

Embracing Diversity, Nurturing Integration Project (EDNIP)

A school-based response to Ireland's increasingly diverse classrooms

This article outlines the background to and model of a pioneering initiative with five DEIS band 1 primary schools in Limerick city that seeks to support and promote the integration of migrant families in school and community life.

Background and context

The Embracing Diversity, Nurturing Integration Project (EDNIP) is a research and intervention partnership initiative that works with five DEIS band 1 primary schools in Limerick city to promote and support the integration of migrant children and families into school and community life. The schools involved are Our Lady of Lourdes NS, Presentation Primary, Scoil Iosagáin CBS, St John's Girl's and Infant Boy's School, and St Michael's Infant School.

Ireland has become increasingly multicultural and diverse. Census 2022 data indicates that 13.8% of the population has a nationality other than Irish and that 170,597 people have a dual Irish nationality. Over 750,000 identified as speaking a language other than English or Irish at home, an increase of 23% from 2016. Census 2022 saw a decrease in those who identify as Catholic (69%), with Church of Ireland being the second-largest religion, followed by Orthodox and Islam, and a doubling of the number of Hindus since 2016. In 2022, new ethnic group/background categories were included in census questions, such as Roma, Indian/Pakistani/Bangladeshi, and Arab (CSO, 2023).

Our changing society and demographics have permeated schools around the country, with students from diverse ethnic backgrounds, cultures, traditions, religious



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practices, and home languages present in many classrooms. Research on the DEIS programme has long established that DEIS schools have a greater prevalence of children from non-English-speaking backgrounds (Smyth et al., 2015). Across the five EDNIP schools alone, there are 1,020 children speaking 36 languages, from over 46 nationalities and 17 religious backgrounds.

Migrants in Ireland are not homogeneous and range from those who are well-qualified and proficient in English to those arriving from conflict regions with little resources (Hennessy, 2021). Some migrant families are at greater risk of being adversely affected by economic, health, educational, and social inequality, compounded by social isolation. Changing demographics coupled with complex social issues have significant implications for our schools, our communities, and Irish society; EDNIP is a school-based response to this.

The initiative evolved through discussion with members of the PLUS and OSCAILT networks of DEIS schools facilitated by the Transforming Education through Dialogue (TED) Project, Curriculum Development Unit, Mary Immaculate College (MIC), Limerick (Bourke, 2022). The current phase (2021–2024) is funded through the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) National Integration Fund, Rethink Ireland Education Innovation Fund, and a philanthropic donation.

EDNIP's model and aspirations, detailed in Higgins et al. (2020), mirror the aim of the Department of Education and Skills' (2010) Intercultural Strategy: 'to ensure that all students experience an education that respects the diversity of values, beliefs, languages and traditions in Irish society' (p.1).

The participating schools' experiences and existing practice in supporting migrant families underpinned its development. Schools strongly welcomed children and families from a diverse range of backgrounds. Staff identified many positive outcomes from the increasing diversity in their schools, including enriching the school culture, support from parents, and the joy of working with children from diverse backgrounds. They recognised their own need for support to embrace diversity and enhance inclusive, respectful learning environments. They emphasised the need for a holistic approach which included parents and the wider migrant community, and they identified challenges, including the difficulties of teaching children with little English and some children having little or no prior experience of schooling (Higgins et al., 2020).

The EDNIP model

For integration to be successful, a whole-school approach is essential. EDNIP understood that building an effective model would involve becoming embedded into each school through a bespoke, flexible model of integration

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that is not prescriptive. EDNIP facilitates schools to decide on what works best in their unique context to support their individual school communities, while also offering opportunities to share best practice across schools through a community of practice.

EDNIP has a strong organisational structure. It is managed by a project management committee (PMC) comprising the principals of participating schools and representation from MIC, Limerick City and County Council, Limerick and Clare Education and Training Board, Limerick Education Centre, and Tusla Education Support Services. Members make substantial contributions by sharing expertise, resources, and facilities and proactively working with the project leader to expand and deliver programmes in schools.

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In each partner school, school integration committees provide a platform to address individual school needs and develop school plans. These meetings are attended by the home school community liaison coordinators, class teachers, special education teachers, principals, and parents.

EDNIP is embedded in the life of the school through an intervention model that maximises opportunities to connect with the school community. It is a 'wrap-around' model that is multi-layered, holistic, and adaptive and offers in-school interventions, whole-school events, after-school activities, and a school holiday programme. Examples of in-school interventions include intercultural lessons, sport, theatre, and excursions. Children also take part in a STEM after-school club on site in MIC. Whole-school events have included intercultural days and visits by a mobile farm.

EDNIP also provides a programme during school holidays so that a strong school community is sustained when schools are closed. Family trips to local sights, the beach, farms, and forests provide experiential learning opportunities along with treasure hunts and family fun days at the schools. EDNIP also organises a parent toddler group and weekly English conversation clubs for parents to practise their English.

Conclusion

Essentially, EDNIP is a model of social change that has had a significant impact to date on children's and parents' sense of belonging in schools, on home-school links, and on school staff's knowledge and understanding of migrant families and integration (Higgins et al., 2020). It aims to empower the school community to ensure that the identity and culture of every child in the classroom is welcomed and celebrated. Schools, children, and parents need support, tools, and resources to build strong and dynamic school communities that reflect the children that attend the school, and to create respectful and inclusive environments that embrace and celebrate diversity.

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