Promoting Diversity and Equality in
Early Childhood Care, Education and Training -
The 'éist' Project

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The purpose of this workshop is to highlight the work which has been undertaken by the ‘éist’ project in relation to the need for, and development of, a diversity and equality training approach for the early childhood sector. The initial work has been completed but much needs to be done to disseminate and provided a truly egalitarian approach to early childhood work. The quotes below set the context for our discussion on promoting diversity and equality in early childhood care, education and training.

What the Papers Say:
- 29th Aug 2004: Special Report: Traveller Suicides. Outlawed, stigmatised, antiquated depressed for many Travellers, the only outlet is suicide.
- 7th Sept 2004: Rise in racial assaults blamed on referendum.
- 9th Sept 2004: Lack of services in deprived area major cause of racism.
- 10th Sept 2004: We were beaten up for being Russian.
- 14th Sept 2004: President describes racism as ‘a cancer’.
- 15th Sept 2004: 50% of victims of persistent bullying feel suicidal.
(The Irish Times, Sunday Tribune and Irish Independent Newspapers)

What Children Say:
- “You can’t play Mummies and Daddies cos you don’t have a Daddy”: 4 year old girl.
- “Mummies don’t drive”: 3 year old boy to playmate.
- “Catholics are the same as masked men. They smash windows”: 6 year old girl living in Northern Ireland.
- “A Protestant is a bad person because they want to kill all Catholics”: 4 year old girl living in Northern Ireland
- “Look at those disgusting Travellers”: 5 year old boy observing settled men sitting on wall drinking beer
- “I am going to make my eyes straight and blue”: 4 year old Kim to her teacher when Sarah said she had ugly eyes.
- “You’re brown so you’re dirty”: 3 year old in preschool to a black child.
(Source: Connolly et al 2002; Ross, and Ryan, 1990; Wright, 1992)
Questions of Quality

What Trainees in UK Say:

(Notes: student teachers all white)

- “We only had one lad who is a Muslim so it doesn’t really apply to us”.
- “We do not have problems here because we have no black children”.
- “I refuse to acknowledge that the child is black because I refuse to see colour as an issue; all people are exactly the same in my eyes and I treat them as such”.
- “I know he’s being picked on because he is black but he gives as good back, so it doesn’t matter”.

(Jones, 1999)

Every generation has the opportunity to choose or change which values and attitudes will be passed on to the next. In Ireland, early childhood carers and educators have a very important role to play in supporting all children in their developing sense of self. We must all continue to learn how to provide effective services to all children. In order to learn how to be effective, we must reflect fully on our own values and thinking and assess how they affect our own practice.

Diversity, when we adults are effective, can be a very positive, enriching source of vitality and growth. When we adults are not effective, diversity can be a source of conflict and hurt. Self-awareness is vital here and it includes recognising and understanding our intentions and expectations and being able to apply these insights within our own practice.

Children learn very early that not everyone is treated fairly and this affects how they view the reality of difference. We know that it is not the differences which cause problems, but how we react to the differences. Children learn from that reaction or response.

Background to Pavee Point and the ‘éist’ project

Travellers are a small indigenous minority who have been part of Irish society for centuries. They have a unique distinct value system with their own language, customs and traditions.

Pavee Point is a voluntary, non-governmental organisation committed to the attainment of human rights for Irish Travellers. The group is comprised of Travellers and members of the majority population working in partnership to address the needs of Travellers as a minority ethnic group experiencing exclusion and marginalisation.

The Early Childhood Programme is an integral part of work in Pavee Point in promoting the needs and rights of the Traveller child. Over the past six years Pavee Point has taken
a leadership role in promoting diversity awareness and training in the early childhood sector in Ireland. In line with the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989), Pavee Point seeks to ensure that the voices of Traveller children are heard, that their identity and culture are respected, that they are protected from discrimination, and that their right to intercultural education becomes a reality.

Pavee Point recognises that many issues faced by Traveller children are not exclusive to them and that the seeds of prejudice and attitudinal development are sown in early childhood.

Prejudice and racism are topics which elicit strong views in whatever forum they are raised. While many people feel strongly about racism and the harm it causes, there are also those who deny its existence, and even some who condone or justify it. A surprisingly common view is that very young children are unaware of and unaffected by racism and other forms of discrimination. A strong body of international evidence contradicts this view (Goodman, 1970; Milner, 1983; Ross and Ryan, 1990; Van Ausdale and Fagan, 2001). I believe that prejudice and racism are harmful, not just to those who are targeted by it, but also to those who practice it. Children are not immune to the effects of prejudice and discrimination. Indeed the foundations are laid in early childhood. Only recently in Ireland is there an emerging recognition that prejudice and racism are societal challenges that cannot be ignored.

Pavee Point is addressing these challenges and is seeking to enhance mainstream training by developing a ‘diversity and equality’ approach for the early childhood sector and by providing training to meet the needs of both majority and minority children. This approach addresses all discriminatory grounds laid out in the Equal Status Act (Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform [DJELR], 2000b).

The ‘éist’ Project

The ‘éist’ project, funded under the Equal Opportunities Childcare Programme (EOCP) (DJELR, 2004) sub-measure 3 (Quality Improvement Programme), grew out of the realisation that early childhood practitioners did not have access to appropriate diversity and equality training and were not being adequately resourced to deal with equality issues and areas such as racism and discrimination in the early childhood setting.
The project was funded for a three-year period and set out to raise awareness of the need for a comprehensive equality and diversity training approach relevant to the early childhood sector and to develop such a programme. This training approach has been successfully promoted, developed and tested across the sector at pre-service and in-service levels and in both urban and rural settings. Aware of the increasing and immediate need for training and the absence of diversity and equality trainers, ‘éist’ worked closely with the County Childcare Committees (CCCs), developing Awareness Raising Training Packs and delivering training on their use for CCCs nationally. The project also developed a series of posters and sequence cards depicting Irish children from minority backgrounds; produced 4 Traveller jigsaws depicting the life of the Traveller and provided resource lists on diversity issues and equipment for early childhood practitioners.

‘éist’ made submissions promoting the inclusion of diversity, equality and anti-racism issues at policy level. The project also worked on diversity and equality guidelines for practitioners in the early childhood sector through the advisory subgroup to the National Coordination Childcare Committee with the DJLER. Throughout the duration of the project, we also operated at an international level, working with the DECEIT network to develop a European diversity and equality training manual.

Following the pilot project evaluations, the project compiled a training manual ‘Ar an mBealach’, which in English means, ‘On the Way’. The aim of ‘Ar an mBealach’ is to support the mainstreaming of a high quality diversity and equality training programme for the early childhood sector. It provides a ten-day programme which reflects on attitudes, builds a sound knowledge base and provides opportunities to develop skills for implementation in practice.

The ‘Ar an mBealach’ training programme addresses issues both for the practitioner and the child. It focuses on issues of inequality, racism and discrimination with particular reference to the Irish context. It looks at terminology associated with diversity and explores ways of handling difficult situations, along with the consequences of ignoring diversity. It takes a goal-oriented approach looking specifically at identity development, difference, critical thinking and how to engage with others in the face of prejudice or discrimination. The manual also presents research on children’s attitudinal development and looks at policy implications.

The training programme was very well received and proved to be successful. Below are some of the comments the trainees made during the pilot evaluation:
• “The training was an eye opener”.
• “Helped me to reflect on my values and attitudes and uncomfortable feelings re diversity and equality.”
• “How under resourced I was in relation to diversity and equality I had no idea re diversity.”
• “Terminology-difficult to learn and need to be careful; the meaning of words I use without thinking”. 
• “Not as familiar with legislation as I thought I was”.
• “Books that I had used in the past rarely reflected disability ... had not really looked at books as a way of reflecting diversity”.
• “The research on attitudinal development in young children was very interesting and real eye opener”.
• “Feel a bit clearer on my direction with all of this – I was aiming too high in my ideas for change within my setting and myself. I need to start small”.
• “More comfortable and confident in dealing with the scenarios presented to us”.
• “Having a plan set out on paper helps keep our actions very focused”.
• “This is process and will take time”.

The Future
This phase of the project has come to an end with the development of ‘Ar an mBealach’. The challenge now is to source funding to train trainers to deliver and mainstream the programme at national level.

We are all aware that this work is not about a quick fix, nor is ‘Ar an mBealach’ a simple recipe book. Diversity and equality training requires investment and commitment. There is no doubt that diversity and equality issues are challenging and these take many forms. To begin with, it involves convincing people that this work was/is needed and is essential both at statutory and voluntary levels. A further challenge for reflective work of this nature is the seeking of funding in a society that is focused on numeric rather than ‘quality’ outcomes. The sector needs to commit to the long-term investment of time and resources for future gain. There is now an opportunity to embrace the challenges and work together to mainstream diversity and equality work, to bring about change in the training we provide and ultimately benefit all children attending our services.

The Next Step
The Bernard van Leer Foundation is currently processing a proposal to support a preparatory phase for ‘éist’ to undertake the next stage of training. It will require working with the sector, in partnership with government, to further the mainstreaming of the work and in particular to access funding for the future.
Equality issues should permeate the whole setting, policies, procedure, practice, behaviours, and structure. But this cannot happen without careful planning and training. If we are concerned with the whole child, the whole curriculum and the need to provide a quality service to families and children—as all early years settings are—we cannot ignore equality. (Iram Siraj-Blatchford 1994)

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References


