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Programmes to Tackle Sectarianism and Racism

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# The Media Initiative for Children: Using Early Years Programmes to Tackle Sectarianism and Racism

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*Abstract: The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) was developed by Early Years, the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland, and Pii, the Peace Initiatives Institute in the USA. This respecting difference programme is aimed at young children aged 3–6 and it combines cartoon messages around diversity with an early years programme. Together they aim to promote positive attitudes to physical, social and cultural differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. The messages also address bullying behaviours. The cartoons are set in a play park and feature characters young children can easily identify with. The messages in the cartoons are reinforced in the early years setting through the use of resources and interactive activities that prompt children to talk about their feelings and attitudes to the issues explored in the cartoons. MIFC aims to: increase awareness of difference in Northern Ireland among children, parents and teachers; help young children to understand what it feels like to be excluded and encourage them to be more willing to include children who are different; encourage young children to demonstrate respect and include others who are different, rather than ridiculing, fighting or rejecting them; make respecting difference a very real experience for young children and something that can be shared with their families. The training of practitioners to implement the programme is a vital component of this initiative. Through training, diversity is translated into practice as practitioners and teachers are helped maximise the potential of the MIFC resources. The programme was recently subjected to a Randomised Controlled Trial across 74 settings in Northern Ireland and Ireland and was one of the largest of its kind ever carried out internationally. The final report showed robust evidence that the MIFC had a significant impact on young children's attitudes to difference and on their socio-emotional development.*

Keywords: Difference, Respect, Ethnicity, Sectarianism, Race, Bullying

## Preamble

**T**HE MEDIA INITIATIVE for Children (MIFC) was developed by Early Years, the organisation for young children (Early Years) in Northern Ireland, and Pii, the Peace Initiatives Institute in the USA. This respecting difference programme is aimed at young children aged 3–6 and it combines cartoon messages around diversity with an early years programme. Together they aim to promote positive attitudes to physical, social and cultural differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. The messages also address bullying behaviours.

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The MIFC aims to: increase awareness of difference in Northern Ireland among children, parents and teachers; help young children to understand what it feels like to be excluded and encourage them to be more willing to include children who are different; encourage young children to demonstrate respect and include others who are different, rather than ridiculing, fighting or rejecting them; make respecting difference a very real experience for young children and something that can be shared with their families.

The training of practitioners to implement the programme is a vital component of this initiative. Through training, diversity is translated into practice as practitioners and teachers are helped to maximise the potential of the MIFC resources.

The programme was recently subjected to a Randomised Controlled Trial<sup>1</sup> across 74 settings in Northern Ireland and Ireland and was one of the largest of its kind ever carried out internationally. The final report showed robust evidence that the MIFC had a significant impact on young children's attitudes to difference and on their socio-emotional development.

## **The Changing Face of Northern Ireland**

Since the 1994 ceasefires, the make up of Northern Ireland society has changed to such an extent that it is now considered to be a multi-racial and multi-cultured society. Such a change brings with it many opportunities to experience other cultures and traditions, however Early Years recognises that attitudes to those who are different can vary greatly, both within and between communities, particularly between the two main traditions in Northern Ireland.

By 1994, Early Years, or NIPPA as it was known then, had developed into an organisation that was well placed to make a significant contribution to the peace process that followed. Not only was the organisation already facilitating cross community work between early childhood practitioners, but with a network of 1,000 member groups located across Northern Ireland in communities of all backgrounds, the organisation had significant potential to begin to effect a community change model.

For many years, Early Years has adopted a clear non-sectarian and non-political approach in relation to its work and the shared spaces created. However, the peace process created the opportunity to move beyond this and promote a more explicitly anti-sectarian approach that involved overtly naming and challenging sectarianism and encouraging respect for diversity.

However, it was evident that this was no easy task given the physical and emotional scars that people carried with them from the previous 25 years of conflict. While early years groups were already doing a lot of work around respecting differences, this tended to be in relation to issues such as race and disability and there was definitely a reluctance, and in many cases a fear, of dealing with Northern Ireland's own "ism," i.e. the ever present threat of sectarianism between the Protestant and the Catholic communities.

## ***Too Young to Notice?***

At a time when Early Years was working on developing a more explicit approach to dealing with the divisions between the Unionist and the Nationalist communities, an influential research report was published in Northern Ireland looking at the attitudes and awareness of 3–6 year old children in Northern Ireland. The report entitled *Too Young to Notice? The*

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<sup>1</sup> Connolly, P; Miller, S; and Eakin, A; (2010).

*Cultural and Political Awareness of 3–6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland*<sup>2</sup> showed that even at the age of three, children were beginning to be affected by the divisions that existed and to internalise the cultural preferences and attitudes of their respective communities. Moreover, by the age of six, these attitudes were found to have become much more entrenched and negative.

### **The Media Initiative for Children**

The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme is a pre-school programme for 3–6 year old children that seeks to increase awareness of diversity and difference issues among young children, early childhood practitioners and parents and to promote more positive attitudes and behaviours towards those who are different.

The programme combines the use of:

- five one-minute cartoon messages shown on national television
- an early years curriculum and a set of culturally and contextually appropriate resources for use in the pre-school classroom and in the home environment;
- a comprehensive training programme for pre-school teachers, parents and management committees;
- ongoing support from Early Years Specialists who act as external mentors and critical friends to practitioners.

The cartoons are set in a play park and feature characters with which young children can easily identify. The messages in the cartoons seek to promote positive attitudes to physical, social, cultural and ethnic differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents. These messages are reinforced in early years settings through the use of resources and curricular activities that prompt young children to talk about their feelings and attitudes to differences.

Since its inception, the MIFC has been going from strength to strength. To date, 850 pre-school and early years settings have been trained in the MIFC and a recent report released by Early Years has found robust evidence that the programme is successful in helping young children to be respectful of difference.

### **A Sound Evidence-based Programme**

An interdisciplinary research team comprising the Centre for Effective Education at Queen's University Belfast, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) Northern Ireland and Stranmillis University College, was commissioned by Early Years to undertake a rigorous and independent evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children during the academic year 2008–2009. The evaluation took the form of a cluster randomised controlled trial, led by the Centre for Effective Education, and in-depth qualitative case studies undertaken by NCB and Stranmillis University College.

The purpose was to test whether the programme had a positive and measurable effect on a range of outcomes identified for the children, parents and practitioners participating in the programme. The trial was one of the largest of its type ever conducted internationally and

<sup>2</sup> Connolly, P., Smith, A., & Kelly, B. (2002).

involved 74 pre-school settings selected randomly from settings in Northern Ireland (54) and counties Louth and Roscommon in the Republic of Ireland (10 per county). A total of 1,181 children aged 3–4 years participated in the evaluation, together with 868 parents and 232 practitioners.

## **Research Methodology**

The trial took place during the academic year 2008/09. Pretesting was undertaken in September/October 2008 and the post-tests were conducted in May/June 2009. At both time points, children were tested individually and asked to complete a series of standardised tasks in which they were shown a variety of pictures and photographs and asked to identify and describe what they saw. Parents and practitioners were asked to complete questionnaires at both pre-test and post-test stages that consisted of a series of questions and statements that respondents were required to indicate their response to on a Likert scale.

## ***Findings from the Cluster Randomised Controlled Trial***

For the purposes of the evaluation, an outcome was defined as a real and discernible change in attitudes and/or awareness that had occurred as a direct result of taking part in the MIFC. Clear evidence was found that the MIFC achieved positive effects regarding children's attitudes and awareness in relation to their:

- socio-emotional development;
- cultural awareness; and
- inclusive behaviour.

Such effects were consistent across the whole sample of children and no differences were found between:

- boys and girls;
- Catholic and Protestant children;
- children from differing socio-economic backgrounds;
- children in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

The programme was also found to achieve similar effects regardless of the rated quality of the setting and, on the whole, the settings that took part in the intervention were found to have delivered the programme with relatively high degrees of fidelity to the programme.

Within this, no evidence was found that the minor variations in programme delivery across settings that did exist had any significant impact on its effectiveness in improving outcomes among the children.

The evaluation found some potentially encouraging signs of positive change among both parents and practitioners in relation to increases in their awareness of the need to undertake diversity work with young children and also their confidence in their own ability to address such issues with their children.

## Main Conclusions

Overall, the randomised controlled trial found robust evidence that the Media Initiative for Children is an effective programme to improve outcomes in young children in relation to their socio-emotional development and awareness of, and attitudes towards, cultural differences. Moreover, these effects represent the ‘added value’ to pre-school settings that the programme can provide in enhancing socio-emotional learning and promoting understanding of and respect for differences compared to their usual methods and resources.

The programme was enthusiastically received by practitioners, parents and children and provided a range of examples of how the programme can be effectively and appropriately delivered in a range of differing contexts. Moreover, the evaluation identified a number of core programme elements that acted as important drivers of successful implementation:

- a practical and relevant curriculum supported by a wide range of high quality and culturally appropriate resources;
- the provision of high quality training for practitioners, parents and management to achieve a common vision for the programme and the development of practical skills required to ensure its effective delivery;
- ongoing support of the Early Years Specialists to ensure that the programme is delivered by skilled and confident practitioners in an effective and appropriate way; and
- strong and clear commitment to the programme and leadership from setting management to ensure the programme is delivered with fidelity.

## Evaluation Recommendations

The following recommendations were made in the evaluation for the future development and roll-out of the Media Initiative for Children:

### *The Programme*

Given the strong evidence base that the randomised controlled trial provided the programme, further investment would be warranted to ensure that the full programme is available for use by all pre-school settings across the island of Ireland and that settings are encouraged to use it as an effective means of improving young children’s socio-emotional development and awareness of, and respect for, diversity and difference.

Given its proven effectiveness among 3–4 year old children, consideration should be given to developing and extending the programme so that there are developmentally appropriate versions for use in Sure Starts<sup>3</sup>, Day Nurseries and Primary Schools.

### *Curriculum and Resources*

With regard to encouraging children to be more inclusive of others in general, the report recommends considering how the existing activities and resources developed for the programme could be used to demonstrate and explicitly model out inclusive behaviours for

<sup>3</sup> **Sure Start** is a UK Government initiative with the aim of “giving children the best possible start in life” through improvements of childcare, early education, health and family support and with an emphasis on outreach and community development.

children in a range of naturally occurring situations, as well as providing more guidance for practitioners on how they can model out such behaviours in their practice.

It is critical that when practitioners are working on issues related to disability and race/ethnicity, they draw upon all of the available curricular resources and guidance contained in the Programme Service Design Manual that support practitioners to address all aspects of difference.

With regard to increasing further the effectiveness of the Media Initiative for Children in relation to children's awareness of and positive attitudes towards cultural differences, it would be worth identifying a number of key cultural events and symbols and developing more focused activities and materials that seek explicitly to increase the children's awareness and knowledge of these. The choice of events and symbols should reflect a variety of cultures and should also appeal to both boys and girls.

### ***Practitioners/Teachers***

Practitioners should ensure that they are making extensive use of the guidance and resources provided to support the programme delivery and that they are devoting a sufficient amount of time to working on each of the five core messages to ensure the programme is delivered effectively. It was recommended also that all practitioners and setting managers attend the full four days of training.

### ***Training and Early Years Specialist Support***

Further support and encouragement should be provided to practitioners through the training and ongoing support of the Early Years Specialists to implement all of the media messages, particularly those messages dealing with ethnicity and sectarianism. Also the programme training could be further developed to include more use of multi-media techniques and real life examples.

The current Early Years Specialist model is a vital aspect of the programme in terms of quality and quantity of support offered to practitioners and should be maintained.

In relation to initial teacher education, there is a need to ensure that knowledge and understanding of diversity issues inform all aspects of the curriculum. In addition, specific components of training are required that seek to provide teachers and practitioners with the knowledge and skills required to deal skillfully and effectively with issues of diversity in their own classrooms and settings.

### ***Working with Parents***

While the parent workshops are delivered by the Early Years Specialists, practitioners are the agents through which these are organised and communicated to parents. It would therefore be beneficial if the Early Years Specialists could have more direct contact with parents regarding these important elements of the programme, rather than relying on practitioners as the link. Practitioners should also be encouraged and reminded of the importance of communicating with parents in terms of what their children are doing in the setting regarding the programme, as well as what could be done at home to support programme delivery. This will ensure that children are not receiving conflicting messages at home.



Although some resources are currently provided for parents, namely the home links material, a more comprehensive and tailored parent/family support package would be useful. For example, parents could also be given a DVD containing the media messages and their own manual to explain the messages and to give them some simple activities to follow at home. The DVD could also provide some background information on the development of the programme; this may help to convince parents of the importance of doing diversity work with young children and may in turn encourage greater parental participation. Early Years has since developed a range of resources for parents to use in the home, including story books of the five main messages, finger puppets of the six characters and a DVD of the cartoons.

### ***Policy and Research***

It is notable that in relation to Northern Ireland, the need to address issues of diversity and to promote respect for difference in early childhood is not mentioned either in relation to the government's recent consultation on the Programme for Cohesion, Sharing and Integration<sup>4</sup> or the Early Years (0-6) Strategy<sup>5</sup>. In contrast, recent policy developments in the Republic of Ireland have stressed the need for a focus on diversity and interculturalism. These include: *Siolta*, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education Diversity and Equality Guidelines for Childcare Providers<sup>6</sup>; *Aistear*, The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework<sup>7</sup> and the Intercultural Education Strategy<sup>8</sup>. Given the cumulative weight of evidence that now exists locally regarding how attitudes form at an early age, and in light of the strong evidence provided through this present trial of the role that early childhood initiatives can have in bringing about real and measurable positive change, it is imperative that issues of diversity and difference form a key component of any early childhood strategy and that such a strategy, in turn, represents a key element of any wider programme to promote community cohesion.

The evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children is one of only a few studies (either in relation to early childhood programmes or in relation to community relations programmes more generally) that has attempted to undertake a rigorous evaluation of the actual measurable effects of a diversity programme on the attitudes and awareness of children, parents and practitioners. There is a need for government not only to develop appropriate programmes to promote community cohesion but also to ensure that such programmes are based on the best available evidence and also subject to rigorous evaluation.

Finally, it should be recognised that this has been an innovative trial, not just in relation to its size and scope but also the nature of the outcomes focused on. As such, it has required a number of bespoke measures to be developed and used for the first time. In ensuring that the appropriate tools are available to continue to evaluate the effectiveness of programmes such as this one, further developmental research is required in relation to working on and refining existing measures as well as developing further measures that are capable of being used to measure the impact of other aspects of the programme not covered in this evaluation.

<sup>4</sup> Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) Northern Ireland (2010).

<sup>5</sup> Department of Education Northern Ireland (2010).

<sup>6</sup> Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) (2006).

<sup>7</sup> National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009).

<sup>8</sup> Department of Education and Skills (2010).

### **What Next for the Media Initiative for Children?**

It is the vision of Early Years that the Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme will be available to all 3–6 year olds on the island of Ireland. It is also hoped that the programme can be tailored to suit two year olds. The Media Initiative has also been delivered in some primary schools through funding received from the Department of Education and it is hoped that this can be consolidated and rolled up through primary classes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Early Years is also in discussion with agencies and funding bodies in other parts of the United Kingdom, particularly Scotland, with a view to developing characters from other cultures as well as the accompanying messages. There has also been considerable interest in the Media Initiative for Children from other countries and Early Years is in discussions with Serbia, Colombia and Turkey with a view to roll out in these countries.

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Kevin Fearon is the International Project Manager with Early Years—the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland. Kevin manages the International Network for Peace Building with Young Children, an EU funded project funded by the PEACE III programme. The project is led by Early Years and currently comprises 18 members from conflict affected regions throughout the world. The Network aims to develop an international programmatic tool that supports innovation in the field of peace building in early childhood care and education; a pilot Masters Programme in Early Years and Conflict that will provide practitioners with a more focused knowledge of how to work with young children in conflict; an advocacy model to support the early childhood sector in conflict. Kevin is also responsible for the management of the Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme—Early Years’ flagship programme on inclusion and diversity.

### *Eleanor Mearns*

Eleanor Mearns has worked for Early Years—the organisation for young children in Northern Ireland for the past 21 years and is currently Senior Early Years Specialist for Inclusion. She is also part of Early Years International Division and has worked on developing pre-school provision in Eastern European Countries since 2003. Since 2004, Eleanor has led in the development of the Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme. This intervention programme targets children aged 3–6 years old and supports them in developing positive attitudes and behaviours towards those who are different to themselves. Eleanor has presented on the programme locally, nationally and internationally and is also a member of the International Network on Peace Building with Young Children.



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Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars, and examines the concept of diversity as a positive and at times fraught aspect of an interconnected world and globalised society. Those unable to attend the conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can either submit a video and/or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

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