

# The Long Shadow of Discrimination

A call to comprehensively address diversity, equality, and inclusion in early childhood education and care



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This article draws attention to the need for political leadership and decisive action in addressing diversity, equality and inclusion in early childhood education and care. Recent political and social events have again raised issues of discrimination and racism in Irish society, with profound implications for the lives of young children. We must move beyond rhetoric and take action.

1998 saw the first national early childhood conference addressing diversity, equality and inclusion in Ireland, titled 'Education without Prejudice: A Challenge for Early Years Educators in Ireland' and hosted by Pavee Point. Doreen Reynolds, sharing her experience of racism in Ireland, said, 'I am not people's assumption'! She spoke about her concern for her young son:

*My son was first a victim at the age of three when he came home from nursery school, obviously upset and angry, and said, 'Black is yuck, Mummy?' And I thought to myself, Here we go, how do I handle this? Trying not to take it too out of hand, because as I said, I tried to understand the way Irish people see me, but my child was a victim of racism. (Pavee Point, 2001)*

Chrissy Joyce, a young Traveller woman, gave voice to her experience of racism in Irish society, specifically in the maternity and education systems, drawing attention to her emancipation as a mother and mature student:

*There is nothing like having the responsibility of small children to make you question what is fair and what is just in a society that fails to treat all children equally, regardless of what group they belong to. On a personal level, no more was I prepared to go back at twenty-six years of age and sit in a classroom and deny my identity and deny the experience that has made me the person that I am. (Pavee Point, 2001)*

While revisiting these testimonials recently, it struck me how little has changed in the past twenty-two years in addressing racism and discrimination at individual, societal, and service levels. Of course, there has been welcome movement in terms of policies, strategies, and messaging – but how much has really changed in practice? Only last week the Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) found that 'Irish Travellers have the highest rates of acute poverty, the lowest

employment rates and face some of the worst discrimination of six Traveller and Roma communities across Europe' (Holland, 2020).

In May 2020 the Black Lives Matter campaign became headline news when George Floyd was killed by police in the US (O'Brien, 2020). While there have been many shocking incidents of racial violence by police officers, this killing was a catalyst, an exemplar which highlighted the issue of racism not only in the US but globally, including in Ireland. Most of us felt revulsion and shock. The then Taoiseach Leo Varadkar condemned racism, saying, 'It is right to be angered by injustice. Racism too is a virus, transmitted at an early age, perpetuated by prejudice, sustained by systems' (MerrionStreet.ie, 2020).

We know there are excellent examples from individuals and communities working to address racism and other -isms in our society and our institutions. The policy discourse, however, continues to 'other' Travellers, asylum seekers, and refugees despite the rhetoric for change. In Mac Gréil's (2011) seminal work on prejudice he warns that if the state remains passive or does nothing to support Travellers, there will be consequences for their inclusion. The work of McGinnity et al. in 2017 on discrimination reaffirms Mac Gréil's work.

Some excellent policy documents and guidelines to address exclusion have also been developed in various government departments. In general, however, their implementation has been inadequate. The bottom line is that we have systemically ignored the most marginalised and oppressed in our society, including Travellers and asylum seekers living in Direct Provision centres.

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For example, the Intercultural Education in Primary and Post-Primary Guidelines for Schools (NCCA, 2005b) have never been properly implemented or appropriately resourced. The 2006 Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers (OMC, 2006) had a similar fate. At the 1998 conference, Mary Wallace, Minister for State at the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform said:

*It is the time to concentrate efforts to rectify the situation by developing an anti-prejudice curriculum, which enables all children to develop positive attitudes so that they can accept, learn and appreciate differences of 'race', culture, language disability, and gender. (Pavee Point, 2001)*

Eighteen years later, Katherine Zappone, Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, wrote in the foreword of the Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) Charter and Guidelines:

*Inclusion and quality go hand in hand. An inclusive environment where equality is upheld and diversity respected, is fundamental to supporting children to build positive identities, develop a sense of belonging and realise their full potential. (DCYA, 2016)*

Training has accompanied the DEI Charter and Guidelines, which is very welcome. But unfortunately the training is not mandatory, nor does it have

resourcing incentives or accreditation for attendance in an already overburdened early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector (Murray, 2017). While important and useful, it is a fifteen-hour programme, which is not enough. If early childhood is to contribute to challenging stereotypes and prejudices, we all have to believe it is necessary, and then proactively and comprehensively address it.

ECEC has a role in laying the foundation for children to view diversity and difference as a positive and rich gift to our society. None of us wants to think that we may have negative thoughts or feelings about diversity, but we are all touched and affected by societal biases, both individually and institutionally. The early childhood sector is a microcosm of broader society and can unknowingly perpetuate and normalise societal inequalities.

There is evidence that ECEC educators have varying levels of comfort when addressing diversity, mainly because they see it as a burden to young children (Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2016). This, however, denies the reality of families. The discourses of diversity and equality available to educators can make a difference to how they perceive and approach working with children. These can vary from assimilation to multicultural approach, social justice, and critical pedagogical approaches.

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No policy or guideline, however well developed, will make a difference on its own. The only way to achieve and embed change is to embrace the uncomfortable and begin with a critical reflection on our own values and attitudes in order to unpack how we perceive the world. How often do we do that, if at all, in our training programmes for ECEC, or how much time is given to that exploration? To be truly anti-racist or anti-sexist, it is necessary to unpack our own comfort and discomfort when looking at diversity and equality issues.

Learning and unlearning are part of the process. It is not enough to simply do inclusive activities; it is necessary to be aware of the big issues affecting those who are marginalised and discriminated against in society at economic, social, and political levels. This means recognising the political nature of our work and moving towards a more transformative pedagogy. The DEI Charter and Guidelines offer an opportunity to begin the exploration of self, and give practical guidance to embed a critical Anti-bias approach into practice (Derman-Sparks and Anti-Bias Task Force, 1989; Derman Sparks and Olsen Edwards, 2020).

Demi Isaac Oviawe, an actor in the *Young Offenders* television programme, has spoken about her experience of racism in Cork:

*I've been called the n-word thousands of times, but my youngest brother is only four, so it's really terrible. The children who called my brother this name were not much older than him – between the ages of about four and seven. (Horgan, 2020)*

Senator Eileen Flynn, the first Traveller appointed to a government position, has spoken about her experiences of racism and her personal challenge in owning her identity as a Traveller. She describes her biggest fear:

*Billie [her daughter] being treated less than her peers, being bullied in school. And say if she's in Irish dancing or if she's in football or boxing or whatever it is my child wants to do, that if it's a competitive game or a competitive sport that somebody will just be nasty to her and call her a knacker or a pikey or something. I don't want Billie growing up in that kind of environment, but I want her to be proud of who she is. (Hogan, 2020)*

Covid-19 has brought serious challenges to an already stretched ECEC sector. Those living in marginalisation, such as Travellers and those in Direct Provision, have been especially affected. Just because racism is not visible in a setting does not mean it's not present. Minister Roderic O'Gorman and the Department for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration have the responsibility and capacity to create change for those who are marginalised and often silenced. A first step is to recognise and pro-actively support the mainstreaming of anti-racism, anti-sexism, anti-homophobic, and anti-ableism training for those for whom the Minister is responsible and seeks to serve.

Most importantly, this also applies to the early childhood sector. Because this work is about alleviating human suffering, there is a moral requirement on us all to begin and continue critical engagement with these issues. The social imperative for those who hold the power, make the rules, and distribute the funds is to create change through leadership, strategic planning, and resourcing for implementation. The Minister has a unique opportunity to use his brief to do just that and create meaningful change, starting with early childhood.

**“ ECEC educators are in an ideal position to make a positive difference in the lives of all children and their families. ”**

In the forthcoming Workforce Development Plan for the ECEC sector, it is imperative that mandatory diversity and equality training, including a critical pedagogical approach, be mainstreamed in both continuous professional development and pre-service education. There is now an opportunity to fully implement this work in early childhood. It is necessary, and ECEC educators are in an ideal position to make a positive difference in this critical area and to the lives of *all* children and their families.

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## ENDNOTES

1. Doreen Reynolds was a strong advocate for an anti-bias approach in early childhood in Ireland. She left us too early, shortly after she gave me her paper for the conference proceedings. May she rest in peace.

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The whole world is like the human body with its various members. Pain in one member is felt in the whole body.

– Mahatma Gandhi