in Ireland. This was the first time that diversity and equality training for ECCE practitioners and services, which adheres to a common approach and belief set, had been delivered at a national level (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013, p.127).

Before presenting the details of the initiative, some background information in terms of definitions and the approach underpinning this initiative shall be briefly outlined.

**Diversity** refers to the diverse nature of Irish society, for example in terms of social class, gender, returned Irish emigrants, family status, minority groups and the majority group.

**Equality** refers to the importance of recognising different individual needs and of ensuring equity in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families. It is therefore not about treating people the same.

**Diversity and equality in childcare is about validating and cherishing all children. This is just as important for children from the majority culture as it is for those from minority groups.**

(OMC, 2006, p.vi and p.ix)

In other words, this work actually involves 'all' children and discussing with 'all' children how we are all different and alike and that it is ok to be different, there is no such thing as the 'normal' ones, 'normal' families, 'normal' people or the 'correct way to be or live'.

The work of this initiative was based firmly in the anti-bias tradition, drawing directly from the work of the Anti-Bias Curriculum Task Force (Derman-Sparks & the A.B.C. Task Force, 1989), more recently developed by Derman-Sparks and Olsen Edwards as the Anti-Bias Education (ABE) approach (2010). The goals have been adapted to the Irish context by the 'eist' project (Murray & O'Doherty, 2001), and are stated below (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013, p.15):

#### GOALS OF THE EQUALITY & DIVERSITY APPROACH

1. To support children's identity (individual and group) and their sense of belonging
2. To foster children's empathy and support them to be comfortable with difference
3. To encourage each child to critically think about diversity and bias
4. To empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations

There are also goals for the adult/practitioner which are worked on in tandem with the goals for children.

#### INTRODUCING THE INITIATIVE

The overarching aim of the Initiative was to support children from minority groups attending ECCE services. To achieve this aim, objectives were set to train and mentor ECCE practitioners to implement the anti-bias approach in their service. This training and mentoring would link to the national quality frameworks of Aistear, the Early Years Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009), Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (CECDE, 2006) and to the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (OMC, 2006). On grant of funding, a steering committee was selected to oversee the day-to-day running of the Initiative. The steering committee formulated invitations to tender and awarded contracts to a co-ordinator, 11 tutors and an evaluation team.

The objectives of the initiative were as follows

(Steering Committee, 2010):

- To train staff in 160 ECCE services in 32 City and County Childcare Committee areas in FETAC Level 5/6 Diversity and Equality in Childcare.
- To mentor the participants of this training to support them to implement the training in their services ensuring a transfer of learning.
- To work towards each participating Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Service implementing the Anti-Bias method of practice.
- To form local equality and diversity networks developed from the core group of trained ECCE services.
- To link to Siolta, the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* and Aistear.
- To evaluate the effectiveness of the programme informing current and future policy and practice.
- To produce a DVD to be used as training tool.

The content of the training programmes was based on 'Ar an mBealach' (on the way), the 'eist' diversity and equality training manual, published by Pavee Point (2004, 2010). This manualised training programme sets out 10 full-day training sessions to support trainers to deliver diversity and equality training and is set firmly in the anti-bias approach (Duffy and Gibbs, p.20).

All of the tutors contracted to deliver training and mentoring on the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups had completed the training of trainers programme and held a Level 8 Certificate in Equality and Diversity for Early Years Professionals accredited by National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth. This course skilled tutors in delivery of the



full content of the 'Ar an mBealach' trainer manual and was the basis for all training programmes delivered. Tutors employed a strong ethos of participatory learning. Personal reflection underpinned the delivery methodology (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013, p.20).

The intended outputs of the initiative were as follows (Steering Committee, 2010):

- ECCE staff having an understanding of anti-bias approach in childcare.
- To remove barriers/obstacles experienced by families from minority groups accessing and participating in ECCE services.
- ECCE staff having greater awareness of equality legislation and children's rights.
- ECCE staff have an understanding of quality childcare.
- ECCE staff have an understanding of the child's identity and the ability to support their identity.

The delivery of the initiative involved the following (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013):

- 70 hours of FETAC accredited training
- 15 hours of on-site mentoring per service
- Purchased resources for services (€333 per service)
- In-depth independent evaluation
- DVD produced with an Irish perspective to support training in this area
- 27 Training programmes delivered nationally
- 339 ECCE practitioners trained
- 231 ECCE services engaged, serving approximately 3,322 pre-school aged children
- Over 1000 hours mentoring to over 86 ECCE services
- 105 FETAC level 5 certificates awarded
- 167 FETAC level 6 certificates awarded

## THE EVALUATION OF THE INITIATIVE

The material presented in the following three sections is taken directly from the Evaluation Report completed on the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups (Duffy and Gibbs, 2013). To read further detail in this report, the full report or summary report can be downloaded at [www.clarechildcare.ie](http://www.clarechildcare.ie)

### Terms of Reference

- To administer a baseline evaluation of a representative sample of included childcare services using both quantitative and qualitative verifiable research methods.
- To develop and conduct an evaluation of the project against its stated aims.
- To assess the extent to which the project has impacted on the childcare services.
- To assess the reproduction of the training model.
- To provide evidence based recommendations for the Steering Group in order to inform further practice.

The research questions that guided the evaluation were:

1. Does participation in this Initiative lead to a significant increase in knowledge, skill and positive attitude around issues of diversity, equality and the anti-bias approach?
2. Does participation in this Initiative result in an increased emphasis on diversity and equality in ECCE services programme practices?

These research questions were examined using participatory research methodology with a mixed methods approach to data collection. As a multi-stakeholder approach was adopted for the evaluation, multiple sources of both quantitative and qualitative data were generated, collected and analysed to assist in evaluating both the outcomes and effectiveness of the Initiative and the implementation processes inherent in its delivery.

### Site Visits

Site visits were made before the Initiative commenced, to document baseline levels, and again after all activities, training and mentoring of the Initiative had been completed. These measures were then compared to determine change. The site visits were conducted by the evaluators. Site visits were made and the agreed tools were administered to a sample of 35 pre-school rooms in 35 participating ECCE services across nine separate City and County Childcare Committee areas.

The four tools used were:

- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales – Revised (ECERS-R) (Harms et al., 2005)
- Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scales – Expanded (ECERS-E) (Sylva, et al., 2006)

- SpecialLink Childcare Inclusion Practices Profile and Principles Scale (Irwin, 2005)
- Preschool Program Quality Assessment (PQA) (HighScope, 2003)

The items assessed were:

- Materials reflect human diversity and the positive aspects of children's homes and community cultures.
- Race equality and awareness.
- Promoting acceptance of diversity.
- Adults use a variety of strategies to support classroom communication with children whose primary language is not English.
- Gender equality and awareness.

### Practitioner Knowledge, Skill and Attitude Survey

All ECCE practitioners who attended the first session of each training programme completed the knowledge, skill and attitude survey. At Initiative end, ECCE practitioners completed the knowledge, skill and attitude survey.

### Focus Groups

An ECCE Practitioner focus group and Tutor focus groups were also facilitated by the evaluators. At initiative end, a focus group was also held with the Steering Committee and Co-ordinator.

### County and City Childcare Committee Survey

On completion of all training and mentoring programmes, an electronic survey was sent to the County and City Childcare Committees who participated in the Pre-school Educational Initiative for Children from Minority Groups.

### Case Study

One ECCE service was invited, and agreed, to take part in an in-depth case study. This involved completing room journals documenting their journey through the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups, recording implementation, learning, team discussions and the children's reactions and responses. This journal was supplemented by photos and video. At the end of their participation in the Initiative, the ECCE service engaged in an in-depth reflection and review with one of the evaluators.

## KEY FINDINGS OF THE INITIATIVE

The mean scores on all five PQA and ECERS Items assessed at site visits increased and these improvements were statistically significant.

At Initiative end, ECCE practitioners' self-reported levels of knowledge, skill and attitude in relation to equality and diversity had increased. ECCE practitioners reported:

- 66% increase in knowledge
- 52.6% increase in skill
- 7.9% increase in attitude

These changes were found to be statistically significant.

At the ECCE Practitioner Focus group, the evaluation of the Initiative was overwhelmingly positive. As a group, practitioners could easily articulate changes they had made in their attitudes and practice as a direct result of involvement in the Initiative. Practitioners reported that the training programme was a positive learning experience. The mentoring programme was experienced as highly supportive and constructive. Practitioners were enthusiastic in their desire to maintain their anti-bias practice and continue to network and engage in further learning opportunities. Sample of some comments in Focus Group:

*'The most worthwhile course I have done!'*

*'This training has been by far the most beneficial training I have undertaken since my FETAC childcare course. I have learned so much personally and professionally and the training has changed my focus completely from academic learning to promoting children's sense of belonging and self-esteem.'*

*'I learned a lot about my personal development. It opened my mind and changed my views. I now do not stand by when I hear prejudice or bias.'*

*'This course, module, E+D should be mandatory. More mentoring hours. Networking in relation to E+D in childcare.'*

*'Pre the training we viewed everything as black and white and after the training we were enlightened, it's about celebrating and seeing difference. The course was an eye-opener. For parents to see ECCE workers from different ethnic groups is important and also the need for men in ECCE because some children don't have a father figure. The course offers us a new way of seeing things.'*

Practitioners reported that this was the *'first time a tutor came to the setting to offer constructive advice, criticism'*, *'excellent, first course where you had a real experience from your tutor'*. The mentoring process was described as *'brill'*, *'personal'*, *'good support'* while *'individual tuition – builds confidence'*. Practitioners described their mentors supporting them in the

following ways: *'very helpful with policies and procedures'*, *'good ideas for activities'*, *'recommendations for room layout were very helpful'*.

The scenarios and commentary in the case study provide merely a snapshot of how the group tackled the issue of implementing an anti-bias approach with children and families in their setting. It was generally agreed that the mentoring process affirmed learning such as things done well and setting goals to keep the process on track. The overriding conclusion from the practitioners was that though their skills were still emerging, they were learning as they implemented different activities. They had no doubt as to the benefits of the initiative on children on a daily basis. Supporting children to have more positive experience of themselves and others was a key motivation for the staff, *'having observed the many positive responses from children and parents'*. There was consensus among the group of the marked change in practitioner attitude, knowledge and skill level from having participated in the initiative even though the level of participation varied considerably. In their final analysis, *'the consequence of ignoring the issues of prejudice and bias with young children was simply no longer an option in their practice'*.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a national initiative, the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups was both innovative and successful. This was the first time that diversity and equality training for ECCE practitioners and services, which adhered to a common approach and belief set, had been delivered at a national level.

ECCE services' levels of quality increased significantly in relation to providing a learning environment and pedagogical approach that promoted young children's identity, acceptance and exploration of diversity, gender and equality awareness and support for learners of English as a second language. The use of a standardised and validated quality assessment tools, such as the ECERS-R, supports not just the measurement of quality but also promotes discussion and the development of understanding and awareness around aspects of quality in ECCE practice.

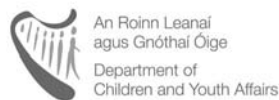
Stakeholders at all levels expressed satisfaction with the Initiative and it was concluded that Tutors and Mentors trained and experienced in Equality and Diversity in Childcare are integral to success of any learning programme. Furthermore, the combination of both training with mentoring/coaching is the most effective translation of theory to practice for ECCE practitioners.

Moving forward with this work, the following is recommended:

- Provide professional development opportunities nationally for ECCE tutors at all levels, to establish a shared, common approach to equality and diversity training in the ECCE sector.
  - Promotion of the FETAC level 5 and 6 Equality and Diversity Components as mandatory on all childcare courses in VECs and at local level.
  - Promotion of database of EDeNn tutors currently trained in Equality and Diversity Approach in Childcare to be sourced for training and mentoring.
  - Provide Diversity and Inclusion training opportunity for Designated Officers in CCCs and NVCOs.
  - Articulate a formal process and structure for the mentoring programme.
  - Establish local networks to support the ECCE practitioners and services who engaged in the Initiative to maintain and further develop their practice.
- Common approaches to practice in the ECCE sector will lead to standardisation and shared national understandings of best practice. It is recommended that a model of national initiatives be developed to provide for professional development within the ECCE sector and that this model draws from evidence-based practice and develops practice-based evidence in line with current knowledge from the field of implementation science.

**DVD: 'Valuing Difference in Early Childhood Care and Education: an Irish Perspective on Supporting Young Children using an Equality and Diversity Approach'. Available to order from Cork City Childcare Committee Tel: 021 4357500**

**Equality and Diversity Resource lists are available at [www.clarechildcare.ie](http://www.clarechildcare.ie)**



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# Diversity and Equality Training



**ANN HALLIGAN, EDeNn Trainer, Mayo**

**PATSY BAISSANGOUROV, EDeNn Trainer, Donegal**

In 2008, we attended a training of trainers programme as part of the 'éist' early childhood project in Pavee Point on the topic of equality and diversity. This training took place over nine weekends and was very different to any other training we had attended previously. It became a personal journey where cleverly designed exercises challenged us to explore our own attitudes and values, and understand and reflect on our own prejudices.

The concept of majority and minority people in society, for example, those privileged and not so privileged, was all new to us. One day we were asked to explain our culture. We are both white Irish, living in Ireland and no-one had ever asked

this of either of us before and it required quite some thought. As we moved further into the training there was a realisation that, in the past as practitioners, neither of us had done enough to find out accurate and true information from families about their backgrounds, heritage, ethnicity and culture. Who were they, these families in front of us?

Having gone through the process of the training ourselves means that, now as trainers, we have engaged with all the exercises and experiences that the participants on the training we now deliver are engaging with. We have been on the same learning curve as opposed to just teaching the learning outcomes of a given course.

This training gave us the tools to discuss, go in-depth, unpack and really go further into the area of equality and diversity with early childhood students and practitioners. The Equality & Diversity (FETAC 5 & 6) module delivered alone affords learners the opportunity to 'think critically' about their place and role in the ECEC service and in society. The depth of this module is really vital for change.

As a trainer it is invaluable to have the 'Ar an mBealach' training manual of carefully planned days and exercises which lead the participant on a path of reflecting. These reflect on who they are, their own values and belief systems, and how these can support or at times hinder their practice. Participants then progress to look at practice and learning experiences for children, which means working to support children to make meaning of their world and of the broader world. The resources devised to go with the manual are designed with interactive learning in mind. They work to motivate and engage the participant in the learning process. As part of the training of trainers programme, we made the materials for the exercises and it is fantastic to have these practical exercises to work with and see the benefit they have for the students and practitioners.

In our experience, the personal learning journey which we encountered has become a regular occurrence for participants on the training we now deliver. Some comments from participants that stood out for us include 'The penny dropped, 'It's amazing how we think really, what we grow up with', 'I have to stop saying children are the same, because I now realise that they are all different and I see it'.

As a practitioner and trainer, I (Ann) have the privilege of seeing the Anti-bias Approach in practice every day with the children and families, as well as with the trainers. As EDeNn trainers we both embrace the importance of mentoring as part of a training process. We delivered the training and mentoring as part of the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups.

The inclusion of mentoring in the service was a real opportunity to support learners to implement the approach. This involved working in partnership with practitioners, discussing the impact of the training, and how they wanted to move forward in terms of implementation. Seeing the practitioners grow and work with the goals to suit babies, toddlers, pre-school and, after-school children, and making the work their own for their particular setting, was an honour.

The personal growth and confidence of some practitioners and their practice led to some unexpected outcomes, as one participant commented, 'the biggest change has been around

the way we work with parents, we are working differently and parents are more involved and part of the service now. This has made a big difference for the children and for us.'

The training is based on the Anti-bias Approach which has been adapted to the Irish context by 'eist' and promotes four goals for both the adult and child. The goals for adults are:

- 1 To be conscious of one's own culture, attitudes and values and how they influence practice.
- 2 To be comfortable with difference, have empathy and engaging effectively with families.
- 3 To critically think about diversity bias and discrimination.
- 4 To confidently engage in dialogue around issues of diversity, bias and discrimination. Work to challenge individual and institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

Many practitioners are familiar with celebrating the child's 'Identity & Belonging' through working with Siolta and Aistear. However, the Anti-bias Goals help to highlight the adults' responsibility to look at themselves and their own attitudes and values closely first, rather than simply looking at celebrating difference. This has been the biggest revelation for many participants on this training, realising that they cannot truly embrace every child and family until they understand where they themselves are coming from, understanding their own attitudes and values. In our experience, practitioners found this very empowering.

This training affords us the opportunity to explore nationally issues of diversity, equality or perhaps inequality in the ECEC sector. It opens up opportunities for us to ask real question such as: What is diversity? How do we as practitioners recognise it, value, embrace and really celebrate the diversity of families in our settings? How do we recognise and respect the challenge, including discrimination, experienced by different families? How do we work in solidarity with children, families and the community?

As EDeNn trainers we know that promoting Identity and Belonging is so much more than having a picture of the child over the coat hook in the setting, it is about who we are and the richness we all bring to a setting. Six years later, the group of trainers who attended the training of trainers course in 2008 (10 in total) are all active members of EDeNn ([www.edenn.org](http://www.edenn.org)). We come from all corners of Ireland and meet regularly to discuss the training process, the impact of our work and the policy landscape. We are committed and know that what we have been part of is making a difference for children.

**SUZANNE MacDONALD, Owner and Manager of Playscool Preschool, Killiney**

I run a small private sessional play school service in Dublin. There are two adults and 13 children in the service, who vary in age from 2½ to 5 years. Our mission is to provide a service where every child feels they belong and are represented in the service. We changed our mission while attending the 'Ar an mBealach' diversity and equality training as part of the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups. I found this training to be most interesting and beneficial in our everyday running of the service from the perspective of policies and procedures to the organising and implementation of activities.

This training has improved my knowledge and understanding of diversity and supported me in dealing with challenging issues which arise regularly. It really opened my eyes to my own attitudes and beliefs and to my prejudice, and I realised that it's ok to be different. I also have a clearer understanding of my own rights and responsibilities in relation to early childhood care and education.

Parents are the primary careers of their children, while we as early childhood providers play a vital support role in helping young children to become active citizens of society. Our own attitudes and beliefs can have an impact on children's views and opinions, and children pick up positive and negative messages from adults and other children. Every aspect of our service can have an impact on the children attending the service, things like the language we use, how staff deal with and communicate with each other and with the children together, and how we relate to each other.

This training has provided me with the greater confidence to work with the children. I am not afraid to ask questions in relation to their background, their culture or their beliefs. It has taught me never to make assumptions and to ensure that the environment is suitable for all children in the service. We do this regularly by diversity and equality proofing our service and the equipment.

When planning our work we now involve the children in a meaningful way. We work on their interests and plan activities around diversity. We encourage each child to stand up for themselves and be proud of 'who they are'. One of the very successful activities we have completed with the children is 'The Family Wall', where each child has brought

in pictures of people in their family or people who are important to them. This is a very active wall and it's there for the full year. The children take the pictures off the wall to talk about their family and they also add to it. It is a continuous process and the benefits have been amazing. We extend the family wall activity to engage with the community, which gives the children an opportunity to really look around and see and connect with where they live. They notice different services and people in their community. These activities that highlight diversity have been positively accepted and discussed among and with the parents. They comment that the children are asking questions or passing comments about different types of families, different types of houses etc. Parents see this as a very important aspect of their children's development.

Our aim is to support children to see equality and diversity as a natural part of our setting and our world. We encourage them to ask questions and to be active learners. We want children to be aware of and understand difference and to be comfortable with difference. We want children to have respect for everyone regardless of their 'race', culture, ability, gender or family background. We do believe that this training has given us the tools to ensure we provide every child, who attends our service, the opportunity to reflect on diversity.

Working with this approach has opened up so many opportunities for us as practitioners and we feel what we offer to the children is more authentic, more real and gives them the space to be themselves and explore more possibilities.



# From 1989 to 2013

# What Have

# We Learned

## about early childhood anti-bias education?

LOUISE DERMAN-SPARKS, author of *Anti-Bias Education for young children and ourselves*

Increasing population diversity in countries around the world has brought – and will continue to bring – richness and complexities. Ensuring that early childhood education and care (ECEC) programmes are places where all children and families are visible and thrive requires that leaders and staff pursue a ‘relentless commitment to equity, voice, and social justice’ (Kugelmass, 2004, p.44). Anti-bias education is one way to carry out this pursuit, enabling us to, as one educator explained,

*Reclaim my vision of childcare and education as empowerment, as a vehicle for changing the world. Our work as teachers has that kind of power. Anti-bias work provides a vehicle for... building in our classrooms and centers the kinds of communities we want to live in, models of the world we envision (Wallace, 1999, p.155).*

Since the 1989 publication of my book *Anti-Bias Education: Tools for Empowering Young Children* by the National Association the Education of Young Children (NAEYC),

educators throughout the USA, and in many other countries, have embraced its mission and goals in diverse socio-political and cultural early childhood and care settings. This article reviews lessons that emerged from their work.

### UN CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD

The 1989 Convention of the Rights of the Child signalled worldwide recognition of the importance of naming and protecting the right of young children to grow up without societal produce and discrimination. For example, Article 29 states ‘Children’s education should develop each child’s personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage children to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures.’ Article 30 strengthens this principle in regards to ‘minority or indigenous children’, which ‘have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language, and religion. (See UNICEF, 1990 for all the articles.)

In many countries who have signed on to the Declaration, early childhood diversity and equality educators get inspiration from it. Although the United States is one of the few UN members who have not signed on, the anti-bias approach reflects its principles.



### ADAPTATION TO SPECIFIC CONTEXTS

Over the years, the anti-bias education approach has proven to be useful in diverse countries, adapted to the specific social, cultural, and political dynamics of their respective countries. For example, in the Netherlands:

*The transition of the American [anti-bias education] programme to the Netherlands developed in two ways: (1) through observation we learnt which taboos, prejudices, stereotypes and forms of discrimination are most common in our Dutch situation...the analysis of the local situation was the starting point for the anti-bias programme in each childcare centre. (2) Through experimenting with exercises and activities, which were known as good practices in the USA, we discovered many examples that were not suitable in our situation. (Van Keulen, 2004, p.31)*

In Ireland, prejudice and discrimination directed at the Traveller community is a central issue; in the United States skin colour is the central criteria defining racism, beginning with the targeting of African Americans and Native Americans.

Nevertheless, in both our countries, the dynamics of systemic and interpersonal racism share significant characteristics. In addition, the dynamics of diversity and prejudice are not static. In Ireland, as Murray and Urban (2012) explain:

*The demographics have shifted in terms of a visible racial and cultural diversity in the past 15 years, but diversity is in fact much broader than what we can see. Diversity encapsulates social class, gender, family status, people with disabilities, gay and lesbian people in families, ethnic minorities, the Traveller community, economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Irish-language speakers, multiracial Irish, and the majority population (p.19).*

Early childhood educators in several countries describe how they use anti-bias education principle and goals with children and adults in their contexts. For resources in English, see: Brown (UK), 1999; Creaser & Dau (Australia), 1996; DECET (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training Network), 2013; Koopman (South Africa), 1997; McNaughton (Australia), 2003; Van Keulen (Netherlands), 2004.

## WHAT ANTI-BIAS CHANGE INVOLVES

An anti-bias programme puts diversity and equity goals at the centre of all aspects of its organisation and daily life. Doing so requires broad systemic changes. This involves much more than adding some new materials and activities into the already existing learning environment. It also includes changes in policies, structures, procedures, and processes as well as in the learning environment and curriculum. The people who serve the children and families must also engage in their own growth journey. In sum, it is 'a process, not an event' (Kugelmass, 2004, 86).

ECEC programme leaders (director/manager) are critical to the organisational and people change anti-bias work needs. They plan (hopefully with staff) and guide an intentional, thoughtful strategic approach for both the short and long haul. This includes making decisions about where to focus at a specific time, the speed at which to proceed, and the most effective route to specific goals and objectives. Being strategic also means engaging in a deliberative process of data gathering and analysis about the people and contexts that constitute a programme. Otherwise, programme leaders and staff risk moving too fast and causing unnecessary problems, or, conversely, underestimating the support for forging ahead and moving too slowly, or not at all, in areas where they can make change.

## ANTI-BIAS AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE PRACTICES

Minimising cultural discontinuity between home and ECEC programmes, and eliminating any indicators of discounting or prejudice against child's home culture foster an equal playing field for all the children. Young children thrive when their early childhood programme integrates their home languages and cultures into all of its operations (NAEYC, 1995). Thus, culturally responsive practices in an early childhood programme goes hand-in-hand with anti-bias practices.

In the United States, the importance of culturally responsive early childhood and care programmes is a heated 'contested ground', where the debates open up possibilities for moving forward. The majority of early childhood programmes and schools in the United States are still likely to ground their environment, curriculum, teaching styles, and language in the dominant culture<sup>1</sup>, even when families from the dominant culture are numerically in the minority. Consequently, a large number of young children attending ECEC programmes in the USA – and I suspect in too many other countries – experience two very different cultural contexts every day. Sadly, in addition, many staff treat children's home culture as invisible or inferior. One example is the use of child development criteria based on the socialisation of children in the dominant cultural group to judge the ability of children from other cultural groups. Even if this happens with good intentions, children from non-

dominant cultural groups are disadvantaged because teachers do not see or build on their actual abilities and strengths.

The more discontinuity young children face, the more they find that what they are learning in their family about how to be in the world, including their language, does not work for them outside their family. Lack of familiarity with a programme's care practices makes it harder to adjust, to build strong relationships, to act and feel competent, and to feel secure. Conversely, the children who experience little or no cultural discontinuity are better able to be active, competent participants, and to feel respected for whom they are.

Creating a culturally responsive ECEC programme requires a broad vision of equity and inclusion. It calls for an intentional, proactive effort that pays attention to the seemingly small and everyday details of a programme's life, as well as to its structures, relationships, and teaching practices. In addition, a culturally responsive and anti-bias programme evolves as the children and families it serves change. Programme leaders and teachers must be open to and have the skills to integrate what they know as ECEC professionals with what they learn from the children's families and children.

## TRAINING, TRAINING, TRAINING

The vital role of appropriately and adequately prepared teachers and programme leaders is the lesson of most consequence in regards to anti-bias education work. No matter how well conceptualised and written a curriculum may be and how lovely the material for children, ultimately it is the teacher who matters. We cannot expect adults who have never examined the discomforts, stereotypes and prejudices about various aspects of human identity and diversity they have absorbed from family and society since childhood, to suddenly be free of them. We cannot expect them automatically to not allow their biases to influence how they teach. Nor can we ask teachers who have never examined their own biases to help children not to absorb these same beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. Yet, too often, that is exactly what we do.

In many countries, including the United States, too many teacher preparation programmes still do not adequately engage students in serious learning about culturally responsive and anti-bias education or provide opportunities and time for self-reflection and growth. Furthermore, too many already practicing teachers have not had sufficient training. They may have gone to a few short workshops at a conference or work place. However, these do not provide the educational opportunities that result in more than surface learning about diversity and equality issues.

At the same time, we do now know a great deal about what goes into effective professional development about how to work optimally with children of all backgrounds. These methods

<sup>1</sup> We define the *dominant (mainstream, majority) culture and group* as 'the way of life defined by the dominant group in a society, as the 'normal' and right way to live. The degree to which people or families differ from this standard becomes the criterion for judgment about them, and the basis for prejudice toward others... In the United States, the dominant group has historically been White, Christian, affluent, and male. A dominant group achieves its position by controlling economic and political institutions, communications/media, education and health institutions, the arts, and business. (DS & Edwards, 2010).

guide adults to uncover, examine and change their learned prejudices and discriminatory behaviours and support them to gain deeper understanding of their own multiple identities (for example, ethnicity, culture, gender, socio-economic class, race, ability). These methods also foster teachers' critical ability to analyse how the infrastructures, policies and traditional practices in early childhood programmes unequally advantage children from their country's dominant culture, while simultaneously disadvantaging children from different home cultures. Teachers can then fully foster all children's development and learning, including their construction of healthy identities and non-biased attitudes to all forms of human diversity.

In her new book (Murray & Urban, 2012, 120), Colette Murray identifies goals for adults, adapted from the second edition of my anti-bias education book (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010). These include:

1. To be conscious of one's own culture, attitudes, and values, and how they influence practice.
2. To be comfortable with differences, have empathy and engage effectively with families.
3. To critically think about diversity, bias and discrimination.
4. To confidently engage in dialogue about issues of diversity, bias and discrimination. Work to challenge individual and institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

Achieving these goals is a developmental process that involves transformative changes in self-awareness and understanding of the power dynamics of systemic forms of prejudice and discrimination. It takes time – as do all developmental processes. Several scholars have identified stages or phases of consciousness and behaviour change in relation to anti-racism identity (for example, Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2006, Tatum, 2003). This information helps scaffold professional development. However, it is important to use this framework thoughtfully, because person's journey has its own rhythms, influenced by their identities and life experiences. In Ireland, the 2011-2012 'Pre-school Education Initiative

for Children from Minority Groups,' outlined on page 7 successfully piloted an in-service training model. Under the directorship of Colette Murray, this professional development initiative incorporated the goals and pedagogy of an anti-bias approach. A multi-methods evaluation showed the effectiveness of the approach. *'This [initiative] has proved to be an extremely positive and worthwhile initiative demonstrating a major change in practitioner's knowledge, skills, & attitude, which ultimately benefits the children and families attending the Early Years' Setting. There has been huge learning from the Initiative... [For] implementing a Diversity and Inclusion plan for the sector in the coming years.'* (McCarthy, 2013)

### WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The need for early childhood care and education programmes that truly foster the development of children from diverse backgrounds and life experiences will only continue to grow. Ultimately, equitable, successful efforts will rely on the people who deliver ECEC services in all its various arenas and roles. To do so, I believe that we should:

- Institutionalise effective professional teaching and leadership development in diversity and equality work among all teachers, managers and other ECEC leaders.
- Coordinate diversity and equality efforts among the various parts of the ECEC system so that each part supports the other parts.
- Build networks for teachers, managers and other ECEC leaders to support the efforts and time takes for change to happen (for example the Equality & Diversity Early Childhood National Network [EDeNn] in Ireland and the Diversity in Early Childhood Education & Training (DECET) network in Europe.
- Encourage and support qualitative research about 'normal development' and 'best practices' within and across all ethnic/cultural/class groups.
- Educate the public at large about how diversity and equality education is integral to quality ECEC education.

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# gender equality in the early years

*Research shows that from the age of 7 months babies can tell the difference between male and female voices.*

*This early awareness of gender difference is one of our first abilities to distinguish differences in people and sets the stage for one of the most difficult forms of discrimination to eradicate. Adults, as well as children, often confuse gender and gender roles and, because there are natural, biological differences, attitude of 'boys will be boys' often prevails. It is very important for early years practitioners not to fall into that easy response and to work hard to ensure that boys and girls are given equal opportunities in the pre-school setting.*



**JOANIE BARRON, Project Co-ordinator, Wallaroo Playschool**

## **'IS IT A BOY OR A GIRL?'**

From the moment children are born, boys and girls are treated differently in most cultures. One of the first questions asked is the sex of the baby, even before it is born. This is important information for parents, relatives and friends so they will know what clothes and presents to buy and what names are acceptable. Whether or not there are real differences, adults treat newborns in different ways; they make different comments about babies depending on whether they think they are looking at a boy or a girl. As children develop, the different approaches and expectations for boys and girls become more marked. The style of dress, hair,

choice of toys and interests that are supported by the adults around them differ greatly for boys and girls. In the Republic of Ireland we even have segregated boys and girls primary schools.

By the time children come to early childhood care and education there are common beliefs (Honig & Wittmer, 1983) that boys are noisy, competitive and aggressive, and love construction-related and rough-and-tumble games. Girls, on the other hand, are viewed as quiet and compliant, they play co-operative games in the home corner and would do arts and crafts all day long if they could.

While there is some scientific research that asserts that differences in male and female brains affect their interests (Cahill, 2005) and behaviours, there is an important question that should be asked: should biology determine life outcomes for people? Modern Ireland does not present equal opportunities for boys and girls. Women earn 70 per cent less than men and are severely under-represented regionally and nationally within decision-making structures (CSO, 2010). Fathers in families still carry the burden of the role of breadwinner, and when a separation takes place they are often left playing a minor role in the rearing of their children (Murphy & Caffrey, 2010), depriving them and their children of a valuable connection.

It must be remembered that differences in abilities *within* each gender are often more marked than *across* the genders. Maccoby & Jacklin (1974) maintain that physical and behavioural difference vary greatly across different ethnic and cultural groups. Gender difference in itself is unproblematic, but when one group gains and one loses out because of the differences, then the issue becomes political.

The lessons that children learn about who they can possibly be and what roles they will play in society are being imposed from the day they are born. They receive input from family and the media, and they are at the mercy of commercialism in all its forms. When a boy chooses to identify with Ben 10 or a girl wants to be a fairy princess, who or what is influencing their choices? Who designs the toy catalogues with red and black pages for boys and pink ones for girls (Valiulis, O'Driscoll & Redmond, 2007)? Who decides to print flimsy girl jeans and t-shirts with *Babe* written across the chest or bottom? What inspires people to buy those clothes for female children and strong, sturdy, warm clothes for male children? Are boys learning here that they are expected to be tough on their comfortable clothes, which come in toned-down blues, browns or black? What are girls learning about their identity from wearing skimpy, fussy or sexualised clothing?

### **BUT GIRLS CAN BE FIRE FIGHTERS!**

For early childhood practitioners it can seem like an uphill struggle to confront gender attitudes that already exist in children as young as two years (Derman-Sparks, 1989) and which have been reinforced by the media and perhaps also by family values. Working with issues of gender is not about making children into something they are not, it is about recognising that maybe they have not had real choices, and that how we interact with them around gender issues and how we create a gender-positive environment has the possibility of opening up doors for them. It might mean correcting misinformed statements such as 'girls can't be firemen' with 'but girls can

be fire-fighters!' and bringing in an example from a book, a photo, a puzzle or asking a woman who does work at the fire station to visit in her uniform.

In a gender-safe environment, boys and girls are comfortable with themselves and with others of the opposite sex. They play together and allow each other to play in all sorts of games. In order to create a gender-positive environment, early childhood practitioners must start by observing closely how children play together and how they play with different equipment. This should not be done in a cursory fashion, as practitioners tend to underestimate the gendered play of children (McNaughton, 2000). Whether there is as much space for adventurous and boisterous play as there is for quiet sedentary play should be considered.

McNaughton (2000) gives an example from a practitioner who, prior to their action research group, viewed block playing as something that both boys and girls did in her centre. When viewed through a feminist perspective she observed how both sexes played differently with the blocks and how often the boys' behaviour inhibited the girls' play.

### **WHAT CAN EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS DO?**

Early years practitioners should consider the following:

- Are the home corner and the construction areas closely connected? This encourages cross-gender play.
- Are the adults supportive and encouraging of all kinds of play, including loud and rough- and-tumble play?
- Are children who might be intimidated or disturbed in their quieter play protected from noisier play, and supported in skills to speak out about what they need?
- Are all types of femininity and masculinity supported, i.e. both girls and boys who like to dress up, play in the home corner and be involved in quiet imaginative play, and girls and boys who want to play adventurous, physically risky and noisy play?
- Are children who don't fit the gender stereotypes being excluded or teased by other children?

Children need all kinds of play to succeed in life and those working in early childhood care and education should consider the effects of the different types of play on later skills and life experiences. Co-operative play develops the necessary skills in communicating and social awareness, which are the basis for the survival of human society. Caring and nurturing types of play are equally important, developing skills in empathy, protectiveness and sensitivity to the needs of others. Physically risky play helps children develop a sense of their bodies and its capabilities, and supports physical competence and strength. It promotes a sense of adventure, excitement,

anticipation and achievement. These skills are equally important for society as they promote entrepreneurial skills and a desire to discover new horizons. Construction play is the basis for many mathematical, logical, depth perception and engineering skills, and promotes imagination, visualisation and problem-solving.

A diversity and equality anti-bias philosophy in the early years setting supports children to get involved in all kinds of play and the breadth of what the daily routine offers. If early childhood practitioners discover that their practice or environment seems to be contributing to gendered play, i.e. boys tending to play in construction or loud and boisterous games and girls tending to play in the home corner or quiet and co-operative play, what should they or could they do to change this? Being willing to change the environment around and observe the results is a start.

Bring artistic artefacts or home-corner equipment into or close to the construction area. Model playing with construction toys in the home corner, and with decorative materials, such as shells, cloth or ribbons, in the process of construction play activities. Support both genders to become involved in boisterous, imaginative games such as wild animals, super heroes, or fighting games by modelling boundaries and what is acceptable pretend play and what is hurtful. Allow all children the space for contact but ensure that the rules of the games are agreed with children beforehand. Intervene and support children to set and reset limits that are being broken and uphold the consequences to breaking rules. Adults getting down on the floor and getting involved in construction and

physical play will attract more children to a given area of play, which is important for girls who might perceive boisterous play as boys' play. It is good to support and encourage children who do not fall in to the stereotypes of masculine and feminine play and help them to stand up for themselves in the face of exclusion or teasing.

Finally, as early childhood practitioners, we need to look at the effects of stereotyping on our own outlook and perceptions. Do we examine and challenge our own perceptions in discussions with colleagues? Do we welcome men into a field of work that has largely been the domain of women? If we are resisting, what is that founded on? Have we made equality and diversity policy clear to parents? Are they aware of what a gender-safe environment means? What happens when a parent questions our policy or our practice?

### SUMMARY

Research and anecdotal evidence shows that boys and girls play differently and are treated differently in their early years. Different types of play and experiences have an effect on skills and opportunities in later life. Children themselves will discriminate against each other if they cross the perceived gender lines. Our job as early childhood care and education practitioners working in an equality and diversity/anti-bias setting is to ensure opportunities for children to develop a healthy gender identity. There is an onus on society to provide equal opportunities for all, while children are developing their skills and strategies as they progress through the educational system and into adult life.

This article is an excerpt from 'Do 0-6 year olds need lessons in gender equality?' by Joanie Barron from Murray, C. and Urban, M. (2012) *Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood – An Irish Perspective*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan

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# Barnardos Finglas

## Early Intervention Service



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### INTRODUCTION

Barnardos Finglas Early Intervention Service (formerly known as TESO – Traveller Education and Support Options) is now located in south Finglas, in St. Oliver Plunkett's Junior School, Dublin 11. With the move to this new location in September 2013 came the welcome opportunity to strengthen links between Traveller and Settled children and offer a needs-led, inclusive early intervention service to children from the Finglas community. The main activities of the project are pre-school care and education, offered to children through Barnardos Tús Maith programme, family support to pre-schooler's parents, and collaborative and networking activities with statutory agencies and voluntary organisations. The work of the project is supported by an interagency advisory group with membership from HSE, Dublin City Council, Pavee Point, Fingal County Council, Finglas School Completion, Department of Education and Science, Crosscare, the Community and Parents.

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Prior to September 2013, the service operated from a number of different locations, including St. Mary's Park in Dunsink Lane; St. Mary's Cappagh Fields; Patrician College, Avila Park and Barnardos Mulhuddart. In 2006, the TESO interagency group developed a Strategic Plan for 2007-2014, the aim of which was to ensure that Traveller children and families in Finglas would be provided with needs-led services to help enrich lives through education and healthy development for the children, through family support for their parents and through valuing diversity.

Traveller children have particular difficulties and challenges to overcome in their young lives. These challenges are reflected in a set of fact sheets produced by Pavee Point:

**'Traveller children represent a minority within a minority. Accordingly they suffer all the ill effects of inadequate provision that the Traveller community as a whole experiences. This can lead to restricted opportunities in society and can have a detrimental effect on self-esteem and on pride in Traveller children. In addition, Traveller children are especially vulnerable to ill health and poor physical and cognitive development'**

(Pavee Point fact sheet on Traveller children).

A primary challenge for the TESO project over the seven year lifespan of the Strategic Plan (2007–2014) has been to build upon the achievements of the project since 1997; to ensure that the clear and unambiguous focus on children and young people is maintained; and to provide more needs-led services to the children, young people and their parents, within an economically challenging environment.

## MOVING TOWARDS A NEEDS-LED AND OUTCOMES-FOCUSED SERVICE

In a needs analysis<sup>1</sup> conducted by Barnardos, significant gaps with two child skill development areas were identified, namely: social and emotional development and language and early literacy development. A review of the evidence followed, which informed us as to the needs of children in this age group and how best to optimise their developmental outcomes to ensure they are ready for school. During this

review, REDI was identified as a programme which was proven to amplify the outcomes for children attending a HighScope service.

HighScope is a well established early years curriculum which is evidenced to achieve real and lasting outcomes for children, including positive self-esteem, achievement of their developmental and learning potential, improved school readiness, improved and continued engagement with school, and economic independence as adults (Weikart et al, 1978; Schweinhart, 2005) (For more info visit [www.highscope.org](http://www.highscope.org)).

The REDI programme was designed and developed by Dr. Celine Domitrovich & Dr. Karen Bierman from the Prevention Research Centre in Penn State University USA. It is evidence-based, shown to enhance the HighScope curriculum and to achieve increased child outcomes in the domains of social and emotional competence and emergent literacy for 3-4 year olds. The REDI programme lessons target children's skills in social and emotional development and in language and early literacy development. Staff use stories, puppets and role plays to introduce key lesson concepts to children during daily circle and reading time lessons. Social and emotional lessons focus on friendship skills, emotional understanding, self-control and social problem-solving. Social-emotional coaching strategies used by the adults focus on: positive group and classroom management; praise and warm involvement; emotion coaching; induction strategies and social problem-solving dialogue. The model for induction strategies offers a combination of different approaches:

- Prevent behaviour occurring by using different promotion strategies
- Intervene early when children are starting to struggle by using induction strategies
- Use external control when children are really struggling with what is happening

In 2009, Barnardos, with the support of Atlantic Philanthropies, supported the TESO staff team to participate in a project called Tús Maith. Tús Maith presented the opportunity for staff to train in the new REDI programme components that were evidenced to increase child outcomes in social and emotional wellbeing and in early literacy and language development. It operates within the context of the Barnardos Quality Framework. This was an exciting development for all as there was a clear fit between the children's needs and what the REDI programme components evidenced to strengthen alongside the HighScope curriculum.

<sup>1</sup> The range of needs demonstrated by the children accessing Barnardos were found to be complex and multi-faceted, with the most common among them being: family discord (48 per cent), child with behavioural difficulties (46 per cent), child has poor relationship with peers (45 per cent), adult has drug or alcohol misuse (45 per cent), carer is overburdened (43 per cent), and child has a poor relationship with mother (34 per cent). The children attending Barnardos' services were also found to have poor social and emotional skills, limited access to books and to be experiencing difficulties in making and maintaining relationships.

## WHAT IS TÚS MAITH?

Tús Maith means *Good Beginning* in Irish. It is a pre-school programme for children aged 3 to 5 years, which develops the skills they need to make a good start in primary school.

Tús Maith helps children to develop skills in four areas:

- **Social:** This is about being able to make friends, being able to share and to take turns when playing.
- **Language, literacy and comprehension:** This helps them to express themselves and to understand what others say. It also teaches them to recognise letters and sounds.
- **Emotional:** This is about understanding and saying how they feel, and recognising how others feel. This helps children to understand that all feelings are ok, but some behaviours are not ok.
- **Physical:** This is about doing different types of activities to support their physical development. This helps them to do things for themselves – like washing their hands, kicking a football, holding a crayon and drawing.

## WHY IS TÚS MAITH IMPORTANT?

In Tús Maith, while children learn, they develop the skills they need to prepare them for primary school. The approach used in Tús Maith has been researched and shown to achieve real and lasting outcomes for children.

## HOW DOES THE PROGRAMME WORK?

Characters, Twiggie the turtle, Daphne the duck, Duke the dog and Henrietta the hedgehog, introduce key ideas such as:

- Friendship skills
- Emotional understanding
- Self-control
- Problem-solving

Adults use scaffolding, conversations with children, modelling, and coaching. Achieving better emotional outcomes so that children can manage their emotions and regulate their behaviour is evidenced in Tús Maith by the children being able to: identify and name emotions; be aware of their own and others' emotions; understand and express emotions; manage conflict; and demonstrate empathy for others. Stronger social outcomes are evidenced by children being able to: play cooperatively; participate and take turns; solve problems; share; and make positive choices.

Language, Literacy and Communication lessons focus on getting better child outcomes to help ensure that children will have the necessary emergent language and literacy skills

Talking about feelings and problems that arise between Twiggie and his friends teaches children that it is normal and ok to feel angry, sad or happy sometimes.

Each day children have reading time in small groups. Staff use a particular set of books and props that link with that day's lessons. The children learn:

- Lots of new words
- Skills for listening
- How to ask and answer questions

Each day, the children are supported to actively learn and make plans for their day, carry out their plans and later they review what they did with their friends and staff. All of these activities help children to become active and confident learners.

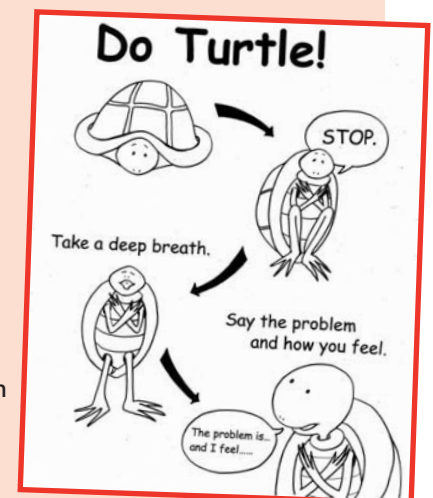
## WHAT PARENTS CAN DO AT HOME

In Tús Maith, children learn to calm themselves when they are upset, which is called doing turtle (after Twiggie the turtle).

At home, parents can encourage children to do the four steps:

- 1 Stop what they are doing
- 2 Cross arms across their chest
- 3 Take a breath
- 4 Say the problem and how they feel

Just like Twiggie, doing turtle when feeling angry or upset will help children address their own feelings of frustration, anger or disappointment.



needed to start school well. This is evidenced by children being able to: express and comprehend language; communicate effectively with peers and adults; recognise letters, numbers and symbols; and demonstrate developmentally-appropriate fine motor skills. Adults help children learn language by using the most helpful types of interactions as frequently as possible. For example, adults use interactions that support children's attention, engagement and motivation to learn. Adults conduct daily 'dialogic<sup>2</sup> reading lessons' that emphasise the use of rich decontextualised language, responsive expansions, scaffolding and target vocabulary words, along with sound games and alphabet centre activities that help promote identification of uppercase and lowercase letters. Alphabet centre activities are developmentally-sequenced to support child learning (for

<sup>2</sup> Based upon the shared reading of Wasik, Bond & Hindman (2006) and dialogic reading of Whitehurst, Arnold et al. (1994)

example, letter stickers, a letter bucket, art and craft materials for a range of letter-learning activities). Sound games are based on the work of Lundberg and colleagues (Adams, Foorman, Lundberg & Beeler, 1998). The games introduce phonemic awareness skills in a developmental sequence: listening, rhyming, alliteration, words and sentences, syllables, and phonemes (individual sounds).

### SUPPORTING EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IN TÚS MAITH SETTINGS

Barnardos Tús Maith programme has strong links with an anti-bias approach. The anti-bias approach has four goals for children<sup>3</sup> and adults<sup>4</sup> and favours a critically reflective approach to early childhood practice. This approach requires educators to continually and closely monitor language, behaviour, activities, communications, relationships and decisions in terms of equality for all involved. A central focus of Tús Maith is to encourage children to discuss feelings, experiences (including discrimination, hurtful behaviours etc.), opinions, and needs that are personally meaningful, and they can feel listened to, supported, and respected by adults and peers. This facilitates the internalisation of feeling valued, cared for, appreciated, and part of a social group, which in turn, motivates children to value, care for, and appreciate themselves, their environment, their social groups, other people, and their world.

To support the implementation of an anti-bias approach, the adults and children need to organise their feelings, thoughts and behaviours in new ways in order to confidently engage in dialogue around issues of diversity, bias and discrimination. Anti-bias learning, similar to social-emotional learning, is not automatic and does not necessarily come with age. Simply telling children what they should do or how you want them to behave or think does not promote their social-emotional learning nor does it help children develop as critical thinkers and active learners. Children learn by watching how adults (including educators) interact with them and with each other. Child learning is affected by the way that adults make them feel. Adult guidance, support and feedback help children become more skillful at handling social challenges, and develop a shared understanding of diversity and equality concepts.

Pavee Point Travellers Centre *éist* project – Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Care and Education – highlights the need to have an ‘anti-bias approach’ in early childhood care, education and training settings as it is most suited to the needs of all children. The Anti-bias Approach supports the implementation of Siolta Standards (2006), Aistear Themes (2009) and the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (2006). Nearly all of us hold some learned stereotypes about other groups. In order to challenge our misinformation and embrace diversity it is important that everyone from both ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ backgrounds becomes involved in the conversation about diversity. Developing a better understanding of others’ experiences and perspectives helps us to respect others.

### CONCLUSION

Adopting an anti-bias approach is not merely a matter of ‘imparting knowledge’ to children and adults. Anti-bias principles are relevant to every level of practice including recruitment, management, admission procedures, assessment and training, as well as the work with children and parents. Recognising good practice and equality and diversity standards in children’s settings is not just about policy, procedures, standards, curriculum; while these are essential components, the most important, powerful and influential component of all is that the adult has the ability to ensure it happens. The ability to use the power of self, to practice gentleness, to show a love of children through play, learning and fun together, to recognise potential in all children and treasure the teachable moments and privilege of being part of children’s ongoing learning and development.

Barnardos’ Tus Maith seeks to support children to develop the social and emotional skills that enable them feel a sense of belonging and identity, the ability to emphasise with others and an understanding of diversity. The challenge according to Louise Derman-Sparks (2001) is: ‘*To be able to develop understanding of others you have to know who you are, overcome biases you have learned about other groups and have a highly developed sense of empathy and justice.*’

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<sup>3</sup> **Anti-bias goals for children:** 1. To support children’s identity (individual and group) and their sense of belonging. 2. To foster children’s empathy and support them to be comfortable with difference. 3. To encourage each child to critically think about diversity and bias. 4. To empower children to stand up for themselves and others in difficult situations

<sup>4</sup> **Anti-bias goals for adults:** 1. To be conscious of one’s own culture, attitudes and values and how they influence practice. 2. To be comfortable with difference, have empathy and engage effectively with families. 3. To critically think about diversity, bias and discrimination. 4. To confidently engage in dialogue around issues of diversity, bias and discrimination. Work to challenge individual and institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

# Good Practice for children with special educational needs is Good Practice for ALL children



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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a growing awareness and commitment to promoting effective inclusive practice in early childhood care and education (ECCE) settings. While this article focuses on the needs of children who have special educational needs or additional learning needs, there is no doubt that effective inclusive practice for children with special educational needs has positive implications for all children in an early years setting. Westwood (2013) advocates that educating children with special needs is more about 'catering for diversity' than it is about addressing specific issues relating to a disability or special need. In fact, he goes on to say that special educational needs are only one of a number of reasons why children may need additional supports and consideration in an ECCE setting.

## THE 'IN' IN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Inclusion can be defined as *'the dynamic approach of responding positively to pupil diversity and of seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning'* (UNESCO, 2005). This definition challenges us as early childhood providers to see the strengths and potential of young children with diverse needs first before any perceived difficulties. It is true that children with SEN (special educational needs) are more like their peers than not. Virtually all children follow the same developmental patterns and stages; however they may do so at different rates. This further challenges early childhood practitioners to learn how to meet the needs of children who are demonstrating different rates of progress and following diverging developmental pathways within the same age-grouping.

Siolta, the National Quality Framework (CECDE, 2006) and Aistear, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2009) both highlight the importance of high quality ECCE provision in maximising outcomes for ALL young children including those with special educational needs. A key point in Aistear, which is written in the voice of the child, is:

*Help me to feel 'equal to everyone else' to not let me be excluded because of 'ethnicity,... special educational need,... or ability... remember treating people the same is not equality. You may have to treat me in a different way to ensure that I feel equal.'* (NCCA, 2009: 8)

It is difficult to believe that in 2013, children with SEN could be excluded from mainstream ECCE settings, yet we are aware that parents of children with SEN or additional needs often undergo a stressful process trying to find an early years setting that will cater for their child's needs. Due to a lack of resources, and a lack of targeted training in inclusive practice, early years' providers who are committed to quality ECCE provision may feel ill-equipped to meet the needs of these children (Moloney and McCarthy, forthcoming). In considering the 'In' in Inclusive Practice, it is essential that children with SEN are not just included 'locationally' within a setting. It is not enough that children with SEN are simply accepted into a setting. In order for Inclusion to be meaningful and in order to ensure maximum outcomes for children with SEN, there are a number of pre-requisites that need to be in place: staff who are educated and qualified in Inclusive Practice; appropriate adult: child ratios; individual assessments of need; Pre-school Special Needs Assistant (PSNA) supports; appropriate equipment and materials; and access to multi-disciplinary teams, as appropriate.

## A CHILD IS ABOVE ALL ELSE A CHILD

Allen and Cowdery (2012) emphasise that no matter what additional or special educational needs a child may have, they are first and foremost a child. Aistear (NCCA, 2009) highlights that every child has his or her own individual strengths and interests, and that it is always good to try to build on these as far as possible when devising programmes and planning activities for children with SEN.

*'Remember that I am a unique individual with my own strengths, interests, abilities, needs and experiences. Recognise and build on these when you are helping me to learn and develop.'* (NCCA, 2009: 7)

So, for example, if a toddler loves *'Peppa Pig'*™ then using a *Peppa Pig*™ puppet as a role model when teaching a child to use greetings such as *'Hi everyone'*, *'Good morning'*, *'Will you play with me?'*, *'Good-bye'* and *'Thank you'* could prove to be highly motivating for the child. When working with a child who has a SEN, it may be necessary to work at a slower pace, focussing on one greeting at a time and providing many opportunities for the child to hear and practise that greeting in different contexts and at various times throughout the day.

It may be helpful to use Lámh, which is a simple form of sign language designed for children with intellectual disabilities, to reinforce some of those greetings. When using Lámh, speech and signs are used together (for more info see [www.lamh.org](http://www.lamh.org)). Combining visual (signs) with auditory cues can be helpful for some children with SEN.

If working with a child who is functioning at the pre-verbal stage of communication, it may be helpful to use a BIGmack communicator to pre-record responses (recorded in a child's voice) so that the child can use the device to interact with their peers and with staff in the setting. The child simply clicks the BIGmack and it 'speaks' on behalf of the child. This can also be very effective in group participation in nursery rhymes or songs where there is a repetitive language pattern. So, for example, if the group was singing *'Old MacDonald had a Farm'*, the child could click on the BIGmack and it would say *'with a quack quack here and a quack quack there'* for the child.

It is important to note that while a child may have a special educational need at a particular point and time, this doesn't mean that a child will always struggle (Mountstephen, 2011). If difficulties are identified early enough, and early intervention and appropriate supports are provided with parents, early years providers and multi-disciplinary professionals working

together, many children with special needs can fulfil their potential and even surpass expectations. The potential for early years provision to make a difference in terms of outcomes for young children with SEN cannot be overemphasised. Research has demonstrated that early intervention combined with high quality early childhood provision is the key to ensuring successful outcomes for children with SEN in later years (Lindsay et al., 2010; Deiner, 2010; Anderson, 2007; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000; DES, 1999.).

### THE LANGUAGE OF INCLUSION

A British politician, Pearl Strachan Hurd, famously once said *'Handle them carefully, for words have more power than atom bombs.'* The National Disability Authority makes recommendations about the language and phraseology that people should use when describing individuals with disabilities ([www.nda.ie](http://www.nda.ie)). As mentioned above, Allen and Cowdery (2012) stress that a child with a special educational need or an additional need is first and foremost a child. The 'person first' approach is based upon the premise of inclusion and the perspective that all children are children first and foremost before any disability or difficulty that they might experience.

*'If we put the person before the disability, our statements define what the person has, not what the person is.'* (Snow, 2009)

Person First Language (PFL) says much about the values and attitudes that we have in relation to people with disabilities. It is a more accurate and respectful way to communicate about children with special educational needs. Children with SEN should not be defined by their diagnoses, they are children first. As practitioners, professionals and parents, we need to use these 'diagnoses' to ensure that the proper resources are put in place to meet the child's needs and also to ensure that we are all clear about these needs and how they should be met. The language that we use really matters. It can raise or lower expectations which can have a significant impact on outcomes for the child. When we use 'person-first' language, we respect the potential of children with special educational needs and we also can have a positive impact on society as a whole. Of course, the appropriateness of terminology changes over time, so it is important for ECCE practitioners to keep up to date with those changes over the duration of their careers.

### EXAMPLES OF PERSON-FIRST LANGUAGE

- ✓ He has an autistic spectrum disorder.
- ✗ He is autistic.

- ✓ He uses a wheelchair.
- ✗ He is wheelchair bound.

- ✓ I have a child with Down Syndrome in the toddler room.
- ✗ I have a Down Syndrome child in the toddler room.

- ✓ She has a disability.
- ✗ She is disabled.

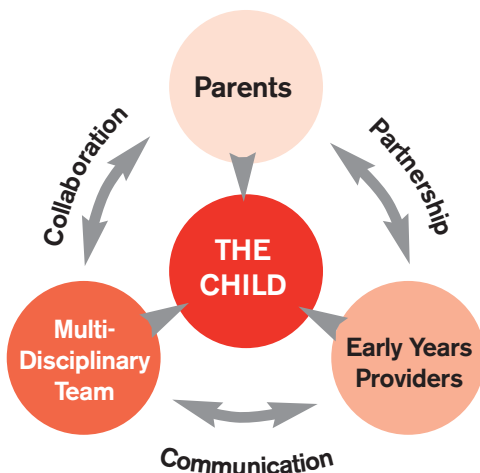
- ✓ She has an intellectual disability.
- ✗ She suffers from a mental handicap.

### PARENTS ARE KEY PARTNERS IN INCLUSIVE PRACTICE

Parents are the first and primary educators of their children and they play a central role in supporting Inclusive Practice (McCarthy and Moloney, 2010; NCCA, 2009; Dardig, 2008). According to *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009), children learn about the world and their place in it through their conversations, play activities, and routines with parents and families. Parents know their child better than anyone and they can provide key information about a child's priority needs, their likes and dislikes, and any issues that might trigger a negative response in the child. The early years practitioner can then use this information to inform their planning when devising individualised programmes for the child.

Communication with parents is the first and most important step in terms of inclusive practice. It is a two way process and communicating with parents is really important in terms of sharing information about the child's progress in the setting and the home. Practitioners and parents can share strategies that are being used to support the child's learning, providing opportunities for reinforcing learning in the home as well as in the ECCE setting. Through engaging with parents and sharing information with them in an open and inclusive manner, mutual respect and trust can be fostered. Furthermore, where there are positive relationships between parents and practitioners, consistent approaches can be used at home and in the early years setting. This can have a very positive impact on the outcomes for the child.

As you can see in Figure 1 (overleaf), which is taken from the *Framework for Action for the Inclusion of Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Education Settings* (McCarthy and Moloney, 2010), the child with SEN is at the centre of the communicative process. In order to ensure successful inclusion there needs to be effective communication between the parents, the early years providers and the multi-disciplinary team. At the heart of all of this is the child with special educational needs. It is essential that all partners listen to and communicate effectively with the child.



**Figure 1 Communication for Successful Inclusion**

### LISTENING TO THE VOICE OF THE CHILD

The idea of listening to the voice of the child was pioneered by Loris Malaguzzi, an Italian teacher and psychologist who viewed all children as 'rich in potential, strong, powerful and competent' and with the right to express themselves through the 'one hundred languages of children' (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1998). Communication is one of the cornerstones of children's learning and development. Early years practitioners play a significant role in promoting speech, language and communication in children with SEN. Some children with special educational needs may progress slowly in developing language while others may have significantly delayed speech and language skills. Children who have physical disabilities may be unable to articulate clear speech sounds while others may be functioning at the pre-verbal stage of communication. Some young children with autism, for example, may be non-verbal and children with Down Syndrome may have difficulties with articulation due to low muscle tone in their tongue or lips. In cases where a child has articulation difficulties, early years practitioners may be unable to understand what a child is saying and may need to depend on contextual and visual clues to understand a child's speech.

It is vitally important to ensure that children with SEN have a means of communicating their needs and wishes and that they are provided with a mechanism through which to make their choices known. More importantly, early years practitioners need to tune in very carefully to children with SEN to make sure that they hear the child's voice or non-verbal communication and that they respond appropriately to the child's choices. Child agency is essential in promoting a child's independence and in enabling them to learn at their own pace. The following extract from the *Framework for Action for the Inclusion of*

*Children with Special Needs in Early Childhood Settings* (McCarthy and Moloney, 2010: 17) outlines a number of strategies that can be used to support communication in children with SEN:

#### General strategies to support communication, speech and language development

- Get down to the child's level when you are speaking to him/her. Face the child, make eye contact. If the child is small or sitting in a wheelchair, bend down so that you are facing him/her at his/her eye-level.
- Speak slowly and clearly and check for understanding. Be aware of your tone of voice.
- Make language activities and conversations a positive experience.
- Encourage the child to make non-speech sounds and to copy sounds in his/her environment.
- Play guessing games, role-play and use puppets to promote language development.
- Sing songs and recite lots of nursery rhymes, especially those with repetitive lines.
- Listen attentively when the child communicates and show interest in what s/he is saying. Make sure that only one adult communicates with the child at a time.
- Talk to the children about what they are doing and what the other children are doing.
- Support verbal input with visual supports (concrete items, pictures, symbols, drawings, key words).
- Use activities that strengthen the muscles of the mouth such as blowing bubbles and playing musical instruments that require blowing.
- Use a 'reduced language' approach (McCarthy, 2001). Avoid using elaborate sentences, focus on key words/phrases only and build on the child's own language. For example, if the child says 'boy kick ball' you repeat what the child has said and build on it slightly, saying 'yes, the boy is kicking the ball'.
- Name objects and add vocabulary about these objects as appropriate, for example, characteristics and function). For example, the red car, the ball rolls.
- If necessary, repeat any instructions that you have given to the whole group with the individual child. Check that s/he has understood by asking him/her to repeat back what s/he has to do.
- Allow the child 'wait' time to think and formulate a response. As a general rule, count to 5 or 6 before interjecting.

## CONCLUSION

Early childhood practitioners have a duty to meet the individual needs of a diverse group of children within the early childhood setting. This requires knowledge of each individual child, an awareness of their needs, and a willingness and ability to respond appropriately to them. To a large extent, inclusion is about having a positive attitude, about 'seeing individual differences not as problems, but as opportunities for enriching learning' (UNESCO, 2005). As discussed within this article, it is vital that the child is not defined by his/her diagnosis, but that

each child is seen first and foremost as a person. A positive approach not only unlocks the practitioner's potential in terms of supporting each individual child in their personal learning journey, it ensures that inclusion is at the core of practice within settings. If we listen to the one hundred languages of children and are open to the multiple ways of learning and doing, then we are well on the way to being a responsive caring practitioner who puts children's needs first. Ultimately, in such an environment, all children benefit, not just the child with special educational needs.

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# Working With Diverse Families in Early Years Services



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## FAMILY AND DIVERSITY

In order to work with diverse families in early years services there is first a need to reflect on two key concepts – ‘family’ and ‘diversity’. What do we mean by these terms? Who is included and who is excluded?

The family is arguably the most important institution we have (Haskey et al., 1999). Taylor (2011) writes that there is no correct answer to the question of what the family is. The perception is

that it is a simple structure that nurtures the needs of the individuals within. The reality of families is that they are complex structures that, while sharing common characteristics, differ in their composition. Defining family by a list of people who should be included or excluded is not adequate. Drucker (1999) believed that a family should be considered in terms of what the family members share and how they congregate and interact with each other. Love, commitment and nurturance are primary qualities and recognising these supportive and emotional bonds is what gives us our family.

The majority of families in Ireland are two parent families with two or three children. This family structure is often called the

traditional family. However, there are many other types of structure evident in Ireland today and it is important that all of these are respected and valued in our society. Examples of non-traditional families included:

- Lone Parent Families
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Families
- Adoptive Families
- Blended Families and Step-Families
- Cohabiting Families
- Foster and Group Home Families
- Multi-ethnic Families
- Grandparent-Led Families
- Extended Families

'Diversity' quite simply refers to the fact that families are made up of distinct qualities, characteristics, traditions and people. It is not a value-based word but a word that provides us with the information that there is difference in the families that surround us.

Siolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (2006) states that 'Quality early childhood settings acknowledge and respect diversity and ensure that all children and families have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.' This can only be achieved if we respect the diversity of families in Irish societies and ensure that they are all visible in the early years environment.

### ATTITUDE OF EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONER

Early years practitioners engage with diverse families on a daily basis. To ensure that this relationship is beneficial to all involved, it is important to explore personal attitudes to diverse family structures and identify inaccurate or negative stereotypes and prejudices. Identification of these attitudes is the first step to dispelling them and to becoming comfortable with difference. 'Only then can they develop the awareness, insights and skills to implement an inclusive diversity and equality programme with the objective of ensuring all children and their families are protected from discrimination and encouraged to express their diversity.' (OMC, 2006)

Every individual holds stereotypes and prejudices. An example of a **stereotype** is that 'all families have two parents'. An example of **prejudice** is that 'women are caring so children of lesbian parents will be very well reared and cared for'. Obviously stereotypes and prejudices are not necessarily negative or damaging. They provide a means of categorising the information that we receive. The difficulty arises when we

hold stereotypes and prejudices that are inaccurate or negative and that go unchallenged thus leading to discriminatory behaviour, for example, 'Grannies are too old to be Mummies.' Such an attitude could result in an undervaluing of grandparents as the main care-givers of a child and could be damaging to the individual and family identity of a child who lives in a grandparent-led family.

When an early years practitioner values the whole family there is a welcoming of this family and an inclusion of the family in all aspects of the early years centre.

### RELATIONSHIP WITH PARENTS/GUARDIANS

**'Parents [guardians] are the most important people in their children's early lives.**

**Children learn about the world and their place in it through their conversations, play activities, and routines with parents [guardians] and families. Parents [guardians] can also support children's learning in out-of-home settings, such as childminding settings, crèches, playgroups, pre-schools, and primary schools. By working together parents [guardians] and practitioners can enhance children's learning and development.'** (NCCA, 2009)

Establishing a strong partnership fosters a trusting relationship between the early years practitioner and the parents/guardian resulting in the sharing of key information about members of the child's family, family traditions and cultures, etc. This knowledge ensures that the child can be accurately represented in the early years setting and promotes a strong sense of identity and belonging. This partnership also means that the childhood professional can support the parent/guardian in validating their family structure and helping their child to understand and accept that while their family unit is perfect for them, others may have a difficulty with it. The child can be supported in challenging the attitude of the individual involved or they can be supported in understanding that sometimes people are wrong but don't want to change their mind and that this shouldn't influence how the child views their own family or how they feel about themselves.

## VISIBILITY IN THE ENVIRONMENT – FAMILY PROOFING YOUR CENTRE

‘...the Family Wall is a practical tool that can contribute to building respect for diversity amongst all children, families and staff involved in an ECEC setting’.

(Murray & Urban 2012)

The Family Wall provides a space for displaying family photos in the centre. By displaying photos supplied by the families, and by engaging with them on a daily basis, these pictures serve as a focal point for discussion. The Family Wall supports the children to develop a positive sense of who they are and a feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and a community, thus embedding the theme of Identity and Belonging in practice.

The Family Wall accurately represents all the families of the early years centre. Children will see that not every family is like their family and that this is okay. In one centre a child observed that ‘*Mary’s* family is all wrong.’ When asked why this was so, the child said ‘because in that photo *Mary* has a different Daddy than [her brother] *John* and that’s not fair’. Children assume that all families are like their own and the Family Wall allows them to actually see that while families have similarities, they also differ in so many ways. It also gives the early years practitioner the opportunity to engage in discussion about the child’s perceptions and to address stereotypes and prejudices before they become entrenched.

It is important that the books and images in the environment represent the family structures of the children attending the centre. Children learn from the adults around them but they also learn from what they see in their immediate environment. Books provide a great medium for representing diverse families and it is important that majority and minority family structures are represented.

Other materials such as jigsaw puzzles, family folders, board games, etc. should all include diverse family structures or allow the child to create the family structure that is real for them.

Mother’s Day, Father’s Day, Grandparent’s Day each have a place in our calendar. Some centres choose not to celebrate Father’s Day because, in a number of instances, the child’s father may not be living with the child or may not be in the child’s life at the present time. There can also often be a struggle as to whether these events should be celebrated if there has been a death of the person who holds the role in a child’s life. These days are commercially celebrated so the

children will see them advertised on television and in the shops. They will hear their peers talking about giving cards or presents to their Mother/Father/Grandparent. Instead of denying the day, early years practitioners can explore what these concepts mean to individual children and identify ways in which each child can celebrate the day in a manner that is meaningful to them and their family.

## RESPONDING TO BIAS

It is important to be observant of interactions between all those who participate in the life of the early years centre. This includes the children, staff, parents, students, visitors, etc. Observation is central to identifying bias and discrimination and to combating it. *Is Peter intentionally or unintentionally excluding Mary from activities that he leads because she has lesbian parents and he has issues with homosexuality? Is Susan being excluded from playing Mummies and Daddies because she ‘does not have a Daddy’?* Each of these scenarios must be engaged with or else the bias is reinforced.

The Anti-Bias Approach to Diversity and Equality in early childhood was developed in the US by Louise Derman-Sparks and the ABC taskforce (Derman-Sparks, 1989). This approach has four goals for children that build on each other and support respect and appreciation of difference. These goals are:

1. To support children’s identity and sense of belonging.
2. To support children to become comfortable with difference.
3. To foster each child’s critical thinking about bias.
4. To empower children to stand up for themselves and others in the face of bias. (OMC, 2006)

Engaging with each incident of bias gives the children and adults the message that it is not okay to exclude, humiliate, ridicule or otherwise hurt someone because of who they are or because of their family structure. It is important that this engagement is not confrontational and that learning is supported. Discussion, puppets, role play, storytelling, music, painting, etc. can all be used to explore incidents of bias as they occur or at a later stage when emotions are not heightened.

Team meetings, support and supervision meetings, mentorship programmes, diversity and equality training, etc. all provide avenues for the childhood professional to develop skills in reflecting on their attitudes and practice and on the attitudes and practice of their colleagues and of the parents/guardians of children attending the centre. This reflection is preparatory to supporting changes to individual practice, to the policies and procedures of the centre or to how these policies are implemented.

## CONCLUSIONS

Diversity is central to early childhood care and education. It is embedded in the early years practice frameworks, Siolta (2006) and Aistear (2009), and we are given guidance on how to engage with it in the *Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers* (2006). However, very often we think of diversity in terms of people from other countries and from other cultures. We fail to see the diversity that exists in relation to family structure and by doing so we miss the opportunity to support the child's understanding of the many different types of family in their community.

For children to develop healthy individual and group identities, it is important that early years practitioners are proactive in exploring the different family structures that exist in the child's community. For this to happen the adult needs to

be aware of their own attitudes in relation to differing family structures and, where necessary, to work on these to ensure that they are not imparting negative messages about a family structure, either intentionally or unintentionally. Providing children with an environment that visually represents a variety of family structures will encourage them to question what they see and allow the practitioner to support them in their learning. The Family Wall is ideal in this regard as it represents all the families of the centre and so is of particular relevance to the children present. If diversity of family structure is not really present in the centre, it is still important to explore the concept as the children should be comfortable with all areas of difference as represented in our society. This is the only way to develop a society that is respectful and welcoming of diversity.



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# Useful Resources on Equality & Diversity

The following resources are available to borrow from Barnardos Library.  
You can search the library catalogue on [www.barnardos.ie/library](http://www.barnardos.ie/library)

**Changing Faces of Ireland: Exploring the Lives of Immigrant and Ethnic Minority Children**

Sense Publishers, 2011

**Count Me In: Exploring Cultural Diversity Amongst Children and Young People**

Save the Children, 2004

**Developing Anti-Discriminatory Practice in Early Childhood: a How to Guide**

Barnardos; Cork City Childcare Company Ltd

**Diversity in Early Childhood: a Collection of Essays**

National Children's Resource Centre, 2002

**Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood: an Irish Perspective**

Gill & MacMillan, 2012

**Early Childhoods in a Changing World**

Trentham Books, 2010

**Every Child Matters: Developing Anti-Discriminatory Practice in Early Childhood Services**

National Children's Resource Centre, 2004

**Equality and Inclusion in Early Childhood**

Hodder Education, 2012

**Festivals**

David Fulton Publishers, 2004

**Gender Equity in the Early Years**

Open University Press, 2004

**I am a human**

Kilbaha Publishing, 2005

**Life Stories: Exploring Identity with Young People**

Youth Action against Racism and Discrimination (YARD), 2004

**Meeting the Needs of Ethnic Minority Children: Including Refugee, Black and Mixed Parentage Children**

Jessica Kingsley, 2000

**Náionáin le Chéile. Early Childhood Identity & Belonging Programme. Educator's Handbook**

Donegal County Childcare Committee, 2011

**Understanding Cultural Diversity in the Early Years**

Sage, 2010

**Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years**

Trentham Books, 2002

**Where to From Here:**

**Inter-Ethnic Relations Among Children in Ireland**

Liffey Press, 2011

**Working with Ethnically and Culturally Diverse Families and Children: A Review of Best Practice and Guidelines**

National Children's Resource Centre, 2005

**You Are Welcome: Activities to Promote Self-Esteem and Resilience in Children from a Diverse Community, Including Asylum Seekers and Refugees**

Lucky Duck Publishing, 2004