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# Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood: an Irish Perspective

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## Why this book – and why now?

It doesn't take much to see that Ireland in 2012 is a hugely diverse society. A stroll down your street, a look at the paper, a trip on a bus are enough to realise that we are with people from all walks of life, all the time. As Ireland continues to change as part of a changing world, there is no denying that diversity is a reality in our society. 'So what?', you might say. 'People are not the same, what's new about that?' You would be right, there is absolutely nothing new about people not being the same. We all are unique and special, as individuals and members of our families and communities. However, as your own experience will no doubt tell you, diversity in Irish (or any other) society quite often means that people experience being different in negative ways. Most modern societies are unequal and twenty-first-century Ireland is one of the most unequal societies in Europe (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). Inequality often goes hand in hand with people being identified as different from or inferior to the majority population. Stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, sexism, homophobia and racism are the ugly side of the diverse society we live in.

Recent research by the Immigrant Council of Ireland (2011) confirms that experiencing racist harassment and bullying is an 'everyday fact of life' for migrants into Ireland:

[...] these experiences have also created a perception that there is an underlying racism within Irish society, a society that condones and fails to challenge racist speech. Several respondents who had lived in other European countries remarked that racist speech in Ireland was especially coarse.

(p. 30)

Ireland today is diverse and unequal in many respects. Many ethnic and cultural differences are easily visible – and so are the prejudices and the discrimination that are based on them. There are, however, many other diversities we seem to fail to respect on a regular basis: gender, class, disability, religion, sexual orientation, economic status,

language and age – to name some of the differences that are frequently targets of discrimination, disrespect and bias. Discrimination and inequality, it seems, are deeply rooted in Irish society; they ‘continually and profoundly affect the lives of children and their families’ (Murray and O’Doherty, 2001, p. 18).

However, against this the Irish have shown themselves as capable of standing up against the negative forces of prejudice and discrimination: inequalities in Irish society have been created and perpetuated by Irish people and can only be changed by Irish people. All children are entitled to equality of access, participation and quality outcomes, which includes the opportunity to learn in an inclusive, stimulating, culturally appropriate and non-discriminatory environment.  
(Murray and O’Doherty, 2001, p. 19)

The passage above is from the ‘*éist*’ report, published following a long and thorough consultation with the Irish ECEC sector in 2001. It is as valid today as it was then – this is what this book is about.

### **Who this book is for**

This book is about the effects of diversity and (in)equality on young children – and about professional early childhood practices that engage proactively with those effects to ensure more just and equitable experiences for *all* children in early childhood settings.

The book is for those who work (or are studying to work) with young children in the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECEC) sector in Ireland:

- ▶ Childcare students at FETAC level 5 and 6
- ▶ Those studying early childhood education at degree level in Institutes of Technology and universities
- ▶ Montessori courses
- ▶ Primary teacher education courses
- ▶ Social Care courses

The book can – and should – be used at different levels, whether you are a beginner or an advanced learner. The chapters of this book offer content of various complexity, allowing for different ‘entry points’ at different levels: some chapters focus on giving necessary background information, while others ask you to critically engage with theories and concepts. A whole section of the book offers insights into innovative early childhood practice, collected and written together with Irish practitioners. Therefore, we would invite you to take an open, fluid approach to this book. You can use it according to your needs – starting from where you are at the moment and returning to themes and chapters

with new questions and insights as your knowledge base, reflection and confidence develops over the course of your studies.

Children experience and notice difference from a very young age; it is an important part of their making sense of the world and developing their identity in relation to this world. Whether we work directly with young children in ECEC settings, study to become an early childhood professional, or support practitioners and students in a role as lecturer or trainer, we have a responsibility to proactively address children's experiences and work towards more just and equitable experiences and outcomes for *all* children in ECEC.

How children learn about diversity and equality issues is closely bound up with the acquisition of their identities and attitudes within a broader set of social relationships and contexts in which they live. Within their sphere, children learn and come to internalise the types of relations and attitudes to difference from their immediate environment and local communities. What children learn about diversity and difference varies from one context to another. However, children all learn attitudes both positive and negative associated with difference (Connolly, 1998; Mac Naughton, 2003; Van Ausdale and Feagin, 2001).

Diversity and Equality issues have long been absent from the mainstream of training, professional preparation and professional development in early childhood – not only in Ireland. An official communication from the European Commission, published in February 2011, states that while working with 'children at risk' is part of initial training in many countries, 'many other aspects of diversity are not sufficiently covered' (European Commission, 2011, p. 6).

But as early as 1998 a conference in Dublin Castle, hosted by Pavee Point Travellers' Centre, stressed the need to address these critical issues in the Irish ECEC sector: *Education without prejudice: a challenge for early years educators in Ireland*. From this starting point, the '*éist*' project has advocated a comprehensive approach to Diversity and Equality in Irish ECEC.

Change has been slow but steady since then, and today the value of diversity and the benefits of engaging with it in systematic and proactive ways are widely recognised in the sector.

At European level, policy documents and reports at European emphasise the central role played by early childhood education and care in countering social inequalities and exclusion (Eurydice, 2009). This is supported by findings of a European research project on 'competence requirements in early childhood education and care' (CoRe). This is the conclusion of the CoRe research project from data gathered in 15 European countries. Thorough knowledge of 'cultural diversity and anti-discriminatory practices' as well as knowledge of 'comprehensive strategies for tackling poverty and socio-cultural inequalities' are key components of competent early childhood systems (Urban, Vandembroeck, Van Laere, Lazzari and Peeters, 2011, p. 44).

In Ireland, key documents to guide practices and policies embrace respect for diversity as the foundation of important tasks for the ECEC sector, such as supporting each child's identity and belonging. *Síolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006) and *Aistear*, the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) are important achievements for Irish ECEC; both documents require practitioners and providers to focus on diversity and equality in their practices and policies.

*This book supports the implementation of Síolta and Aistear, and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers. It directly addresses the learning outcomes of the FETAC module 'Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Education and Care' at levels 5 and 6, and supports the delivery of this module.*

### **Equality and Diversity Principles**

#### **Aistear**

Nurturing equality and diversity is important in early childhood. Promoting equality is about creating a fairer society in which everyone can participate equally with the opportunity to fulfil his/her potential. Diversity is about welcoming and valuing individual and group differences, and understanding and celebrating difference as part of life.

#### **Síolta**

Equality is an essential characteristic of quality ECEC. Quality early childhood services acknowledge that all children and families should have their individual, personal, cultural and linguistic identity validated.

Qualification requirements for ECEC practitioners are changing, too. As a concrete step towards a comprehensive Diversity and Equality approach, practitioners now have the option to choose a module titled 'Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood Education and Care' at FETAC levels 5 and 6. This is also part of the degree-level courses (e.g. at DIT).

### **Why do we need an 'Irish perspective' on Diversity and Equality?**

A lot has been written about the need to address human diversity, and to counter discrimination and exclusion from an early age. There has been, and continues to be, a lively international debate about these issues in a wider context of social justice. Most important for a critical understanding – and practice – of working with young children in the context of diversity and equality is the work of Louise Derman-Sparks who has developed and championed the Anti-Bias Curriculum in the United States (Derman-Sparks, 1989). Much of the work in Ireland that has led to the inclusion of diversity and

equality issues in Irish ECEC policy and practice has been inspired by her work. Glenda Mac Naughton, together with her team at the Melbourne-based Centre for Equity and Innovation in Early Childhood (CEIEC) in Australia, has also hugely contributed to our critical understanding of how children learn about difference from an early age. Her work demonstrates how critical early childhood practitioners can make a difference for children and families.

The Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training (DECET) network has actively promoted diversity and equality in early childhood in many European countries. It has developed a range of resources and materials for early childhood practitioners and trainers, including ‘Diversity and social inclusion. Exploring competences for professional practice in early childhood education and care’ (DECET, 2011). The ‘*éist*’ project represents Ireland within this network; Colette Murray is a founding member and current board member of DECET. Together with colleagues from Belgium, France, The Netherlands, Scotland, Serbia and the US, Colette Murray and Mathias Urban are co-authors of ‘Diversity and Social Inclusion’.

If so much has been written about Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood – and many examples of excellent practice are available – why do we need this book? The short answer is that the vast majority of publications, practice examples and resources that are out there have been developed in professional ECEC contexts outside Ireland. They build on experiences and practices from the US, Australia, the UK and other countries. Considering the rapid changes in Irish society and in the Irish ECEC sector, there is a need for an Irish perspective on Diversity and Equality in Early Childhood – a resource for students, practitioners and lecturers that is grounded in the Irish ECEC sector, and that builds on the experiences of Irish practitioners, learners and trainers in working with children and families in this country.

There is another, particularly Irish angle to this book. The work that forms the basis for this book has its roots in the support for Traveller children as driven by Pavee Point Travellers’ Centre. John O’Connell, founding director of Pavee Point was convinced that working towards equality for Traveller children had to be embedded in a much broader and much more comprehensive approach including *all* children. He supported the vision of ‘*éist*’ from the very beginning.

The ‘*éist*’ project, and since 2006, the Equality and Diversity in Early Childhood National Network (EDENN, <http://pavee.ie/edenn/>) have advocated for the introduction of a comprehensive Diversity and Equality approach in ECEC in Ireland. The project has held conferences and seminars (e.g. ‘We make the road by walking’, 2010), developed resources for practitioners and trainers (Murray, 2010, 2001; Murray and O’Doherty, 2001) and has informed framework documents for the Irish ECEC sector, e.g. Síolta (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education, 2006), Aistear (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2009) and wrote the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for

Childcare Providers (Office of the Minister for Children, 2006). But perhaps most importantly, *'éist'* has worked with trainers, practitioners and students in many ECEC settings, colleges and trainings across the country. It has spread ideas, encouraged and supported innovative practice, and collected and documented the experiences of practitioners and learners over many years – all of which have informed this book.

### *An Irish perspective? Not one, but many!*

D.W. Winnicott, paediatrician and psychoanalyst, once famously wrote ‘there is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone’. What he wanted to point out was that a child can only be fully understood in her or his relationships – with the immediate carer, the family and the community. Just like this child, this book is the result of collaborations and relationships of many people over many years. We, the authors, have worked together for many years, and are both passionate about more just early childhood experiences for *all* children. However, we have come to this work from different backgrounds and different personal and professional histories. We share our perspectives in this book; at the same time we each maintain our own voice in writing the different parts of it. We have invited many other contributors (practitioners and trainers) to share their experiences, stories and examples. Each one of them brings their own voice and perspective to this book. Many quotes and stories from practitioners and learners add to the picture. Therefore, this book is a book of many voices and many perspectives. They all come together out of a shared conviction that a comprehensive Diversity and Equality approach in early childhood education and care is necessary – and possible.

## **What is in the package?**

We have divided this book into four sections, each one focusing on a broad thematic area, and divided into several chapters concentrating on more specific topics.

The four main sections are:

1. Diversity is real – and so is exclusion
2. (Re)thinking early childhood education
3. Walking the walk: voices from the sector
4. Roadmap to Equality: conclusions and recommendations for policy, professional development and practice in the Irish ECEC sector

**Diversity is real – and so is exclusion** presents a framework for what adults (early childhood practitioners and students) need to know to address diversity and equality proactively. The section has four chapters: it begins with a historical perspective on diversity in Irish society; defines the key concepts used throughout this book; explores acceptable and unacceptable language and terms you will encounter in a context of



diversity; and finally, introduces you to important legislative frameworks and documents that orient non-discriminatory practice in ECEC and beyond.

As an ECEC practitioner or learner you might ask why you need to know all about the broader Irish context and history. What is the benefit of having knowledge and understanding of concepts like discrimination and oppression? Does using the right terms when talking about diversity really make such a difference? You might ask why you have to know about national and international legislative frameworks that go far beyond ECEC policy and legislation. It matters because as an ECEC professional you will have to consider how to best provide early childhood services to children, families, communities and our society on the whole. Therefore you need to understand what makes us what we are – how we became who we are and what shapes and influences the broader developments of this society. It matters, too, because it will give you a more solid foundation for implementing Síolta Standards, Aistear Themes, and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers in a critically reflective and comprehensive manner.

**Diversity is real – and so is exclusion.** The first chapter in this section takes you back into the history of this island. It is important to understand that diversity has always been a reality in this country – it has made us who we are. Just like the Traveller community, and new communities arriving in this country today, Irish people themselves have experienced emigration and have met prejudice and exclusion. In our history there have always been individuals and movements that have challenged injustice and championed human rights.

Whenever we talk about diversity and equality in ECEC, we use specific concepts and terms that relate to people's experiences in daily life and in society in general. As ECEC practitioners you need to have a sound understanding of these terms and the meanings behind those concepts. The second chapter in this section therefore explores key concepts and their meanings: what exactly do we mean by 'diversity'? Does 'equality' mean that all children should be treated the same? How is a stereotype different from a prejudice, and how do they relate in the bigger picture of exclusion, discrimination and racism? The chapter helps you define these key terms and it encourages you to think critically about their meaning for children's life experiences.

While you might have a sound understanding of the more abstract concepts that frame your work in diversity and equality, you might still be nervous or insecure about how to engage with people from diverse backgrounds without 'getting it wrong'. What language we use to identify and describe members of minority groups in society makes a huge difference. The third chapter of this section explores diversity terms and their meanings. It helps to clarify myths and encourages you make the effort to use acceptable language.

The last chapter in this section introduces you to legislative documents and frameworks that are key to realising equality in ECEC and beyond. The chapter begins with a short discussion of Irish legislation affecting children and families and how they

are influenced, and often initiated by, international legislative frameworks and conventions. We then ask the obvious question: 'I'm working in an early childhood setting – why do I need to know about all this?' Children, in ECEC and in society, have rights, which are spelled out in an international document: the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Children's rights are widely embraced in the ECEC sector. However, besides the UNCRC there are many other legal documents that shape and influence children's and families lives in positive or negative ways. Making children's rights real and not aspirational is what counts.

**(Re)thinking early childhood education**, the second section of this book, focuses on how we interact with the social realities from a professional perspective. The three chapters in this section help you explore how we think and reflect critically about our professional practice with children, families and communities, how we can understand our professional knowledge about children and how this affects our practice and the approaches we can take to ensure more equal and just experiences for all children.

The first chapter in this section explores a concept that inevitably will come up in your studies: the reflective practitioner. There is an expectation, reinforced by recent policy documents, e.g. Aistear, for you to become a reflective practitioner. But what exactly does that entail? What is there to reflect upon – and how does it make a difference to how we engage with children and families in the setting? In this chapter, we suggest that reflection per se is not enough. Reflecting upon our practice needs to go hand in hand with asking critical questions about the conditions for our practice, and about the social realities that shape children's and families' lives.

Becoming critically reflective, and asking critical questions, is closely linked to the topic of the second chapter in this section: how do we know what we know about early childhood? We all agree that professional practice, with young children or otherwise, builds on a professional body of knowledge. But what shapes our knowledge and our understandings of the child? These questions are part of a more fundamental exploration we encourage you to undertake in this chapter: what do we mean by knowledge? What is the role of theory when it comes to our professional practice with young children? What is our own role in bringing about new professional knowledge? This chapter supports you to explore these (admittedly challenging) questions and it encourages you to take a critical stance on ideas we take for granted too often.

The third and final chapter in this section asks what practical and conceptual approaches are there to engage with diversity and equality in early childhood settings. The chapter helps you to understand concepts such as multiculturalism and interculturalism and their implications for early childhood practice. We then explore in more detail an approach based on the Anti-Bias Curriculum and the diversity and equality practice as developed by the '*éist*' project in Ireland. The Anti-Bias approach

informs key documents for the Irish ECEC sector, including *Síolta*, *Aistear* and the Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers.

**Walking the walk: voices from the sector.** This third section of the book takes you right into experiences and examples from the sector. We have invited practitioners, trainers and learners to share their experiences in working with the Anti-Bias approach in ECEC in settings and across Ireland. Building on the conceptual framework we have laid out in the first two sections of the book, these examples illustrate how services are engaging with diversity issues in practice. They all share a common understanding of the importance of a proactive approach to dealing with diversity and working towards equality.

The chapters in this section have been provided by different authors (listed below); we – Colette Murray and Mathias Urban – have edited them to bring them into the overall structure of this book. In doing so, we have tried to interfere as little as possible with the authentic ‘voice’ of each contributor.

Joanie Barron, from Wallaroo Playschool, Cork, explores how gender differences impact on children’s lives both now and in their future. In her chapter she asks how we can get an understanding of the experiences of children, and how they might be changed by intervention.

The Family Wall is a creative way of engaging with children and families through photos. Stories and experiences from a project with ten services across Ireland show that introducing a Family Wall, informed by the Anti-Bias Approach, supports children’s identity and belonging – two key themes in *Aistear*.

Kathryn O’Riordan from Cork City Childcare Committee explores common difficult situations in ECEC settings. In her chapter, she shows how working in partnership with parents can help to find constructive ways forward.

Working with Persona Dolls in an Anti-Bias framework is a powerful way to help children develop empathy and respect for people who are different to them and also discover the ways in which they are similar. Ann Halligan, trainer from County Mayo and practitioner of Curious Minds introduces working with Persona Dolls and shares her experience of how they can be used to reflect children’s individual and group identity and introduce children to social and cultural diversity in an Irish Context.

How can we embrace the richness of many languages in our service, and how can we best support children whose first language is not English? Patsy Baissangourov and Martina Mc Govern illustrate the advantages for bilingual children, their peers and adults in the childcare setting.

Orla Fitzpatrick, practitioner from Co. Clare, shares with us her personal journey as a learner and practitioner beginning to engage with Anti-Bias Approach. Her reflections show how the knowledge she gained through the Anti-Bias training informs both her practice and her thinking.

When did you last take a critical look at the environment in your setting? Have you ever tried to see it through a child's eyes? Colette Murray explores the issue of proofing the physical environment for diversity in the ECEC setting. Her chapter looks at why it is important to represent each child for their well-being and in particular to support their identity and sense of belonging.

Travellers and Roma are the most marginalised communities in Ireland and Europe. Colette Murray (EDENN, Pavee Point) outlines the background of Travellers and Roma exploring their relationship with the settled or majority community.

Where can we go from here? Building on the questions, suggestions and experiences we have explored in this book, the final section takes a look at possible ways forward. What are the necessary steps towards a comprehensive Diversity and Equality approach in Irish early childhood education and care, in practice, professional preparation and policy? Is there a **Roadmap to Equality**? The concluding chapter gives our preliminary answers.

Throughout this book you will occasionally find various types of boxes. They contain examples, questions, and quotes from practitioners and students related to the topic of the chapter. Sometimes they provide short explanations and definitions of terms and concepts discussed in the main text; we call them Jargon Busters. Here are two examples:

### **Jargon Buster: Transformative Practice**

Transformative practice, in this book, refers to seeing the day-to-day work with children (teaching, caring) as inseparable from issues of equality and social justice, and how they are addressed in your setting. Transformative practitioners aim to change (transform) themselves, and how they understand their role – and at transforming their way of working with children, families and communities in order to actively address diversity and inequality.

Transformative practice involves:

- being strategic and reflective – using your knowledge as basis for action and questioning your knowledge and how it affects children
- working with others to build a critical community: with colleagues, other professionals, parents and carers and members of the community. Each person's history, knowledge, experience and who they are (their social and cultural identities) are valued.
- socially just teaching, learning and caring. This includes developing your own awareness of who is advantaged and disadvantaged by the way your setting and your day is organised, and working towards change for social justice.

**Practitioners' voices:**

I always understood that equality is about the same access. I have never actually thought about the same opportunity or outcomes for people. I think it's a basic mistake in the childcare services – there might be pictures of children of different ethnicities sticking on the wall, but no one ever does anything with them. This is my experience.

(Practitioner, 2010)

With this book, we aim to give you all the information you need to come to a better understanding of diversity and equality issues in early childhood education and care. However, there is only so much information that you can pack between the covers of a book. Therefore we have set up a page on the Gill & Macmillan website for additional resources – more detailed information, stories, vignettes, etc. Simply go to [www.gillmacmillan.ie](http://www.gillmacmillan.ie), search for *Diversity and Equality* and click on the link in the right-hand column.

Enjoy the journey!

# SECTION ONE

## Diversity is Real and So is Exclusion

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This island has been inhabited for more than five thousand years. It has been shaped by pre-Celtic wanderers, Celts, Vikings, Normans, Huguenots, Scottish and English settlers. Whatever the rights or wrongs of history, all those people marked this island: down to the small detail of the distinctive ship-building of the Vikings, the linen-making of the Huguenots, the words of Planter balladeers. How could we remove any one of these things from what we call our Irishness? Far from wanting to do so, we need to recover them so as to deepen our understanding.

(President of Ireland Mary Robinson, 'Cherishing the Irish Diaspora', 1995, Irish Oireachtas)

### Overview

**A**s ECEC professionals we want all children to benefit from, and be secure, included and happy in our services. An implicit part of our professional preparation is the exploration of our value base, which informs our thinking, perceptions and understandings (see Section 2: Critical Reflection). Our beliefs and attitudes are also central to our understanding and engagement with diversity and equality in ECEC. Experiences from teacher education (e.g. Lenskietal, 2005; Haritos, 2004) suggest that learners' beliefs are well established prior to their participation on training programmes. Research also indicates that many learners enter education training programmes with a thin base of knowledge relative to their own and other cultural histories and value systems (Cockrell et al, 1999, Dufrene, 1991, in Clarke and Drudy, 2006).

Our beliefs, attitudes and disposition are tightly interwoven with our knowledge, skills and behaviours, and so it is for those working with children. How we look at the world,

or the ‘lens’ we look through, how we see ourselves and others, is influenced by our education, our family, the society around us.

Working with diversity and equality is more than focusing on approaches and methodologies for the setting. It is about being aware of your own values and attitudes, building a knowledge base and gaining skills for implementation. Our individual beliefs are strongly influenced by the prevailing beliefs, values and attitudes of our society. Working towards a more just society and equality of provision means continually examining the local and national context around us, continually rethinking what we do, what we say and how the influences on our lives as individuals and professionals have determined our attitudes and our behaviour.

Diversity is a reality in Irish society – it can be considered an asset, but this is not always the case. Where there is diversity you will generally find a ‘shadow side’, which can cause inequality, hurt and insecurity. This shadow side manifests in stigma, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, oppression, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc. In reality it is not the diversity that causes the problem, but how we respond to it individually and institutionally. As individuals we sometimes just don’t know what to do and may struggle with the language of diversity. That’s OK because addressing equality and diversity issues in ECEC is relatively new and we are all on a learning curve.

Hopefully, getting some direction will help to build your knowledge base, support your reflection and make the journey of addressing equality and diversity in ECEC less daunting.

To begin, it is our contention that ECEC professionals engaging in diversity and equality work do need to investigate and build on their current knowledge around the social and historical, political context. It has informed who we are and our relationship with diversity and equality in Irish society. Knowing about legislation beyond ECEC that can support equality or be a source of conflict for individuals or groups is also beneficial. Our historical context and the implicit values of our society contribute to our beliefs, attitudes and our social prejudice, which in turn affects the behaviour of individuals and institutions on issues of diversity. ECEC professionals are not immune to the values and social prejudices of the broader society, hence linking the historical context to our understanding of how discrimination works and to the legislative context opens up a space for building understanding, knowledge and empathy.

Also crucial to our engagement with Diversity and Equality is our capacity to engage in dialogue on these issues. Having a good understanding of diversity and equality terminology will enable this engagement. Along with your understanding and recognition of inequalities, it encourages other ways of thinking and being.

This Section is divided into four chapters. Here we take the focus away from the child and concentrate on the ECEC professional as a social actor: an individual who comes from a particular social, political, economic and cultural climate, Irish or otherwise. This

is a space where you can make the connections between the broader society and what that means for your ECEC practice. You can also explore concepts and meanings that may be unfamiliar and begin to make a link between ECEC work and its influence within society and in particular with families.



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# **SECTION ONE**

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# Historical Context

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Within an understanding of history as possibility, tomorrow is problematic. In order for it to come, it is necessary that we build it through transforming today. Different tomorrows are possible. The struggle is no longer reduced to either delaying what is to come or ensuring its arrival; it is necessary to reinvent the future. Education is indispensable for this reinvention. By accepting ourselves as active subjects and objects of history, we become beings who make division. It makes us ethical beings.

(Freire, 1997)

## Overview

Ireland has always been diverse. The myth that Ireland has been culturally homogenous (the same) prior to recent immigration is inaccurate. Unfortunately, Irish politicians have naively contributed to this belief. In 1991 an Irish MEP in the European Parliament Committee of Inquiry into Racism and Xenophobia stated:

Ireland is a racially homogeneous country with **no** ethnic minority groups. As a consequence there are no racial problems of the kind experienced in countries with such groups. Neither is there a large presence of foreigners ... the position could alter if the influx became sustained ... there is, however, a minority group of travelling people giving rise to some of the problems associated with racism. (Our emphasis.)

The problem with this statement is that it insinuates that prejudice, discrimination and racism surface only on the arrival of newcomers. This is worrying because it effectively blames the immigrant for Ireland's uncomfortable response to difference. Mac Gréil (2011) in his revealing book *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland* shows that while Ireland's attitude to diversity has improved and we are fairly open and tolerant, social prejudice with regard to many diversities including culture remains a matter for urgent address. Mac Gréil's call for action is backed up by a recent study on racism in the Dublin area by the Immigrant Council for Ireland (ICI), which illustrates the need for political leadership in tackling racism in our communities.

In this chapter we aim to dispel the illusion that Ireland has been historically homogeneous and also identify the challenges for the Irish who have had to emigrate. The recognition and exploration of our history can help us identify what makes us who we are today in twenty-first-century Ireland. By drawing attention to, and asking you to reflect upon our past, we hope to open up a discussion and create a climate of empathy for addressing diversity in ECEC and Irish society today. Equality is a partner of diversity and the struggle to achieve equality is ongoing. Ireland's history of resistance and struggle has produced champions who have worked to nurture equality and respect for human diversity, and to counter social prejudice both individual and institutional. We also give attention to some of them here.

You might ask why we are addressing the historical context of diversity and looking at human rights champions in a book about ECEC. Up to relatively recently a diversity and equality focus was absent in ECEC policy and curricular documents. This has changed, and its inclusion is welcome. Finding out what that means and what it encompasses is what this book is about. Similar changes have occurred as our view of childhood has altered. A sociological lens (sociology of childhood) looks beyond the individual child and its individual development (developmental psychology). The focus has moved to recognizing the multiple layers and influences in a child's life: ideas of childhood are 'socially constructed' and children are 'social actors'. How we live our lives and interact with children is informed by history.

For those who wish to address diversity and equality issues holistically, it is crucial to confront the history of our past addressing both the positive and negative aspects of our development as a society. Haritos (2004, p. 376) maintains that our prior beliefs represent the 'interpretive lenses' through which learners and practitioners attempt to 'focus on, visualise, perceive, characterise, understand and ultimately resolve their [teaching] concerns' in practice. The societal and cultural context (our Irishness) is part of that interpretive lens. Our awareness needs to go beyond understanding children as individuals alone to understanding our societal context and how our history has influenced how we see difference and respond to it. Our awareness can also contribute to our future history through the choices we make regarding our relationship with equality and social justice, and in particular in the work we do with children.

The report *Taking Racism Seriously in the Dublin Area* (ICI, 2011) concludes, following a description of racial abuse from a young children, that 'It is inconceivable that Ireland should be a place where we tolerate a young child [6 years] racially insulting a neighbour without taking meaningful action to address the glaring issues this raises.' (ICI, 2011, p. 16)

### After reading this chapter you should be able to:

- ▶ recognise that diversity has always been a feature of Irish society
- ▶ recognise that racism, sexism and homophobia are not new to Ireland
- ▶ understand that taking action can create positive change for individuals and groups
- ▶ understand that awareness and knowledge of the historical context will enhance your capability for working towards diversity and equality, with positive implications for all children in the setting.

## Introduction: Demographic change in Ireland

There is a tendency to think that Ireland has become demographically and culturally diverse only recently, particularly in the last 15 years. This perception is directly linked to the Celtic Tiger economic boom in the late 1990s and early 2000s and Ireland's extraordinary increase in inward migration. There is more visible and linguistic diversity on our streets and in service provision including ECEC. Between 1996 and 2002 Ireland saw a 26% increase of inward migration; much of that migration, believe it or not, consisted of returned Irish. The 2006 census illustrates that the Irish population remains predominately white (94.8%) and of Irish ethnic background (88.9%) including the Traveller community (0.5%). Other white backgrounds constitute 7.1%, and only 3.5% of the population are non-white (CSO, 2006).

Ethnic diversity, which includes linguistic diversity, has been broadly welcomed in Ireland and Mac Gréil's study maintains that in general Ireland has managed to integrate the increase in numbers of foreign-born people in a relatively short period of time (ten years). This has occurred primarily because of the dissemination of new communities throughout the country, which has 'prevented the large ghettos and it enabled Irish people and migrants to get to know each other better' (Mac Gréil, 2011, p. 19). The arrival of immigrants, however, has not been without its challenges at individual and institutional levels. Negative responses to the visible change on our streets come in the form of the following statements and questions:

With all this diversity, will we lose our Irishness – our own culture?

(Student, female, 19 years)

Racism and discrimination have only come to Ireland since black and other minorities have arrived.

(Male, 26 years)

Why should we accommodate people who come to scrounge off our social welfare system when they have not contributed anything to this country?

(Service provider, male, 40 years)

These concerns must be addressed, but what is it that prompts and influences these questions? What is the thinking that supports individuals or communities to say such things, which are commonly tinged with resentment? Ireland has experienced oppression at home and abroad. Some may question the disparity between the Irish experience of oppression and the not-so-welcoming 'Ireland of the welcomes' for newcomers to Ireland. How does our experience of oppression affect our empathy for immigrants to Ireland? Or does it affect it at all? Being oppressed doesn't mean that you automatically have empathy for others who are oppressed. The ICI (2011) report on racism in the Dublin area illustrates that we have some distance to go. Investigating and understanding certain strands of our history will support a greater awareness of the need to address diversity and equality issues in ECEC.

### **Discrimination and racism**

Social prejudice is a universal phenomenon which has played a most destructive role throughout the history of humanity.

(Mac Gréil, 2001, p. 4)

Many deny that racism was a problem in Ireland until recent migration, and it is common to perpetrate the myth that no one experienced racism in Ireland until the changes in the demographics; 'The proposition that Ireland did not have a "problem" of racism because no black people lived there denies that fact that a perceived lack of racialised people in a given society does not mean an absence of racism.' (McVeigh, 1992)

Another view is that if groups did experience racism, it was generally their own fault, arising out of some form of deficiency on their part, or the failure of such groups, especially Travellers, to allow themselves to be subsumed into Irish society (Farrell, F. and Watt, P., 2001, UCD, 2011).

As the discussion above suggests, new communities are not immune to discrimination and racism. 24% of immigrants feel they have been discriminated against. This is over twice the rate for Irish nationals in 2002–2007. The increased likelihood of reported discrimination among immigrants is most particularly pronounced in employment and then in the following domains: housing, shops/pubs/restaurants, financial services and transport (Equality Authority, 2009). A review of existing surveys in Ireland on attitudes to minority ethnic groups indicates an increase in hostility towards groups such as black people, Roma, Travellers, refugees and asylum seekers (FRA, 2009). Various surveys have documented alarming levels of racism in Irish society. Anecdotal evidence also suggests that there has been an increase in incidences of racism since the beginning of the economic crisis.

The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA, 2009) reported that 73% of black Africans surveyed in Ireland believed that discrimination based on ethnicity

or immigration status was prevalent in the country. The EU-Midis report found that 76% of black respondents did not report their experiences of discrimination to the Irish authorities. This is backed up by a finding in the ESRI (2005) study where 18.7% of black Africans described being treated badly or not receiving an adequate healthcare service on at least one occasion (compared to 9.2% of Asian respondents). Of those who described substandard treatment, most (82.5%) did not make a formal complaint. Underreporting of racist incidents in Ireland would appear to be widespread (ICI, 2011), as illustrated by the table below.

### Reported Racially Motivated Incidents

Year	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Incidents	64	68	100	173	214	172	126

Source: Central Statistics Office (19 February 2010). It is generally accepted that there is under-reporting of racially motivated incidents. (NCCRI, 2011)

These findings provide the backdrop for the daily life of children and families from minority ethnic and Traveller backgrounds attending ECEC services.

### Media engagement

The media portrayal of immigration has often been unhelpful in its representation of new communities. Negative representation exposes xenophobic attitudes (see Chapter 3) within Irish society and can contribute to discrimination of newcomers. Misinformation also contributes to the stigmatising of individuals and groups and can lead to segregation. Lynch (2007) in Mac Gréil (2011, p. 25) maintains that:

The media can play a positive and negative role in the struggle against racism. In fact, the media is a key mechanism in bringing our attention to racist incidents and crime. It is also a powerful mechanism for the promotion of positive images of ethnic minority groups. [...] However, it can also play a negative role. In the Irish context this negative role has included scapegoating and inciting hatred against ethnic minority groups through scaremongering biased and inaccurate reporting.

The question is what other influences, besides the media, are at play in our relationship with diversity?

### Diversity is not confined to culture

Cultural diversity is the essence of a multicultural society, and it contributes to society in a myriad of ways. The impact of cultural diversity on society is greater than other forms

of diversity (i.e., gender or disability). What is it about cultural diversity that ‘gets us’, when in reality culture is only one element of identity, one element of diversity? ‘Identity flows from a range of sources’ (Crowley, 2006, p. 4), which include gender, nationality, disability, ethnicity, skin colour, age, sexual identity, religion, language, geographical context, family background and economic status. Hence diversity is not confined to culture. Diversity in all its form can illicit many levels of prejudice and discrimination. However, it is mostly cultural diversity which has been driving national policy to respond and produce anti-discriminatory and anti-racist policies. Representative organisations continue to lobby for more robust implementation of these policies. There is concern that they do not adequately protect minority communities, nor do they tackle perpetrators of discrimination. Mac Gréil (2011), in *Pluralism and Diversity in Ireland*, writes about the ‘urgency in addressing racism and discrimination in Irish and other societies’.

### **A timeline of migration and struggle for equality**

For the rest of this chapter we will take you on a journey through the history of migration into and from Ireland, and through the struggle for equality and human rights that has always been part of Irish history.

The timeline in this book can only give a brief overview; more detailed information can be found by searching for *Diversity and Equality* on [www.gillmacmillan.ie](http://www.gillmacmillan.ie) and clicking on the link in the right-hand column. The timeline below is divided into three parts:

- ▶ Part 1: Cultural migration into Ireland
- ▶ Part 2: Irish emigration
- ▶ Part 3: Struggles for equality in a diverse Irish society and the voices of champions of equality and social justice.

We begin by briefly highlighting historical and contemporary cultural influences, along with evidence of some problems associated with diversity and cultural identity for new communities. We find that Ireland today mirrors Ireland at various times in her past. If we look more closely we see that many aspects of diversity including gender, disability and sexual orientation consistently emerge in the struggle for equality (see Chapter 2). Since the arrival of the first people in Ireland in 8000 BC, Ireland’s demographic landscape has shifted and changed to make what is today a dynamic population.

We find that Ireland has for centuries embraced new immigrants (at times unwillingly and not without difficulties) along with their ideas and beliefs. In order to understand our relationship with and responses to cultural diversity, it is useful to look at our own historical context and how it has contributed to who we are and how we have responded

to cultural diversity. Looking at our own cultural context is the first step in working towards diversity and equality and in building respect for human diversity and empathy in our ECEC work.

## **Part 1: Timeline of cultural immigration**

Below, we outline the arrival of a variety of people to our shores, showing the complexity of immigration for the immigrant and its impact on the indigenous community from 400 AD to the present day. This timeline is a snapshot, and although you may be familiar with some of the arrivals, you may not have associated them with the building of a diverse Irish society. *Reading these vignettes will not be enough*; discussion with other learners is necessary and follow-up exploration essential. See suggestions throughout this chapter for further exploration and reading to enhance your knowledge and understanding.

### **8000 BC: Arrival of the First People in Ireland**

Mesolithic people arrived around 8000 BC (the Stone Age). Sometime around 4500 BC, in the Neolithic period, people arrived with agricultural skills. They were responsible for major Neolithic sites such as Newgrange and contributed to agricultural development in Ireland.

### **100 BC: Arrival of Gaels**

The Gaels or the Celts came to Ireland between 800 BC and 100 BC. They established five kingdoms. The geography and tribes of the country were recorded by the Roman geographer Ptolemy during this time.

### **432 AD: Christianity Introduced to Ireland by St Patrick**

This time was a period of creativity and joining of Celtic and Christian traditions. The Ardagh Chalice, the Book of Durrow and the Book of Kells were produced during the seventh and eighth centuries AD.

### **795: Vikings Arrive**

The Vikings had a huge influence on Ireland. They developed towns such as Dublin, Limerick, Cork and Waterford and gave the country the one thing it came to love more than all else – ‘money’ (O’Toole, 2011).

### **1079: Reference to First Jews in Ireland**

Ireland has a long-standing Jewish community. Jews first immigrated to this country in 1079, and came from Spain and Portugal in the 1400s. The 2002 census revealed that there were 1,790 Jews living in Ireland; in the 2006 census, figures had increased to 1,930.



### **1100s: Earliest Documentation of Traveller Craftspeople, Tinkers or Tin-smiths**

Travellers played an important role in Irish society by carrying information and providing entertainment and they also supported the Irish economy through farm labour and tin-smithing.

### **1170: Arrival of the Normans**

Strongbow led the Norman invasion of Ireland in 1149 on invitation from the King of Leinster – the beginning of colonisation.

### **1608: The Plantations of Ulster**

The Plantations of Ulster were one of the most successful and destructive immigration projects in Ireland. The plantations had major negative consequences for Irish society, and their impact has continued into present-day Northern Ireland.

### **1709: Palatines Arrive in Ireland**

The Palatines, Lutheran Protestants from Germany, contributed significantly to the development of Irish farming ([www.irishpalatines.org](http://www.irishpalatines.org)).

### **1845–48: The Irish Famine**

The Great Famine (Irish: *An Gorta Mór* or *An Drochshaol*, ‘the Bad Life’) was a period of starvation, disease and mass emigration between 1845 and 1852 during which the population of Ireland was reduced by 20 to 25 per cent (See ‘Emigration’ for more detail).

### **1904: Anti-Semitic Boycott in Limerick:**

There are dark spots in Irish history with regards to the Jewish community.

By 1904, there were roughly 35 Jewish families in Limerick, a total of 150 people. Media reporting fuelled violent attacks on the community, supported by a sermon from Father Creagh:

... Twenty years ago and less Jews were known only by name and evil repute in Limerick. They were sucking the blood of other nations, but those nations rose up and turned them out. And they came to our land to fasten themselves on us like leeches and to draw our blood...

(From the sermon of Father Creagh, cited on <http://politico.ie>)

This was the worst ever recorded anti-Semitic violence in Irish history, which culminated in a general boycott of the Jewish community in Limerick. ([www.irishcentral.com/news](http://www.irishcentral.com/news)).

## 1950s: Muslims begin arriving in Ireland

The Muslim community began to settle in Ireland in the 1950s. In the 2006 census, 32,500 people stated their religion to be Islam. After the attack in New York on 9/11, the community suffered from anti-Muslim incidences and verbal abuse (NCCRI).

## United Nations Refugee Programme

Over many years, many groups of people came to Ireland under a UN agreement, and they were known as ‘Convention Refugees’ (see Chapter 4). Convention Refugees have the right to work and are entitled to training and support.

My first memories of Ireland are from my playschool. It was here that I noticed I was a bit different from the other children. [...] I was brought up in two cultures, the Vietnamese culture and the Irish culture. We spoke Vietnamese in the home and English at school. But I feel completely Irish because I have lived here for so long. At times, though, I do feel there is a conflict inside me over my identity.

– Nguyen Mai, who was two when her parents fled Vietnam in 1979.

(*Irish Times Magazine*, 18 June 2011, UN Refugee Agency exhibition: 60 years – Stories of Survival and Safe Haven.)

## Asylum Seekers

When I landed in Dublin I couldn’t believe the cold. I thought I would never warm up. At first it was quite amazing, all the strange white faces, but once I found recognisable faces, I felt more at ease.

– Emika, Nigerian asylum seeker (NCCRI, no date, p. 33).

In 2001, there were 10,325 applications from asylum seekers from 103 different countries. Contrary to the experience of the refugees settled here through programmes in the 1960s, there was little empathy for the new arrivals. Racial hostility and attacks became commonplace (Cullen, 2000, Harris and Byrne 2001).

The recent ICI report *Taking Racism Seriously: Migrants’ Experiences of Violence, Harassment and Anti-social Behaviour in the Dublin Area* (2011) confirms the continued harassment of new communities in Ireland. The comments of an ECEC practitioner in a Diversity and Equality workshop (2010) also confirm the need to address these challenges in ECEC training and practice: ‘Why do we have to make changes and pussyfoot around everyone so that we don’t insult them? It’s their choice to be here. They can go home if they don’t like it. Do you think that they would change if we went to their country? They would in my foot. I’m sick of it.’

## Immigration

In 2006 there were 420,000 newcomers living in Ireland from 188 different countries. While the vast majority of these people were from a small number of countries – 82% from just ten countries – there was a remarkable diversity in the total range of nationalities (See [www.cso.ie/census](http://www.cso.ie/census)). Between 2000 and 2004 there were also 39,882 work permits and 5000 work visas granted to new communities as economic migrants.

([www.integrationcentre.ie](http://www.integrationcentre.ie), Press Release, 4 May 2011)

Migrants to Ireland have experienced exploitation and abuse in employment. This has led to migrants becoming undocumented. Migrants and their families are very vulnerable both economically and socially. Like the undocumented Irish working in the US, they cannot travel home. Exploitation is also a risk factor. While many undocumented migrants work, pay taxes and PRSI, they are not in the position to access social services and benefits. It is virtually impossible for undocumented migrants to access their rights under national or international legislation.

Migrants have been coming to Ireland for centuries. As you can see, they have brought a wealth of experience and knowledge which has benefited Ireland. New communities have also suffered exclusion and social prejudice. The Irish have also experienced hardship from colonialism and forced emigration. Below we examine the Irish experience of emigration.

### 1.2 Discuss

- Were you surprised by any of the information outlined in the historical timeline?
- Do you think new arrivals to Ireland in recent years have made a contribution to Irish society?
- Do you think our colonial past has affected how we respond to new arrivals in our country?
- How can knowing about the historical and demographic changes in Ireland support your work with diversity and equality in ECEC?
- Take one of the areas above and research the effects of inward migration at that time. Discuss with your learning group.

## Part 2: Timeline of Irish emigration

While people have always been arriving and seeking refuge for centuries in Ireland there has also been a parallel story of emigration. The Irish are among the ten top nationalities to emigrate for work, and Ireland has the second-highest proportion of its population living in other countries of the EU (Migrant Rights Centre, 2010).

It is common to hear Irish people proclaim Irish popularity abroad; they also love to hear that musicians, actors, dignitaries from abroad love to come to Ireland. However, the Irish emigrant story has not always been so welcoming or so easy.

There are about 70 million people worldwide who can claim Irish descent. The largest number of people of Irish descent live in the United States – about ten times the population of Ireland itself. There are an estimated 800,000 Irish-born people living abroad today ([www.irishtimes.com/timeseye/whoweare/p8topa.htm](http://www.irishtimes.com/timeseye/whoweare/p8topa.htm)).

The Celtic Tiger trend of immigration has stalled, and there is a shift again to emigration as a result of the economic downturn. Irish people have settled all over the world, but mostly in English-speaking countries. The Irish have been very successful abroad, but the challenge of settling into new communities has not been easy, as seen in the examples below from the 19th and 20th centuries.

## **The Great Famine**

Between 1845 and 1852 the population of Ireland was reduced by 20 to 25 per cent by starvation, disease and mass emigration. Approximately one million people died and a million more emigrated from Ireland's shores despite massive quantities of food being exported from Ireland.

During the famine period, emigration was largely to America and Canada on 'famine ships'. Many people were also deported by the British to Australia for petty and more serious crimes. A further wave of emigration, mainly to England and America, took place between the 1930s and 1960s escaping poor economic conditions following the establishment of the Irish Free State (Cowley, 2001).

Emigration numbers have begun to increase again as Ireland experiences recession post the Celtic Tiger years (1995–2007). New challenges meet the Irish émigré in 2011. Australia, the US, Canada and the UK continue to be the main destinations for the emigrating Irish, although immigration laws in these countries have become more stringent. There are many undocumented Irish in the US and a strong Irish lobby is working for their recognition. The examples below include the voices of emigrants and their experiences.

## **Survival in a harsh landscape: Challenges for the Irish émigré through the centuries**

### ***United States***

Conditions were very hard for Irish immigrants in the eighteenth and nineteenth century US. The Irish along with the black community suffered the scorn of those better situated in American society. Colour was important in determining a person's social position. The Irish were frequently referred to as 'niggers turned inside out' and Irish characters on the stage were depicted as drunken and foolish. Over time, the Irish learned that to distance

themselves from black people would support their social capital. The Democratic Party (eager for the Irish vote) lobbied the Irish labourers and organised the exclusion of black people from their trades and professions. As such they forced black people out of numerous trades and occupations. It was when Irish policemen appeared on the streets that it was clear the Irish had begun to climb the social ladder, and the Irish had 'become white' (Ignatiev, 1995).

Perhaps no class of our fellow citizens has carried this prejudice against colour to a point more extreme and dangerous than have our Catholic Irish fellow-citizens, and yet no people on the face of the earth have been more relentlessly persecuted and oppressed on account of race and religion than have this same Irish people.

(Frederick Douglass cited in Rolston and Shannon, 2002, p. 44)

### ***Britain***

The relationship between England and Ireland has been fraught with difficulties and contradictions over the centuries. For over 200 years the Irish have immigrated to Britain. As many as six million British are estimated to have at least one Irish grandparent.

The Irish have contributed to Britain at many levels, but in particular to the construction industry. In the 20th century, living in England for many was a struggle. The Irish were stigmatised and stereotyped, and exploited in employment (Cowley, 2001). The stigmatisation of the Irish goes back a long way. Caricatures of Irish people as ape-like or monstrous beings occasionally appeared in satirical magazines like *Punch*. The Northern Ireland troubles contributed to media outrage and maintained and contributed to Irish hiding their identity in the UK ([www.movinghere.org.uk](http://www.movinghere.org.uk)).

*Voices of those who experienced scapegoating and stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, disadvantage and exploitation can be found by searching for Diversity and Equality on [www.gillmacmillan.ie](http://www.gillmacmillan.ie) and clicking on the link provided.*

### ***Australia***

Forced immigration (deportation) and the stigma of criminal ancestry played a part in Irish Australians playing down their ethnic roots until relatively recently. A public anti-Irish campaign was prompted in the 1980s following a surge of Irish jokes which stereotyped and stigmatised the Irish. The Australian population is made up of 30 to 40% of people claiming Irish roots; this is more than double the percentage of Americans who claim Irish ancestry ([www.thewildgeese.com/pages/aus\\_kel.html](http://www.thewildgeese.com/pages/aus_kel.html), 2011).

### *Anti-Irish Jokes*

Anti-Irish jokes have been widespread throughout the centuries in America, Australia and Britain. The most prevalent portrayals of Irish people in jokes are as stupid, drunken and brainless and Irish accents are ridiculed. A survey in 1994–1995 on discrimination and the Irish community in Britain initiated by the Commission for Racial Equality and written by Mary Hickman and Bronwen Walter (1997) found that 70% surveyed thought anti-Irish jokes offensive and only 30% accepted them as ‘harmless fun’. *The Sun* newspaper ridiculed the announcement of the report describing it as ‘a load of codswallop’, and it greeted the news with a page of Irish jokes ‘to give the researchers a flying start’ (*The Sun*, 22 January 1994, p. 9).

How communities are stigmatised and stereotyped can lead to prejudice, discrimination, racism (see Chapter 3) and oppression. Irish people abroad have been afraid of asserting their identity for fear of reprisals or exclusion and so over the years have ‘kept their heads down’. The Irish have been reluctant to protest at racist treatment partly for fear of being identified, but also for shame arising from a partial acceptance of guilt by association (e.g. ancestral criminality in Australia, association with the IRA in Britain). Attacks and intimidation of the Irish abroad have not always been reported to the police largely due to the perceived lack of justice for complainants with Irish accents based on the immediate association with Irish stereotypes and the Northern Irish political context. Above, we outlined similar experiences of newcomers to Ireland not reporting discrimination or poor service.

#### **1.3 Discuss**

- Can you see any similarities in how the Irish behaved in Britain in the face of media misrepresentation, stigmatisation and discrimination, and how new communities respond to similar behaviour in Ireland?
- How do you think emigration has affected the self-esteem of the Irish?
- Do you think we treat new communities in the same way Irish people were treated abroad?

## **Part 3: Struggles for equality in a diverse society**

There are always individuals and groups who lead the way in the search for equality and rights for all citizens. As part of our colonial, tribal and religious history over centuries, struggles for justice for all have been attempted. Champions for social justice in all societies have a common experience of resistance as they generally cause discomfort to vested interests. Without champions of social justice to promote change for those who experience discrimination, Irish society would be all the poorer. Champions of social justice generally work with allies in human rights groups or non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

Change generally comes slowly, but it can and does happen. There are many reasons that champions for social justice causes are driven to act, but the key elements in their drive for change is their vision for an egalitarian society. This vision often includes eliminating discrimination, respecting diverse identities and ensuring that the recognition and acknowledgement of the experiences and situations of different groups and individuals be respected and valued in society. We can all be champions for social justice, for equal respect and recognition of all citizens, even as we work in an ECEC setting. Irish citizens over the centuries have championed for equality and justice at international and national levels. Below, we outline some critical changes that emerged in the struggle for rights and justice linked to a primary champion for social justice and their support groups. These people can also be celebrated for their contributions to human rights in Ireland in teaching exercises with young children. We have presented some people of influence under racial, ethnic and religious oppression, gay rights, women's rights and children's rights. See the *Diversity and Equality* page on [www.gillmacmillan.ie](http://www.gillmacmillan.ie) for further details of champions for social justice.

### **Racial, ethnic and religious oppression**

#### ***Daniel O'Connell: The Liberator (1775-1847)***

Daniel O'Connell was committed to humanitarianism. 'He supported the emancipation of Jews, was at the forefront of the anti-slavery movement, denounced colonialism and its victims where it existed, preached the brotherhood of man with conviction and denounced sectarianism'. (Lydon, 1998, p. 284). The Catholic Association which he founded became the first mass political party in history. The party collected small dues every week in Catholic churches throughout the country. Daniel O'Connell, the first modern agitator, held mass meetings and is credited with developing the method of grass roots organising. Under British rule Catholics were prohibited from holding office. He led the campaign for Catholic Emancipation (Lydon, 1998) and won. He also was a key figure for the 1833 Anti-Slavery and Abolitionist Movement.

Daniel O'Connell denounced slavery, criticising American hypocrisy despite the Irish in America objecting to his calls for freedom for black slaves:

Let American in the fullness of her pride wave on high her banner of freedom and its blazing stare ... In the midst of their laughter and their pride, I point them to the negro children screaming for their mother from whose bosom they have been tore... Let them hoist the flag of liberty, with the whip and rack on one side, and the star of freedom upon the other.

(Ignatiev, 1995, pp. 9-10)

***Mary Manning and Karen Gearon (1980s)***

We won... We didn't start the movement, the movement was there before us, but we certainly brought a new life to it, and we raised its profile. Before this strike there were about six divisions of the Apartheid movement in Ireland. By the time we finished there was an anti-apartheid division in every single county, and some had three or four.

– Karen Gearon, Dunnes Stores worker

Mary Manning refused to handle South African fruit as a cashier in Dunnes Stores in 1984. Her decision was based on a directive of the Irish Distributive and Administrative Trade Union regarding apartheid in South Africa. Eleven young workers took a stand against apartheid and become global symbols of resistance. Their actions caused two and a half years of upheaval for Dunnes Stores. The workers suffered considerably both economically and socially. They experienced abuse, were spat on and were called 'nigger lovers' and told to 'look after their own instead'. Bishop Desmond Tutu from South Africa supported the strikers which gave them an international profile (Sweeney, 2010). Finally the government relented and banned the importation of South African goods in 1986. Through their commitment to human rights they demonstrated what 'ordinary' people can do to fight injustice at a global level (Sweeney, 2010).

***John O'Connell (1949–99)***

In his short life, John O'Connell always took the road less travelled in supporting the rights of poor and oppressed people. He began his work in the Philippines and continued this path in Ireland championing Travellers' rights. He worked tirelessly to support the empowerment of Travellers through education programmes and community initiatives. He founded Pavee Point, the national Travellers' centre, to work in partnership with the Traveller community. A firm believer in the need to act locally and think globally, he pioneered the development of European and international links for and with Travellers and other Irish marginalised groups. He advocated for Travellers' recognition as a minority ethnic group and the rights associated with such a status. His vision may yet come to fruition following the indications given at Ireland's Universal Periodic Review of Human Rights hearing in Geneva in October 2011 that consideration is being given by the Irish government to the recognition of Travellers as a minority ethnic group.

His legacy lives on in his writing, initiatives and especially in the people he inspired to take action for change on their own behalf.

***Women's Rights (1970s)***

Countess Markievicz and Hannah Sheehy-Skeffington worked tirelessly to secure the right of women to vote. They succeeded, though in 1922 women were required to own



property and be over 30 to vote. In 1922 all Irish women over 21 were given the right to vote (Ward, 1997).

### ***The Women's Liberation Movement***

In 1970 the Irish Women's Liberation Movement was founded. Their message was disseminated by members working in the media. The publication *Chains or Change*, in 1971, demanded: equal pay for women; equality before the law; equality in education; availability of contraception; justice for deserted wives, single mothers and widows; and a house for every family. This publication influenced the Commission on the Status of Women Report.

#### **At that time:**

- ▶ a married woman was still regarded as the chattel of her husband
- ▶ there was still a marriage bar for women in the Civil Service
- ▶ Irish women workers earned only 55% of men's wages
- ▶ 'chivalry' and 'respect' applied only to manners,
- ▶ contraception was illegal
- ▶ after a lifetime in the home, many widows ended their days in degrading poverty
- ▶ the plight of unwed mothers, deserted wives and those with broken marriages demanded attention.

In their determination to secure legal contraception, members of women's liberation groups protested against Archbishop McQuaid's letter to the public, in which he said, '*contraception is evil; there cannot be, on the part of any person, a right to what is evil*' by walking out of Mass and protesting at the Archbishop's Palace in Drumcondra. They journeyed to Belfast on the '*condom train*' and publicly displayed illegally imported contraceptives at Connolly Station in Dublin. They held large meetings and organised pickets, marches and demonstrations. These women raised awareness among Irish women and challenged them to demand change. They also raised political awareness of the rights and needs of women (Sweeney, 2010, p. 21).

***Mary McGee: Contraception and the High Court (1973)***

***Mary Robinson: Cherish, Josie Airey and Equal Pay (1973–6)***

***Removal of the Ban on Married Women Working (1973)***

***Anti-Discrimination (Pay) Act (1974)***

(see the *Diversity and Equality* page on [www.gillmacmillan.ie](http://www.gillmacmillan.ie) for details)

## Gay Rights (1970s)

### *David Norris*

In the 1970s homosexuality was illegal in Ireland. In 1973–1974 homosexual men were sentenced in court for acts of gross indecency and for being practicing homosexuals. In 1970s David Norris began campaigning for gay rights and gave his first interview as an openly gay man. He and law students at Trinity College set up the Campaign for Homosexual Law Reform. It wasn't until 1988 that the National Gay Federation took the legal route to challenge the legal ban on homosexuality on the ground that it was an unconstitutional infringement of personal privacy. David Norris took the case. The judge ruled against Norris, and stated 'it is reasonably clear that current Christian morality in this country does not approve of buggery, or of any sexual activity between persons of the same sex' (*Irish Times*, 11 October 1980). They took this 'long and arduous struggle through' (Mac Gréil, 2011, p. 48) the Supreme Court and then finally to the European Court of Human Rights. In the European Court, Ireland was found to be in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights on the grounds of privacy, and on 30 June 1993, the Irish Parliament passed a law to decriminalise sex between men (Murray et al, 2010).

## Right to marry for Same-sex Couples

### *Katherine Zappone and Ann Louise Gilligan (2006–)*

*For more information, see the Diversity and Equality page on [www.gillmacmillan.ie](http://www.gillmacmillan.ie).*

## Children's Rights

### *Nóirín Hayes (1992–)*

Children's rights have been slow to come onto the agenda in Ireland. Nóirín Hayes (DIT, CSER) has continually championed both children's rights and the importance of ECEC provision for young children. As chair of OMEP Ireland (world organisation for early childhood education), she endeavoured to get greater and wider attention in Ireland focussed on the ratification of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child in 1992. The reaction of the government was limited. The OMEP committee decided to bring together NGOs, trade unions and education institutions to attend a meeting in May 1993. While this meeting was well attended it was limited in terms of political engagement. Hayes continued to pursue the issue and in September 1993 held a further meeting: 11 people representing nine organisations attended. One of the organisations, Barnardos, had access to a small grant from the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. This grant was used to move things forward on the topic of children's rights. The core group was mobilised into what eventually became the Children's Rights Alliance (see [www.childrensrights.ie](http://www.childrensrights.ie)). Hayes continued her involvement in the CRA as a board member and Chair, and continues to keep the issue of children's right on the agenda through her research. In the late 1990s, she

took the opportunity provided by the EU NOW funding programme to initiate the OMNA project, which brought the sector together again. This was important in developing a shared sense of purpose for ECEC provision for young children. The idea to bring the sector together was borrowed by the National Childcare Strategy in the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform. This initiative subsequently led to the development of the Síolta Quality Framework (2006) and the Aistear Curriculum Framework (2010).

### 1.4 Activity

- Find out who has championed children's rights in Ireland. What were the issues and barriers that confronted them?
- Champions of human rights are generally – but not always – activists. What qualities do you think are needed to make a champion or activist?
- Why do you think it takes so long for the state to allocate rights to its citizens?
- Source and explore stories from new communities, asylum seekers, refugees and Travellers or Irish immigrants. Investigate:
  - what type of welcome they have had in their host country.
  - what kind of struggles they had or continue to have.
  - how attitudes towards them personally or towards their group have affected their lives.
- Learn about an individual or organisation that has been successful in changing policy for a particular group i.e., women, people with disabilities, the Traveller community, newcomers, etc.

## Summary

At a glance, this timeline gives a sample of the way that the development of diversity in Ireland has contributed to the richness of our heritage and current society. It also highlights some of the challenges associated with the inclusion of cultural diversity for indigenous and new communities, and Irish emigrants' experiences as newcomers in other states. Historically, cultural and broader diversity within the population has not always been valued nor have differences been equally cherished. As a result, Ireland has not always shown due regard for the diverse needs of all people. The struggle for equality and protection against discrimination in all its forms continues to pose challenges for Irish society, a society in which children learn in a system that can continue to reinforce those challenges.

Diversity in all its forms, and how we have embraced or rejected it over the centuries has influenced how we as a nation embrace cultural diversity and difference today. Our history of colonialism, immigration and the negative treatment of Irish immigrants abroad also contributed to the collective possessiveness about 'Irishness' and nationalism. Our perceived homogeneity comes largely from the notion of having to create a unique Irishness in the wake of our becoming an independent nation in 1922. As part of that

Irishness, we have created a self-image of 'Ireland of the welcomes', which has been severely challenged in the past ten years. Ironically, the colonisation and oppression of a nation does not make its people empathetic to those who are immigrating or experiencing disadvantage. Yet this is juxtaposed with a history of respect for the oppressed as seen in such key figures as Daniel O'Connell, Mary Robinson, John O'Connell, the Dunnes Stores workers, John O'Connell, Katherine Zappone, Anne Louise Gilligan and Nóirín Hayes to name a few.

As an example of our continued negative relationship with colonialism, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, many Irish immigrants to Britain returned to settle into their original communities. Reports from some schools in the south west of Ireland indicated that the most significant bullying issues centred on the English accents of children of returned Irish parents.

The demographics of Ireland 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, the returned Irish, family status, people with disabilities, gay and lesbian people in families, ethnic minorities, the Traveller community, economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, Irish-language speakers, religious minorities, the multiracial Irish, the majority population and many others. The changes in our demographics have raised many issues for our society, and in particular in the way we develop and provide services for communities.

So why is it important to be aware of Ireland's historic diversity, its challenges and how equality change has come about in Ireland as an ECEC learner or provider? Because it helps to remind us that we are who we are *because* of our mixed heritage, background, abilities, etc. It gives us perspective, and it may help to show a level of empathy for those who are new and not so new, able and not so able, privileged and not so privileged in our communities. It also draws our attention to the inequalities in society, and helps to dispel some myths that surround diversity and equality issues.

By gaining knowledge about history we can begin to critically reflect on diversity and equality issues in contemporary society, which in turn will enhance our work with children and support the implementation of *Síolta* (2006) and *Aistear* (2010). Children will encounter diversity and inequality in life and addressing these issues with young children will benefit them in fulfilling their own potential and in their active engagement as citizens.