

Direct Provision and Inclusiveness in Education

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The Covid crisis illuminated the importance of education in the lives of our children and young people like never before. Not just from an 'education' standpoint, but for the whole, well-rounded experience that school life gives to our students. That is true of all of our students, and as Ireland continues to become a more diverse and culturally enriched place, it vital that our schools lead the way in not only demonstrating inclusiveness, but in celebrating the differences their students bring. It is also incumbent on schools to recognise that with these differences come challenges for the students themselves, and they may need support in facing those. This was highlighted in the findings of a recent report (*'Direct Division'*) carried out by my Office on the views and experiences of children living in Direct Provision accommodation, many of whom have come from traumatic situations in countries across the globe.

Talking to children living in Direct provision

This report was based on a consultation with children living within that system and focused on their views of their rights, and their experiences of inclusion and exclusion in their accommodation, school and local community. It also asked about any changes that would help them to feel more accepted. The consultation was carried out with 73 children (12 to 17 years) in nine Direct Provision centres around Ireland. While the majority were post-primary students, many of their experiences were related to their time in primary education as well.

What they said

A number of the children told us they felt judged by the colour of their skin and their religion by many Irish people, including their fellow students and teachers.

The children also commonly reported the use of racist slurs by their school peers, including the 'N Word' and taunts of being terrorists if they identified as being of the Muslim faith.

'People in school use the 'N' word...I saw kids laugh at refugees'

'We have a say, but we are not taken seriously [in school] because of our skin colour, no other reason'

There were also reports of bullying and cyberbullying related to race, religion and nationality at school. Teachers were often seen by the children as not standing up for them when instances of racism or sectarianism took place. They also reported that some teachers expressed racist or discriminatory sentiments themselves, or were covertly racist. The teachers were reported as knowing little about what it meant to be an asylum seeker or what living in Direct Provision accommodation meant and the restrictions it placed on the children.

When this report was presented to Minister Roderic O’Gorman (Department of Children, Disability, Equality, Inclusion & Youth) he stated that *‘the findings of racism in some schools and the wider community [are] deeply concerning and highlight the need for a national anti-racism strategy’*.

Our report also highlighted a number of very positive actions which the children were very happy about within their schools. Some children identified a range of activities that helped them to feel included and a part of their schools, communities and wider society.

Examples of these include playing sports for their school teams or representing their school in events like fashion shows, musicals and debating teams.

The children very much appreciated when schools took steps to respect their religion and culture, such as permitting the wearing of the hijab, providing prayer rooms and Halal food, and holding international and multi-cultural days.

‘In our school there is a chapel hall and a room for prayer. Our principal, because we have more Muslims, she decided to set up a room where we could go and pray in the lunchtime.’

‘They have [...] Halal chicken and everything in the canteen’

In the wider community, a small number of the children reported playing for local sports teams and being part of local youth groups with the support of community organisations. When I met with the Minister for Education and Skills about the report, she said she would look at the possibility of a Best Practice Framework for Inclusion in schools. I can imagine that many of the examples in our report will inform such a framework.

Inclusive Education

The importance of inclusion within education for this cohort of children has also been highlighted recently in the Catherine Day Report on the reform of the Direct Provision system (published in Oct 2020). This report recognises that *‘the Department of Education has introduced programmes for... CPD for teachers based on the concept of inclusive education. These include the concept of racism, identity-based bullying and cultural awareness. The area of inclusive education, including multi-culturalism, disadvantage and special education, are mandatory study areas for all student teachers undertaking initial teacher education at primary and post-primary level.’* (pg. 78).

Thus, it would appear that Direct Provision represents just one cohort of children who rely on the understanding and humanity of our teachers to help them integrate in our society. If our primary schools can lead the way, and I have visited many that do, in recognising, accepting and celebrating the differences their students bring, we can feel more secure about the future of those children. One of the suggestions my Office has made to the Department of Education and Skills is the need to review and update the *Anti-Bullying Procedures for Primary and Post-Primary Schools Policy* to include identity-based bullying. We believe that racism is often reported as ‘bullying’ and therefore the core issue may never be dealt with. We are also concerned that, while many of the other factors mentioned in our Equality legislation can form the basis for mistreatment in school, they are never highlighted as they’re recorded under a catch-all of ‘bullying’. That is, children can be picked on for their gender,

sexuality, ethnicity, religion, disability and socio-economic status, but if these issues aren't recorded in school bullying reports, it is impossible to know where inclusive education is succeeding, or indeed failing.

I have seen first-hand the wonderful work being done by so many of the primary schools around the country to welcome and include children from Direct Provision and the wider Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME) population. It is a joy to behold a primary school with 300 students of 11 different nationalities celebrating Culture Week, for example, or a post-primary school with 47 different nationalities teaching 'Hello', over the speaker system, in a different language each month. However, we are all now being challenged to be more than just 'non racist' – we must all strive to be proactively 'anti-racist'. This means we must look at our role in challenging our colleagues who ignore a racist joke or perpetuate racial stereotypes, whether through malice or ignorance. Do we challenge them enough? Have we offered them a chance to understand the different cultures coming into our schools?

Ireland has shown itself to be radically inclusive in the past few years when voting for equality and individual rights. We now need to do the hard work of making those rights real, on the ground, so they are felt by the children who really need them. Inclusive education will be shown to be a success not when a school has no complaints about racism, but rather when such complaints are rare, identified as what they are and dealt with quickly and fairly.