

Equality and diversity in early childhood care and education (ecce) legislation



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Introduction

This project aims to research equality and diversity and investigate how that is reflected in Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) legislation and policy. One also aims to assess stereotyping and discrimination and other barriers that minority groups may face when accessing early childhood care and education and after-school services.

Equality and diversity are important to emphasise within the early years setting as they are critical values to impart to young children. Equality can be broadly defined as the “ importance of recognising, respecting, and accepting the diversity of individuals and group needs, and of ensuring equality in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families” (Murray and Urban, 2012). Diversity can refer to the diverse cultural spectrum that can be found in Ireland today and aims to celebrate and promote every aspect of a person’s background.

According to the latest Irish Census in 2016 (Central Statistics Office, 2016), non-national residents in Ireland make up 13. 7% of the whole population. As the country becomes more multi-cultural, it is necessary to consider how early years settings can adapt to ensure everyone is equally represented and included in the curriculum and physical environment. There are numerous children being enrolled in early years education that come from richly diverse backgrounds for example, children with special needs, economic migrants, members of the travelling community or asylum seekers and unfortunately they may experience discrimination and stereotyping In order for these children to transition successfully through early years and on to

primary education, one must ensure everyone feels accepted and welcome regardless of for example race, culture, religion or family composition.

For this project, it was deemed necessary to evaluate the barriers to education a chosen minority group may face. The Black-Irish community was chosen as the group to evaluate as there appears to be a number of children in the Children's Centre that are part of this community as it would be beneficial to assess the centre with regard to promoting equality and diversity. This will be done through primary research to gauge attitudes to Black-Irish children through a questionnaire in a local early years setting. Through secondary research, one aims to critically evaluate approaches to enhance equality and diversity in early years environments and finally propose recommendations based on the findings. One will conclude with a summation of the findings, a personal reflection on learning, and a professional reflection on an equal approach in the early years sector.

Equality and Diversity

Equality in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) refers to the importance of recognising and celebrating individual differences and of “ensuring equity in terms of access, participation and benefits for all children and their families” (Office of Minister for Children, 2006). According to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), equality is;

“ a critical prerequisite for supporting the optimal development of all children in Ireland... and that all children should be able to gain access to, participate in, and benefit from early years services on an equal basis” (UNCRC, 1989, as cited in National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2006).

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Diversity on the other hand acknowledges the rich nature of Irish society in terms of “ social class, gender, returned emigrants, family status, minority groups and majority groups” (OMC, 2006).

Equality and Diversity are core facets of the Síolta quality framework (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) as each principle was developed with reference to United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). To maintain consistency in a universal approach to equality and diversity across the Early Years sector, childcare centres in Ireland must adhere to both Síolta and Aistear quality frameworks. While Síolta refers to the quality framework regarding assessment, Aistear refers to the curriculum and assessment guidelines that are optimal for promoting equal and diverse learning environments for children of all abilities/disabilities and backgrounds (NCCA, 2009). The four core themes of Aistear are Identity and Belonging, Wellbeing, Exploring and Thinking and Communicating. It may be posited that all themes can reference the principles of equality and diversity however the most palpable is the theme of Identity and Belonging which encompasses “ children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are valued and respected as part of a family and community” (NCCA, 2009). In order to support transitions, access and inclusion, early years settings must adhere to the Aistear curriculum so that children feel welcome, accepted and celebrated.

It can be said that all minority groups can encounter both institutional barriers to education as well as those that relate to play, learning and participation. This can also include stereotyping and discrimination which not only affect the child’s self-concept and attitudes and values but also how

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they may relate socially and culturally. Stereotyping refers to “ a generalisation about a group’s characteristics that does not consider any variations from one individual to another” (Santrock, 2007). Stereotyping can be positive or negative and examples can include assuming all Black people avoid work, or all members of the Travelling community are thieves.

Discrimination can be defined as “ the unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on arbitrary characteristics such as race, gender, sex, ethnicity, cultural backgrounds etc” (Reber & Reber, 2001). Discriminatory actions against minority groups could include exclusion by public houses and hotels of Traveller weddings and funerals or not wanting to have any physical contact with a member of the LGBTQ community. The children of Black immigrants in Ireland are at risk to these barriers also. Barriers could include a lack of diverse representation in curriculum plans and resources used in the classroom and how staff approach equality and diversity in their professional relationships and behaviour.

Research

In order to collate data for this project, it was necessary to conduct both primary and secondary research. A confidential, anonymous questionnaire was devised which was distributed to colleagues in the early years setting (Appendix A). This was done to provide an insight in to how professionals in the early years setting perceive equality and diversity and how they engage in enhancing it for the children of black heritage in the setting. A sample of ten was decided on so to provide an adequate number of responses for data interpretation. The questionnaires were left with an accompanying envelope in the staffroom where colleagues were able to fill out the questionnaires at <https://assignbuster.com/equality-and-diversity-in-early-childhood-care-and-education-ecce-legislation/>

their leisure. When it was apparent that interest had subsided, the questionnaires were compiled and evaluated, and the sample was finalised as six (n= 6). The findings are as follows:

Question 1: What does Equality and Diversity mean to you?

All participants answered this question with some variation on the ethos of treating everybody equally regardless of diverse backgrounds.

Question 2: Are you aware of the Equality and Diversity policy within the children's centre?

Five out of six participants answered this question while one did not. Those that did answer said they were aware of the relevant policies.

Question 3: Do you think the centre committed to promoting equality and diversity for those who attend the setting regarding ethnic minorities, accessibility and inclusion?

100% of participants feel that the centre is committed to promoting equality and diversity.

Question 4: Would you be willing, comfortable and confident in adequately caring for children who come from the Black-Irish community?

All the participants of the questionnaire agreed that they would be willing, comfortable and confident in working with children from the Black-Irish community. This is a welcome finding as one would not wish to find discriminatory attitudes in the workplace.

Question 5: In your opinion, what barriers to education do children from the Black-Irish community face?

Five participants feel that there are barriers to children from the Black-Irish community with regard to education. Participants state lack of representation, language barriers and financial constraints can deter inclusion, participation and learning for children from the Black-Irish community. One participant disagreed with the majority and argued that Black-Irish children are capable and can participate in all aspects of the classroom and no barriers exist.

Question 6: Do you feel you have the necessary tools and resources available to adequately provide for children from the Black-Irish community?

Five participants feel that they have access to the adequate tools and resources to promote equality and celebrate diversity e. g. diverse books, cultural dress-up costumes and multicultural images on the walls. One participant argued that more resources are needed across the centre as only one room in the centre has adequate diverse materials. She emphasised that children notice these things and the importance on the Aistear theme of Identity and Belonging.

Question 7: Would you be willing to attend (further) Equality and Diversity training in the future?

Five out of six participants would be willing to attend further training saying that it is always good to learn and build awareness to improve practice. One

participant advised that they find Equality and Diversity training repetitive and do not see the importance of continuous training.

Question 8: Is there anything you would like to add?

Only two participants provided an answer to this question. One participant expressed that Equality and Diversity training should be mandatory for anyone who works with children. Another participant referred to how times are evolving, and books used to exclusively contain imagery of white families and the traditional nuclear unit stating, “ when I was at school years ago, the books were consisting mainly of white families (*sic* with) mum, dad, son and daughter”.

The findings infer that employees in the Early Years setting are very aware of the importance of equality and diversity in promoting and enhancing all children’s participation and interest in the learning environment. It can be said that the majority of employees recognise the need for continuous training to enhance professional conduct.

From reviewing the available literature on inclusion, equality and diversity, it can be said that many children in the Black community are born in Ireland are citizens of Ireland and they should be culturally represented to reflect all aspects of their nationalities. The guidelines advise as follows,

“ Material that only depicts children from countries in Africa as living in poverty is an inaccurate depiction of all children from African countries. But it also misrepresents Black children from or living in Ireland. If you use such material to enhance children’s understanding of global inequality, it is

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important to counter it with accurate information about Black people living in other circumstances.” (Practitioner and trainer, 2010 as cited in Murray and Urban (2012, p. 207).

According to Irish Nationality Law, children born in Ireland after 2005 are automatically Irish citizens if there is no entitlement to the citizenship of any other country. Therefore, the rights, beliefs and customs of children from minority groups should be respected, welcomed and embraced in keeping with both professional guidelines and legislation (DCYA, 2016). Childcare practitioners must also adhere to the Aistear and Síolta quality frameworks to continue to improve on and overcome barriers to education. Upon reviewing the policy book in the local early years environment, one can conclude that they practice equality and diversity and an anti-bias approach. There are numerous policies referring to inclusion for children in the Black-Irish community for example, the equal opportunities policy, the AIM model, the language policy among others. This highlights that the centre is committed to promoting an equal and diverse learning environment for all.

In conclusion, one can infer from the primary and secondary research that children from the Black-Irish community can be exposed to educational barriers which may impact their learning and participation. Combatting these barriers can include good role-modelling, positive imagery and more diverse tools and resources relating to Black culture and practices.

Approaches to Equality and Diversity

There are various approaches to promoting equality and diversity that have been developed over time. Here one shall discuss and evaluate two <https://assignbuster.com/equality-and-diversity-in-early-childhood-care-and-education-ecce-legislation/>

approaches; the intercultural approach and the anti-bias approach and how they can be applied with respect to the Black-Irish community in access, transition and inclusion within early years education.

Inter-cultural Approach:

This approach refers to fostering understanding and respect between minority and majority cultures and acknowledges that cultural issues are not just relevant to minority groups. The inter-cultural approach emphasises that equality and diversity are important for all children in the early years setting regardless of the group they come from. The aim of this approach is to enable all children's awareness of their cultural identity and to promote diversity across the curriculum, acknowledge racism and challenge stereotypes (Barrow Consultancy and Training, 2017).

The benefits of this approach are outlined by the Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO, 2004) and are as follows:

- That it is a respectful, inclusive approach for all and mutual recognition of each other's values and ways of life.
- That it encourages " the process of active tolerance and maintenance of equitable relationships where everyone has the same importance".
- That it challenges learning environments to consider its policies and structures which may not be reflective of an intercultural society.

This approach can be applied in practice in order to enhance learning and participation for children of minority groups by for example sourcing more

costumes to represent a diverse range of culture or by bringing the children together in an activity that celebrates for example Black culture.

Anti-bias Approach:

The Anti-Bias Approach also encompasses both minority and majority in its approach to early years education and arguably addresses all areas of diversity. The approach was proposed by Louise Derman-Sparks in 1989. It can be said that the approach recognises the societal influences on creating equalities and inequalities. At the core of this approach is a focus on the individual child and supporting them in blossoming and succeeding.

Individual differences and varying levels of ability and disability are focused on and celebrated. According to Barrow Consultancy and Training (2017), the Anti-Bias approach looks at being different as a good thing and aims to empower all children to flourish in the learning environment.

It recognises the need to address discrimination and inequality and aims to provide children with the tools to deal with diversity (Barrow Consultancy and Training, 2017). One positive aspect of this approach is that it appears to rely on reflective practice. This can only serve to maintain positive role-modelling and improve professional learning to enhance inclusive curriculum. It is also “ indicative of and supported by the Aistear, Síolta and equality and diversity guidelines (Barrow Consultancy and Training, 2017). Practical application of this approach may be evident in discussing any discriminatory remarks or stereotypes that may be made by staff or children in the centre regarding ethnicity etc and the legal and professional requirements for successful practice.

Recommendations

From assessing both the information from the questionnaires, interview and evaluating legislation and policies pertaining to equality and diversity in the early years setting the following recommendations can be made to enhance access, transition and inclusion for minority groups accessing education.

1. Perform regular evaluations on the classroom and centre as a whole with reference to equality and diversity and the anti-bias approach.

This will ensure the centre keeps abreast of and adapts its physical environment to reflect all children in the centre.

2. Review the literature in the centre and source more books reflecting diverse culture, gender roles, race and disability and ability.

This will ensure that all children in the centre feel included, welcomed and represented within their learning environment.

3. Source more positive diverse imagery that will be displayed around the centre

By having more positive representation of diverse cultures visible in the centre, children and visitors will feel welcome and represented. This will also promote the Aistear theme of Identity and Belonging for children in the centre and promote an inclusive environment for all.

4. Discuss holding a ' Culture Day' or organise a series of parents from different backgrounds to visit the children and discuss their culture or share their food, music or stories.

This will promote parental participation in the centre, allowing the children to experience diversity first hand and give opportunity for positive adult role-modelling.

5. Ensure staff partake in personal reflective practice through the use of bi-weekly or monthly evaluation forms based on the Gibbs Reflective Cycle (1998).

Through continuous reflective practice, practitioners will be equipped to challenge any negative perceptions and attitudes that may arise and also enhance learning and limit educational barriers.

Conclusion

From analysing the findings, one could say that equality and diversity are incredibly important principles to emphasise within the early years environment for both major and minor cultures within the country. It is clear that minority groups are still exposed to stereotyping and discrimination in Ireland and ongoing reflective practice and Equality and Training is paramount to minimising educational barriers for children of all abilities, disabilities and backgrounds. It can be said that an Anti-Bias approach to early years education and care is the most up to date and inclusive approach and thus is arguably the most adept at promoting equality and diversity for all.

In summation, to carry out this research, I first needed to identify clear a research aim and select an appropriate mode of data collection. I compiled a questionnaire and after gaining consent from my manager, I left ten copies in the staff room for colleagues to complete. I then analysed the findings and <https://assignbuster.com/equality-and-diversity-in-early-childhood-care-and-education-ecce-legislation/>

referred to current legislation and policy relevant to equality and diversity in the early years setting. When I left the questionnaires in to be filled in, I was worried about a lack of participation as I understand it can be tiresome to complete a questionnaire. As only six people participated, I anticipated little in terms of findings and was a little disappointed. However, as the responses were insightful, I was pleased that my colleagues were helpful in that regard. On personal reflection I can say that the secondary research was a challenge to conduct as there is a lot of literature on the subject and it was difficult to ascertain what was relevant or not.

I have learned that research is a long-term task and more time management should be considered if conducting future research. It would be beneficial to conduct an interview with a member of the chosen minority group in future to gain first-hand account of barriers that they may face in terms of access, inclusion and participation in education. I would have liked to interview a colleague who is from Cameroon, but time constraints prevented this from happening. If doing a questionnaire again, I would leave the blanks ones in the canteen for at least a week to allow for maximum participation.

From a profession standpoint, the research conducted has allowed me to see how important an equality approach is within Early Childhood Care and Education. It is evident that early years centres should adhere to the quality frameworks and guidelines in place to ensure the theory is put into practical application that will benefit everyone in the environment. In conclusion, I feel that the research was conducted successfully, and I successfully achieved my research aim.

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