

Conscious Noticing: Anti-bias from Policy to Practice

Colette Murray

Institute of Technology Blanchardstown – Dublin, Ireland

I love Louise Derman-Sparks and try my hardest to implement an Anti-bias Approach, however the difficulty is that practitioners are not trained enough. Practitioners often feel scared or unsure on the issue of addressing diversity and they are often uncomfortable talking about difference.
(ECCE manager/educator)

At its heart, the Anti-bias Approach offers a “vision of a world in which all children are able to blossom and each child’s particular abilities and gifts are able to flourish” (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 2). In this article, I explore the implications of the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) sector at policy and training levels for implementing the Anti-bias Approach (Derman-Sparks & the Anti-bias Task Force, 1989). Specifically, I share data from research undertaken with 45 third and 40 fourth year¹ students in 2016 from the ECCE Degree Programme² at the Institute of Technology Blanchardstown (ITB), Dublin, Ireland. 85 students visited 81 ECCE services, four services were visited twice.

The students who participated in the research were 95% White Irish females from various socio-economic backgrounds. 5% of students represented different ethnicities across three continents. Two male students also participated. As part of their course work, the exercise Equality-Proofing the ECCE Environment (Murray, Cooke, & O’Doherty, 2004, 2010; Murray & Urban, 2012) is first simulated for the students in a large lecture theatre using pre-prepared materials (explained below). The students are then required to choose an ECCE service,³ interview a manager or educator, and then Equality-Proof⁴ the physical environment. I discuss the results of students’ experiences.

Anti-bias Approach and the Irish Early Childhood Care and Education Policy Context

While equality, diversity and inclusion, and Anti-bias training initiatives have been developed, delivered, and evaluated over many years in Ireland for pre-service accredited training and professional development (Duffy & Gibbs, 2012; Murray, Cooke, & O’Doherty, 2004, 2010; Murray & O’Doherty, 2001), they have never been fully mainstreamed by the state. This is despite Ireland having a number of national policy documents that name and require ECCE services to address diversity, equality, and inclusion. The most recent policy initiative by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) is the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM, 2016; <http://aim.gov.ie>) which addresses inclusion, with a particular focus on disability. A central plank of AIM (DCYA, 2016a) has been the revision and retitling of

¹ 3rd and 4th years students took the same module in 2016 because of a restructuring of the ECCE programme.

² This is a 4-year undergraduate Honours Degree programme.

³ In Ireland an ECCE service can mean full-day care or pre-school sessional services, and include early primary for children aged 6 months to 6 years

⁴ Screening of policies, procedures, information, and material, as well as the ECCE physical environment. It involves the incorporation of an equality perspective in all aspects of the service.

“Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers” (published in 2006 by the Office of the Minister for Children [OMC], 2006) to “Diversity, Equality and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines” (DCYA, 2016b). The Anti-bias approach (Derman-Sparks, 1989) and its Goals and Principles (see introduction to the special issue) are central to the Charter and Guidelines. The approach has also been contextualised⁵ for the Irish sector through various initiatives and publications (Murray & O’Doherty, 2001; Murray & Urban, 2012; OMC, 2006).

Building on the expertise of the previous initiatives, training for the implementation of the Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016b) is currently being funded nationally by DCYA. Much of the content of the training comes from the original training initiatives. This training includes the Equality-Proofing Exercise, provided by the author, which is outlined and discussed in this article. This replication lends itself to a more consistent sectoral approach at policy level and across pre-service and in-service Diversity and Equality training.

From There to Here

Weaving equality and diversity and an Anti-bias perspective is not new to my work, as I have advocated for the inclusion of an equality and diversity Anti-bias Approach in the Irish ECCE sector since 1998. The origins of my work stem from the non-recognition, exclusion, and discrimination of Traveller children within the Education and ECCE sectors in Ireland. Traveller children remain the most marginalised and excluded in Irish society (Children’s Rights Alliance, 2017; Holland, 2017; MacGréil, 2011). I see AIM (DCYA, 2016a) as an opportunity to provide training that supports students and educators to understand how policy, theory, and practice can come together to work for a more equitable pedagogy for all children. There is, however, a risk that practitioners may limit their focus to disability or new communities (e.g., second language acquisition), and Travellers, Roma, and the socio-economically disadvantaged remain invisible in many ECCE settings. Being alert to this is a continued advocacy and educational challenge in an improved policy climate.

In 2012, I moved from Pavee Point Travellers and Roma Centre (www.paveepoint.ie) to work with undergraduate ECCE students in ITB. In 2014, a partial programmatic review opened an opportunity for me to introduce the diversity and equality training modules, which I had developed in my previous work (1998-2011) (Murray & O’Doherty, 2001; Murray & Urban, 2012). This work had been developed and piloted with ECCE staff and trainers over many years (Murray, Cooke, & O’Doherty, 2004, 2010). It was delivered nationally from 2011 to 2012 as the Preschool Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups (DES, 2010), and externally evaluated (Duffy & Gibbs, 2012). The results demonstrated significant changes in attitudes, practices, and overall quality of services.

This pedagogical training approach and modules are now part of the ITB ECCE Degree Programme. The work is embedded in two modules: Diversity and Equality in ECCE year 3 and Social Justice year 4. The modules address a critical diversity and equality approach, Anti-bias thinking, and critical dialogic pedagogy and praxis (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994, 2010).

⁵ The ‘*éist*’ project (Murray & O’Doherty, 2001) contextualised the Anti-bias approach to the Irish sector; situating the Anti-bias Framework within the Irish historical context, drawing on research in the Irish context on those who are affected by discrimination, marginalisation, and oppression.

The Equality and Diversity 3rd year Module Content

The Equality and Diversity (3rd year) module⁶ was originally developed with and for small groups using experiential methodologies. The approach was successful in raising awareness and unpacking critical issues of injustice, and in empowering educators to engage with Anti-bias practice. Given the class sizes (50-80) and the lecture style format, I wondered how I might manage to deliver this within a higher education setting. It involved requesting a larger lecture theatre so students could move around, scheduling a consecutive two-hour class, and amending some of the material for the execution of the exercises.

This Equality-Proofing Exercise is part of the 3rd year module. Students first examine concepts of diversity, equality, and inclusion. This includes addressing the effects of oppression, stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination, and racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia (Murray & Urban, 2012; Young, 1990), and how they intersect and operate in society (Baker, Lynch, Cantillon, & Walsh, 2004). Curricular approaches and curricular positions (MacNaughton, 2003; Murray & Urban, 2012) to diversity are then interrogated and linked to the Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016b).

Attention to the personal is core to Anti-bias work hence, attitudes, values, and empathy are investigated through the use of the Anti-bias Goals for adults (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010; Murray, 2012). A critical awareness of one's own cultural context and recognition of ourselves as cultural beings is a first step in addressing Anti-bias work (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Souto-Manning, 2013).

The core of this module is about transformation through consciousness raising, conceptual understanding, skills development, and critical thinking (Freire, 2005). Making the leap to critical thinking (hooks, 2010) can be a challenging step. bell hooks (1994) argues that if we are “without the capacity to think critically about ourselves and our lives, none of us would be able to move forward, to change, to grow” (p. 202).

Providing a holistic and inclusive physical environment is an essential element of our module. Students are required to learn how to equality-proof the ECCE environment for all equipment, materials, and images, which includes analysis of children's books in the ECCE setting. We embark on a path of what Mason (2002) calls “the discipline of noticing” to empower students to engage in questioning what is in front of them and to move beyond taken for granted notions of space and representation.

Equality-Proofing Exercise: How Does it Work?

The Equality-Proofing Exercise builds on the foundational theory explored in the module thus far. It calls on the students to challenge their assumptions, and question inequalities and simply assess what is visible and what is missing in the media, society, and the ECCE environment. This activity brings theory and practice together.⁷ It allows students to practice Anti-bias in everyday contexts. Beginning with Goal 1 of the Anti-bias Approach: “Supporting children's individual and group identity and sense of belonging” we discuss imagery, representation, and the physical environment. In the Irish context, demographics include new immigrants (in recent years from sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia) as well as traditionally marginalised communities in Irish Society (Travellers). We also explore areas such as disability, family status, class, and sexual orientation. The Equality-Proofing

⁶ For details on the 3rd and 4th year modules see ([www.course.itb](http://www.course.itb.ie/index.cfm/page/module/moduleId/3285)) (<http://courses.itb.ie/index.cfm/page/module/moduleId/3285>).

⁷ The Equality-Proofing Exercise was adapted from Carter & Curtis (1994)

Exercise is a critical introduction to how the physical environment is or can be constructed to ensure each child is visibly represented. The exercise offers students an opportunity to look at the ECCE setting from both a minority and majority child's perspective. It provides/prompts insights about affirming and reflecting individual and group identity in imagery and materials in ECCE. It also supports students to critically reflect on their own assumptions and biases, and on their roles as advocates and change agents in ECCE (hooks, 1994; MacNaughton, 2003).

Equality-Proofing: Students in Action

The Equality-Proofing Exercise begins in the lecture theatre (capacity 40 to 80 students). The aim of the exercise is to bring students on a journey to a simulated bookshop so that they can assess everyday images and messages in the popular media. To create this environment, I bring in large cardboard boards covered with images, headlines, and articles from local, national, and international newspapers and magazines. Children's books and examples of birthday and religious celebration cards are also included. The students are informed that they are going on an imaginary visit to a bookshop and they will be going as a given persona.⁸

The students work in pairs and each pair has a prepared persona that represents a child from the Irish context, for example:

- A 4-year-old Irish born Muslim boy with Libyan cultural heritage lives with his mother and father who run their own food store in Dublin.
- A 3-year-old Traveller girl living with her mother and father, two sisters and a brother on a halting site⁹. Her aunts, uncles, and cousins live on the same halting site.

The students are required to expand their persona so that they can attempt to step into the bookshop with their child's world in their consciousness. They are informed how the room is set up, how the material was chosen, and what they must look for:

- Were you represented in the images?
- How were you represented (positive, negative, neutral)?
- How did you feel?

They then go and look at all images and materials to find out how they are represented in Irish society. They record their findings. Specialist magazines¹⁰ (e.g. Disability, Traveller magazines) are not used to build the boards because they are not actively present in the everyday and popular media. I do include examples of children's books on diversity that are not readily available in the shops to enable a more in-depth discussion about children's literature. This supports assessing children's books by reading beneath the surface of the imagery and the written word.

Equality-Proofing: The Students' Experience

A number of critical issues arise from the exercise. When students are developing their persona, what transpires is a heavy reliance on stereotyping in the creation of their child's world. For example, when outlining their persona, students may say the Muslim mother wears a hijab, attends the mosque every day, they are poor, and were

⁸ Persona: a role or character adopted for a specific purpose.

⁹ A halting site is a space where Traveller and nomadic communities can park their caravans. They can be permanent or transient.

¹⁰ Specialist Magazine focuses on one particular area of interest, for example: The Traveller Times <http://travellerstimes.org.uk/Magazine.aspx> and Down Syndrome World <http://downsyndromeworld.org>

persecuted. Some students notice and comment on this in the class discussion. Many students are shocked when they see the level of stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination in the images and articles for some groups (Travellers and Black communities). The invisibility of other groups also raised concerns, e.g. people with disabilities, Roma, Muslims, different family structures, Chinese community. The visibility of the dominant middle class and images of celebrities becomes a talking point.

Some students feel they have had the opportunity to look at the world through another lens, coming from a different social and cultural context. Some find that they personally identify with their assigned child although they may not have thought about it before. Recognising that it is not possible to walk in the shoes of another person/community, the Equality-Proofing Exercise gives an insight into visibility and invisibility in Irish society. This appears to be useful for raising students' awareness at a number of levels. It can be seen as an exercise in 'conscientisation' (Freire, 1970): developing a critical awareness of your own social reality and the social reality of the children and families you work with. It also involves action (Freire, 1970), which is an important part of the process as it involves changing something such as representation of all children in the ECCE environment.

Students often have emotional responses especially when they see that they (as their persona) are totally invisible (e.g. children with disability) in the images or when all or nearly all of the images are negative (Traveller and Roma Community). For example, in a recent piece in the *Sunday Independent National Newspaper* (Kenny, 2017), a heading read "Travellers are largely to blame for their negative image"; this was accompanied by an image of Traveller men bare knuckle boxing.¹¹ Articles like this can compromise students' own thinking about Travellers, as historically Travellers have been "viewed as a lower caste and, at times, as "outcasts" in Irish society" (MacGréil, 2011, p. 303).

Some issues of denial also emerge and are common as some students' state that "children wouldn't notice that they are not represented...there are images here which could represent any child", such as, "the unit of a family, mammy, daddy, and child together." Other students say, "well, even if they are not white they can recognise the unit of a family." Sometimes students take the initiative to go to their own local bookshop to carry out the exercise. In some cases, because I construct the boards, they may doubt the reliability of my choice of images or may feel it has been constructed in a biased way. But those that report back state that their findings are similar to their experience of the Equality-Proofing Exercise in the college.

Clear, insightful unpacking of the exercise is essential. It has the capacity to shock and challenge personal perceptions and misconceptions. It can also elicit empathy and desire for change. There is also resistance. It is important to manage the emotional side of any exercise as it can lead to responses and even actions that can judge or blame ECCE educators.

Equality-Proofing: Students Visiting the Field

Once students have completed the Equality-Proofing Exercise in the college, they are prepared for their external visit. There are two distinctive steps when out in the field. The first step is to interview the manager or educator in the ECCE service. The second step requires the student to carry out the Equality-Proofing of the physical

¹¹ Bare Knuckle Boxing: also known as bare-knuckle is the original form of boxing, closely related to ancient combat sports. It involves two individuals fighting without boxing gloves or other padding on their hands.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bare-knuckle_boxing

environment. The students need to first ask the manager or educator about the composition of the current cohort of families in the service; this is a prerequisite for the Equality-Proofing of the physical environment. The interview questions are co-constructed with the lecturer and include understanding of diversity, equality concepts, how diversity is addressed in their curriculum, and whether they use a diversity and equality curricular approach. They also enquire if they have attended diversity and equality training, and if they have a policy on diversity and equality.

Following the interview, students Equality-Proof one room of the service with the focus on one or more children as appropriate. They use a checklist to support their Equality-Proofing and replicate what they did in the lecture theatre in the ECCE service (see www.edenn.org for the Equality-Proofing Exercise). Students present their findings to each other in the class, followed by a general discussion. They also submit a written record of their findings.

Findings

The ECCE services that the students visited ranged from sessional private and community services, to full day-care private and community services. The services were in both socio-economically disadvantaged and middle-class areas. Some specialist or targeted services, such as charities working with children with special requirements and disadvantaged or vulnerable children, as well as some primary schools in areas designated as disadvantaged, were also used. Services were located in inner city, urban, and rural settings. Most managers and educators interviewed were white Irish, although the services employed staff from a variety of ethnicities. There tended to be less ethnic diversity in small, rural services.

The overall findings indicate that understandings of diversity and equality concepts, approaches, and the use of policies varied considerably, ranging from limited to very clear and concise understandings. The students found that many managers/educators indicated that they embraced diversity through the theme “Identity and Belonging” from Aistear, the National Curriculum Framework (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment [NCCA], 2009). They gave examples of representation, festivals, cultural days, portrait painting, use of stories and books. Similarly, the findings from Equality-Proofing highlighted variations and some contradictions in practice.

From Equality-Proofing, students found that generally representation of all children in the settings was limited, and that many children were not visible at all. There were some exceptions to this where services had very good representation. Some managers and educators spoke a lot about actively working to support diversity and children’s identities, yet had virtually nothing representing the diversity of the children in their setting. This type of contradiction raised questions for the students.

Students reported that findings from the Equality-Proofing Exercise, as well as the interviews, raised critical questions about how identity and belonging are addressed in pre-service training and professional development. They felt it contributed to how they now perceive their future role and practice. Students’ written submissions were read and common themes identified from the interviews and Equality-Proofing results. These were colour-coded and grouped under headings. Emerging themes from the data analysis are outlined below. Student quotes are represented by the letter “S” and, managers and educators interviewed by the letters “M/E”.

Recognition: Child and Family Background

Managers/educators were asked about the background of the families attending the service (e.g. ethnicity, family structure). The findings indicate that some had substantial information about the children in terms of background, gender, ability, family structure, ethnicity, and their culture or cultural heritage:

The practitioner demonstrated a vast knowledge of the backgrounds of the children, which included cultures, abilities, linguistic background, family structure, and religious backgrounds. (S1)

One of the students reported that the manager/educator could identify the child or family's country of origin and diverse abilities:

The practitioner identified the children as Lithuanian, Russian, Turkish, Romanian, South Korean, and Irish, single parent families, and children with additional needs. (S2)

Other managers/educators named the children by their country of origin and some only by religion (e.g., Muslim). Some managers/educators stated the children's racial identity; for example, white Irish. Some identified that there was diversity in the service but they did not provide details of what that diversity was:

The supervisor had to look at the files for the children to find out their nationalities and was surprised herself at where some of the children came from. (S3)

I noticed when explaining where the children came from, she named the home country, but not in the case of the Muslim child; she acknowledged this child by religion. (S4)

This inconsistency and lack of awareness about the diversity in the settings is not surprising as it matches my own experience in the sector. If essential background information is not known or valued, a child's well-being and sense of belonging can be critically undermined (Woodhead & Brooker, 2008). Recognition is about validating children for who they are. The importance of recognition is illuminated in the General Comment 7 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 2005, p. 7). Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argue that recognition can "ultimately transform children's early experiences and in this way, 'difference' is able to accumulate equality, rather than be the site of marginalisation and subordination" (p. 172).

Policy Cracks

Students enquired if there was a diversity and equality policy for the service. There was a mixed response to this question. Some services had active policies; staff knew about them and they were visible. Others had inactive policies, i.e. a policy that is there but no one knew much about it nor had they used it. Informal policies about some areas, e.g. second language acquisition, also emerged. Some had no policy focus on diversity and equality or no diversity and equality policy at all. In only one or two cases were services very clear that their service wished to demonstrate that a diversity and equality policy was central to their practice, for example:

We have a policy on inclusion which is included in our advertising. (M/E1)

Having a diverse service is what I aim to do. I aim to include each child's individual and group differences and similarities. It is all about making the children feel welcome and at home here. (M/E2)

This manager identified as someone who had had Anti-bias training.

Some services were unclear about whether they had an equality and diversity policy:

No, I don't think so (policy) but we do Aistear and actually I think it says in our policies that all children are included. (M/E3)

While others stated that they didn't have an equality and diversity policy:

No, we don't have a policy on diversity and equality. (M/E4)

The school does not have a policy around diversity and equality, and I don't believe it should have one. (M/E5)

One service said they had no policies named as diversity and equality but gave an example on the use of language in the service.

We ask the children to speak English here and speak their home languages at home. But all the staff learned to say "hello" in the home languages. (M/E6)

This is an example of an informal policy about second language acquisition, which the service has not recognised as a diversity and equality policy. The presence of a policy gives very clear messages to staff and parents about how children are treated, recognised, made visible, respected, and how their individual and group identities are (or are not) supported (DCYA, 2016b; MacNaughton, 2003; Murray & O'Doherty, 2001). Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2010) remind us that "invisibility erases identity and experience, visibility affirms reality" (p. 13).

(Mis)Conceptions and Understandings

According to Baker et al. (2004) equality is not about treating people the same but ensuring people are treated fairly without discrimination and having awareness that needs are met in various ways. Managers/educators were asked about what they understood by concepts of diversity and equality. Students reported that some found it challenging to articulate their understanding. In terms of diversity, findings show that the general approach was to focus on different cultures, although in fact meaning different ethnicities. Denial or fear of diversity also emerged. However, those providing specialist services for children with additional requirements or community services based in more disadvantaged areas demonstrated more in-depth understandings of equality.

Diversity as Culture

On diversity one interviewee stated:

Oh, that's a difficult one, that word always gets me. Diversity is about celebrating all the different cultures. (M/E7)

Similarly,

Celebrating and acknowledging difference: we celebrate Chinese New Year to show our diversity around (Chinese child's name). It is the year of the monkey. (M/E8)

Diversity as Discomfort and Denial

Another student stated:

I could feel that the manager was uncomfortable with using the term "Black". It seemed to me that overall the setting was afraid of addressing diversity. (S5)

A manager/educator stated:

I do not feel that difference should be highlighted, it should all be accepted as one. (M/E9)

Most managers or educators associated diversity with different cultures and religions. Disability was mentioned only when discussing equality. Issues of gender or the diverse identities of the majority child did not emerge.

Equality as Social Justice

In responding to the term “equality,” two managers/educators working with children with additional requirements addressed the issue of anti-discriminatory practice:

Our society is both diverse and unequal in many respects. Many ethnic and cultural differences are very visible, as unfortunately are the prejudices and the discrimination based on them. Are we becoming more acceptable of minority groups? I’m not so sure. I believe that discrimination and inequality are deeply rooted in Irish society. (M/E10)

Ensuring as much as possible that the person gets the best out of life within the community and no discrimination against them. (M/E11)

A small number of managers/educators mentioned the challenge of discrimination and of societal challenges in general. However, issues of stereotyping, prejudice, discrimination or racism, ableism, sexism generally did not emerge.

Equality as Sameness

A common conception articulated by educators is that we are “all the same and we are all equal.” Most managers or educators regarded equality as treating people “the same,” or when they mentioned “equal,” the general meaning related to providing the same service to all children, to experience the same outcomes. Some focused on cultural issues:

It is about treating each child as if they were the same and making sure they get the same chance as everyone else. (M/E12)

Equality is encouraging everyone to do the same even if it’s not how they would normally do it, like we taught the children it’s correct to shake hands when you meet new people. (M/E13)

Focus on Disability

No matter what ability, everyone should be treated the same. (M/E14)

If I was applying equality to my service it would mean it’s ensuring that it is open to everyone regardless of their background or if they have any disabilities. Everyone is equal and everyone is individual. Simple rights for everyone. (M/E15)

One student commented, “the staff need to consider the children’s societal context and not just their cultural diversity” (S6). Another student reflected on the use of the word “same”: “What I found interesting was the use of ‘same’; it shows a lack of understanding, avoids confronting difference, maybe even views it as a bad thing, it also demonstrates their values around diversity and equality” (S7). What the student is identifying is the lack of clarity and thought around the concepts of diversity and equality, and perhaps a lack of theoretical understandings around identity formation and “sameness.” The student is problematising the use of the word “same” and its multitude of meanings which can represent a variety of outcomes for children.

Understandings of sameness are standardised on hegemonic cultural values, dismissing the importance of according power differences among individuals, backgrounds, and cultural groups (Robinson & Jones Diaz, 2006). Some managers spoke about sameness as treating the individual child with respect. Nevertheless, there was a lack of recognition of the broader social issues around inequality.

Equality is always about treating everyone the same – it is about treating people in such a way that the outcome from each person can be the same. This means putting things in place to support people to achieve similar outcomes. (M/E16)

Some services drew special attention to how it is *not* about treating everyone the “same,” stating that:

Equality should recognise difference and teach others to value and respect diversity. (M/E17)

Diversity and Equality are necessary conceptual partners. As Woodhead and Brooker (2008) contend, “recognising the interconnections amongst concepts and ideas can help to ensure that the experiences provided in ECCE programmes enable all children and their families to experience a similar sense of belonging as they encounter diverse services” (p. 4). Some of the students expressed their surprise that there was not a better understanding of the concepts of diversity and inclusion, given they are addressed in the national quality and curriculum frameworks *Síolta* (Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education [CECDE], 2006) and *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). This was largely because students had begun to recognise the importance of their own conceptual understandings and this gave them insights into how they viewed children, families, and practice. They were beginning to see and understand “some core, underlying truths, not simply [a] superficial truth which may be more obviously visible” (hooks, 2010, p. 9).

Watch the Gap: The Slide between Policy and Training

Most managers/educators said they were unaware of or had no curricular approach to address diversity and equality. Many stated that they followed *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009) and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006). However, they tended to speak about addressing diversity through the theme “Identity and Belonging” in *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009). Some managers/educators said they had heard of the Anti-bias Approach and some said they implemented it, despite evidence to the contrary in the interviews and from the Equality-Proofing. Good intentions or simply naming an approach is problematic; it can in fact be tokenistic and lead to a denial of difference (Souto-Manning, 2013; Woodhead & Oates, 2008).

The manager said they follow an *Aistear* approach to diversity as they feel naming it as multicultural or intercultural will cause barriers. (S8)

A resistance to naming areas such as intercultural or multicultural feeds into a prevalent perspective that dealing with diversity and equality in ECCE is not related to broader social issues such as discrimination or inequality (Murray & Urban, 2012; Robinson & Joan Diaz, 2006). Having and being aware of an approach to diversity, equality or Anti-bias practice is linked to training. Most services acknowledged that their engagement with Diversity and Equality Training in pre-service and in-service training had been limited.

One student commented:

This is interesting from a service who say they follow an Anti-bias Approach and none of the staff have done any Diversity and Equality training? (S9)

One manager who was implementing the Anti-bias Approach commented that:

Training around diversity and how ECCE practitioners can approach it with confidence is not addressed enough in the basic ECCE courses. (M/E18)

The lack of awareness about differing approaches and reliance only on the guidance of the Aistear Curricular Framework (NCCA, 2009) raises question about how the theme “Identity and Belonging” is addressed and supported in pre-and in-service ECCE training. Addressing Diversity and Equality, and implementing Identity and Belonging from a dominant, hegemonic perspective minimalises what we are trying to achieve for all children.

Equality-Proofing Exercise: The Findings

Aistear’s (NCCA, 2009) theme “Identity and Belonging” states that “Positive messages about their families, backgrounds, cultures, beliefs, and languages help children to develop pride in who they are” (p. 25). When Equality-Proofing the environment for representation of the cohort of children attending the service, students reported they could see the disconnect between the identities of children present and the representation in the materials and imagery in the settings:

Imagery was not accurate or relevant to the make-up of the children in the class. (S10)

The privileging of whiteness was reported on several occasions:

In this all white setting, there is no evidence of diversity of materials or approaches. (S11)

One wall represented only white families, and all the writing on the walls and posters were in English. The library books supported white, able-bodied children growing up speaking English in a nuclear family. This was not embracing the diversity present in the classroom and was not representative of individual children. (S12)

Indigenous Identity and Cultural Practice

The Irish Traveller community received long overdue recognition of ethnic status in Ireland on the 2nd of March, 2017, a historic landmark for Travellers and perhaps the necessary impetus to support the open and appropriate recognition of Traveller children in ECCE. Findings of Traveller invisibility, assimilation, romanticism and subordination also emerged:

When asked if any Traveller children attended the service, the service explained “not this year, the children are great but eh parents are uncooperative and hard to deal with. It makes our work easier you know implying a sense of relief.” (S13)

Students also reported that:

The service provider was so proud to show that she had an old-fashioned Traveller wagon, but it was out of sight and wasn’t available to the children. (S14)

The manager said the materials for the Traveller children were in another building. (S15)

The systemic non-recognition and the essentialising of Traveller children are of ongoing concern. I have referred to this as being Traveller-blind (Murray & Urban, 2012) similar to a colour-blind approach as discussed by Cochran-Smith (2004) and Sapon-Shevin (this issue). Operating out of an assimilationist approach, seeing the Traveller child and culture as deficient has become normalised and is highly problematic. Traveller children's (positive) invisibility in ECCE settings is rationalised as protection against anti-Traveller bias. This type of (in)visibility and essentialising prevents or hinders educators from positively representing Traveller children. It also renders Traveller children voiceless and Traveller culture invisible in ECCE.

Some students referred to evidence of a multicultural approach and a conforming curricular position that maintains the dominant status quo view with limited or no recognition of diversity (MacNaughton, 2002; Murray & Urban, 2012). The token representation, e.g. "the Black doll," or touristic engagement, e.g. "festivals," was also identified. Tokenism overlooks the complexity of children's personal histories and their different backgrounds, including cultural, socio-economic, family structure, and ability (Creaser & Dau, 1996; Derman-Sparks, 1989; Robinson & Jones Díaz, 2006). It can also be patronising:

The physical environment does not represent any of the children in the setting, typical conforming environment style. (S16)

My first thought was it appeared very staged and tokenistic especially when they said they follow and Anti-bias Approach. (S17)

We don't have anything to show you today actually. We have culture days and different festivals to help the children with inclusion (multicultural approach). (M/E17)

Appropriate resources linked to the daily lives of the children in the service is often seen as an effective way of introducing diversity and difference. However, just having diverse resources can be perceived as superficial. Robinson and Jones Diaz (2006) argue that just focusing on providing resources can be "at the expense of fostering children's critical thinking around the issues" (p.173). They also claim that there is little evidence to indicate that critical thinking using resources is common in practice. This is in keeping with what the students found:

My main conclusion is that each setting has a number of materials and equipment based on diversity and equality, however the staff lack the ability to integrate these materials on a daily basis. (S18)

I realised that more should be done to ensure that practitioners are aware of the importance of equality and diversity. (S19)

The findings were positive in the sense of knowledge and understanding but the underlying question is whether that knowledge and understanding is being translated successfully into a quality Anti-bias Approach? (S20)

Pelo and Davidson (2000) maintain that "appropriate and accurate images speak loudly to children and families, affirming that all people share equal and valued status" (p. 5). Representation is only one part of the inclusive picture, however it is a major part. The process of thinking of the children's identity and their representation in the setting heightens awareness. It can draw educators into the first principle of the Anti-bias Approach: "the content [of the curriculum] must come from children's daily lives" (Derman-Sparks, 2001, p. 26).

Student Experiences of Equality-Proofing

The Equality-Proofing Exercise was a powerful lesson for the students within the college environment but proved to be even more significant when implemented with the ECCE setting. It provided important opportunities for the students to reflect on the field, and bring theory and practice together. Some, or perhaps most, went out with an assumption that services were appropriately and positively representing all children in the setting:

After doing this assignment it raised a lot of awareness for me. Before doing this, I would have believed that from a first glance this service was inclusive and represented all children who attended. When in actual fact, this proved to be quite different when Equality-Proofing, as there were so many gaps in who and what was represented and a lot of tokenism. (S21)

bell hooks (2010) argues that critical reflection should support a person to look through the cracks and under the surface of beliefs and practices. Students identified cracks in their own understanding and in-service provision. They identified a shift in their assumptions and thinking, and realised that representation is a more profound concept. They determined that placing photos of the children over coat hooks, while a representation, can also just serve as a label. They began to see the difference between an image and engagement with that image. They established that educators do celebrate special events and/or once-off activities, but don't necessarily see diversity as something integrated throughout the daily curriculum. "The Anti-bias Approach is not just a set of activities for occasional use [...] It is a focus that permeates everything that happens in our program" (Derman-Sparks & Edwards, 2010, p. 8). Students identified a disconnect between what was discussed and what was evident in the setting. They also noted that although important, simply representing children through materials and images will not achieve the aim of supporting each child's identity and belonging. It is however an essential starting point. They also acknowledged that "it takes time to develop a diverse service." (S22)

This learning is significant for how pre-service and in-service training can support the development of practice for inclusion, diversity, and social justice. The experiential learning process evoked an interest, a desire to "check out" whether what we explored in class was accurate and relevant. It offered opportunities for the students to make their own discoveries. Their learning and experience have triggered an inquiring and critical questioning process. Through this process, they are creating new ways of thinking and engaging with children that can lead to empathetic engagement with diversity and social change.

Conclusion

We know that Anti-bias practice is not only about imagery and representation. Some services in this study demonstrated good quality representation and engagement with diversity and equality. However, the combined findings from the interviews and Equality-Proofing show that in general, representation and understanding of diversity and equality was superficial at best. As Dau (2001) cited in Scarlet (2016) points out "certainly the environment is crucial but it is not the 'be-all and end-all'....the Anti-bias Approach requires us not only to say that people are valued in all their differences through establishing a welcoming environment, but to actually value people" (p. xxxii).

The Equality-Proofing Exercise gives a first insight into the work that is required if AIM (DCYA, 2016a), Aistear (NCCA, 2009), Sólta (CECDE, 2006), and the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016b) are to successfully embrace and implement the Anti-bias Approach in training and practice. To promote change and enable equitable experiences and outcomes for all children,

ECCE training programmes can embrace the Anti-bias Approach as outlined in the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (2016b). However, critical societal issues such as discrimination and social and cultural inequality need to be made explicit and visible.

In the pursuit of implementing new policies and practice, it is important to keep in mind that substantial work has already been done in Ireland (Murray, Cooke, & O'Doherty, 2004, 2010; Murray & Urban, 2012; Equality and Diversity Early Childhood National Network [EDeNn]; www.edenn.org). This work is closely connected to international advocacy and research, e.g. the Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training Network in Europe (DECET; www.decet.org) and ground-breaking work in the US (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Farago & Swadener, 2016; Sapon-Shevin, this issue) and Australia (MacNaughton, 2003; Robinson & Jones-Diaz, 2008, 2016; Scarlet, 2016). Much of this work is based on or draws on the Anti-bias Approach founded by Louise Derman-Sparks and the A.B.C. Task Force (1989).

The Equality-Proofing Exercise is included in the national AIM (DCYA, 2016a) training. There is opportunity through AIM to create local critical learning communities to support educators and new graduates in their self-reflection and Anti-bias practice (hooks, 1994; Murray & Urban, 2012; Souto-Manning, 2013; Van Keulen, 2010). There remains a need for strong leadership from government to ensure that AIM (DCYA, 2016a) and the Diversity, Equality, and Inclusion Charter and Guidelines (DCYA, 2016b) do not address diversity, equality, and inclusion at surface level only. AIM must ensure that educators are empowered and resourced to “consciously notice” each child and to embed the Anti-bias Approach in the totality of their practice.

Postscript

53 students had the opportunity to read a draft of this paper and give their feedback on its accuracy from their personal perspective. The majority felt it reflected their views. A small number felt in general the paper was accurate, because they listened to all the presentations in class, however, they felt their personal experience was not so evident:

To me personally it wasn't accurate to my own findings but it was accurate to the majority of the class findings. (S1)

They also commented on the module as part of their reflection:

This paper shows how this module and exercise allowed us to open our minds and explore different issues related to equality and diversity. (S2)

This paper only shows a small summary of all the theory we learned. [...]. It really allowed me to critically reflect on my views of society. I have a completely different outlook on everything. (S3)

I found that the preparation, critical reflections, and discussions in the lecture and in groups over the course of the semester contribute to transformative learning and new ways of seeing things in the classroom. Then the proofing was a way of putting into practice all the elements we have learned. (S4)

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