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Teacher awareness: a key factor when implementing anti-racism initiatives to support children seeking refuge and living in direct provision



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Róisín Keohane is a Newly Qualified Teacher, who finished the Bachelor of Education programme in Marino Institute of Education in June. Discussions about race and racism and the role of education in preventing racism, led her to want to investigate the systems in place in schools to combat racism. She is passionate about catering for all students in the classroom and this stimulated her interest into the challenges that face children living in direct provision, and the way in which they can be supported. The research was thought provoking, challenging and provided Róisín with the necessary skills to have an anti-racist inclusive classroom in the future.

KEYWORDS: Primary Education, Anti-Racism, Direct Provision

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to highlight teacher awareness as an essential element when implementing anti-racism initiatives to support children seeking refuge and living in direct provision (DP). This is achieved by examining the concepts of anti-racism education alongside the barriers that children who live in DP face, of which teachers must be aware. The motivation for choosing this topic for research was my own lack of awareness of anti-racism campaigns and programmes to use in schools, with racism being a pressing issue in today's society (Conneely, 2021). It is of paramount importance that systems are put in place to combat racism. In addition, DP is a contested topic both politically and socially in Ireland today and a challenge that faces children living in DP is the potential racism against them (Ombudsman for Children's

Office, 2020). This resulted in the combination of two themes into one research question for the overall article. Whether or not the Department of Education provides a compulsory anti-racism programme for educators, or a supportive programme highlighting the challenges facing children seeking refuge and living in DP, it is essential that teachers are familiar with topics that are sensitive for children and with approaches that contribute to an inclusive classroom.

This article will provide teachers and educators with information to address racism in the classroom and will highlight areas in which children seeking refuge and living in DP need support. It is important to note that even when DP is abolished, the repercussions for children who have lived there will remain present and teachers will need to continue to support their emotional needs. This article is a snapshot of a broader dissertation, which examined anti-racism education and Ireland's current use of anti-racism pedagogies, which investigated the experiences of children who are seeking refuge and living in DP in Ireland, and which explored intercultural and inclusive education initiatives used internationally with a focus on anti-racism education.

CONTEXT

This research highlights areas of the education system that are denying children their human rights. All children have the right to an education (Article 28, United Nations, 1989). Migrant and refugee children have a right to education that recognises their identity and protects them from discrimination (Article 8; Article 2, United Nations, 1989). Racism is a significant issue in today's society. In 2020, the issue of racism was highlighted on a global level by the death of George Floyd as a result of police brutality in the United States of America, which propelled many people to take part in Black Lives Matter marches all over the world, including Ireland (Gaffney, 2020). The marches held in cities around Ireland stimulated members of the Black community and other minority groups to share their experiences of racism here. The Irish Times interviewed a group of people who experienced racism in Ireland, where one man noted that a racial slur was used against him in the classroom by a classmate. He stated that the teacher told the peer to stop and took no further action. The man remarked, 'I feel my teacher wasted a rare and powerful opportunity to teach the class about racism' (Kenny, 2020). Ultimately, this asks the question how children are being protected from discrimination in Irish classrooms.

Racism is briefly mentioned by the Stay Safe programme which is used in the subject Social Personal and Health Education (SPHE) (MacIntyre & Lawlor, 2016a & 2016b). An anti-bullying policy is in place in all primary schools, yet, only 40 per cent of primary school policies

dealt specifically with racist bullying (Smyth et al., 2009, p. 92). This was echoed by Damien White, President of the Irish Primary Principals Network, in an Oireachtas debate, stating ‘the issue of racism comes under the scope of bullying and some other policies. There should be a stand-alone policy’ (Houses of the Oireachtas, 2021). More recently, it was reported that one school did not deal with a racist incident where two Muslim children experienced verbal abuse and were called ‘dirty faced’ by a member of staff (Michael, 2020, p. 14). At the 2012 Racism and Education Conference, it was identified that very few intercultural pedagogies were being promoted by the Department of Education and Skills (Kitching & Curtin, 2012). The authors also noted the lack of research and information on anti-racism available for teachers. This suggests that the 2005 national guidelines on ‘Intercultural Education in Primary Schools’ developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005) are not effectively addressing racism in the primary school system.

Derman-Sparks et al. (2010), stated that anti-bias education encompasses human rights such as protecting children from all forms of physical or mental violence and participating ‘fully in cultural and artistic life’ (Article 19; Article 31, United Nations, 1989). There are four goals for effective anti-bias education, which can apply to anti-racism education (Derman-Sparks et al., 2010). The first goal requires children to develop ‘self-awareness, confidence, family pride, and positive social identities’ (Derman-Sparks et al., 2010, p. 4). This can be fostered by engaging with children’s different identities and making different types of families and races visible to children, which supports the diverse classroom (Department of Education and Skills, 2010; Beneke et al., 2018). The second goal is for children to communicate their emotions and differences through the use of appropriate respectful language. This allows children to compare their similarities and differences and ultimately show ‘how to treat all people caringly and fairly’ (Derman-Sparks et al., 2010, p. 4). Goal number three involves children recognising their own stereotypes and misconceptions and understanding the reasons behind these assumptions. When children display skills to act against discrimination, the fourth goal has been reached.

In 2000, the Irish State founded DP (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019). DP was initially set up to provide temporary accommodation for applicants seeking asylum, which is a process within the Irish immigration system (UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017). “Asylum-seeker” is a common term for a migrant who has applied for International Protection, and they are placed in DP when their applications for refugee status are being processed (UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017; Children’s Rights Alliance 2019). This process was proposed to be 6 months long, but in recent years the average length of stay is 38 months (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019). In 2018, it was found that 600 people had been living in DP for an excess of eight years (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019). DP

centres are managed by private contractors for the Reception and Integration Agency (Children's Rights Alliance, 2017).

100,000 asylum applications were submitted between 1992 and 2015 (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019, p. 7). 3,673 asylum applications were first submitted in 2018, of these, 23% of them were for children (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019, p. 7). Article 29 of the 1989 United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child describes how that the education of children must facilitate the development of respect for the child's 'cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country... [the child] may originate' (United Nations, 1989). This is being denied for children living in DP. There were 6,405 people living in DP, 'including 1,778 children' (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019, p. 7).

METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in this article was documentary research. Documentary research is a method of "interpretive research that requires researchers to collect, collate and analyse empirical data in order to produce a theoretical account that either describes, interprets or explains what has occurred" (Briggs & Coleman, 2007, p. 281). This involved the examination of secondary documents such as newspaper articles, policies and regulation, reports, books and webpages (Gross, 2018). Corbin & Strauss (2008) stated that documentary analysis requires that the pre-gathered information is examined and interpreted to enhance the understanding of the topic.

There are many advantages to using documentary research. It allows researchers to access a wide variety of published documents and the author's permission does not need to be obtained (Bowen, 2009). It also allows the researcher to make comparisons between documents, (Mogalakwe, 2006). It is essential to acknowledge weaknesses that are associated with documentary research such as the level of bias, credibility and representativeness (Mogalakwe, 2006). The researcher must be familiar with these flaws to critically examine the documents to evaluate their authenticity and credibility.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

There were multiple findings in the documentary research. This article focuses on the findings that are most beneficial and practical for educators and teachers to be aware of. Firstly, the barriers facing children living in DP, secondly, teachers should be aware of programmes that address the challenges facing children seeking refuge, and finally the benefits of anti-racism education.

BARRIERS AS A RESULT OF LIVING IN DP

There are many issues that children living in DP experience and in order to support children seeking refuge and living in DP, teachers need to be aware of the barriers that they face. Children living in DP are subjected to issues such as ‘racism, stigma and bullying, both where they live and in school’ (UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017, p. 7). One child recalled, “In my school, people are mean to me because I sleep with my mum” (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019, p. 11). The children recognise the system of immigration and DP centres as unsafe and unjust (UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017). They are concerned about many issues such as ‘institutionalisation, length of stay, living conditions, inadequate supports and lack of access to further education’ (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019, p. 11). Children also mentioned that they would like a homework club to exist in DP to assist them with their homework (UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017). Teachers must be aware of these concerns to provide support for children seeking refuge and living in DP.

Children’s social interactions are limited to inside the DP centre and inside the school. It is vital that teachers are aware of this. Children lack engagement in extra-curricular activities as a consequence of ‘funds, transport, strict mealtimes and a visiting ban to DP centres’ (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019, p. 11). Children seeking refuge and living in DP are unable to become involved in the social interactions that derive from the school setting such as birthday parties and playdates (White, 2012). The ban on visiting DP centres limits the children’s ability to progress friendships outside of school. The strict mealtimes and the ban on visiting DP centres are as a result of the structure of DP centres which is set out by the Irish State (Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019). Children are unable to freely attend social events outside of school. Thus, teachers must address certain topics appropriately such as birthday parties, play dates and specific community-organised events. Teachers must be conscious that perhaps the social interactions for children cease at the end of the day and during the weekend, as this can affect children’s social skills.

Children frequently mentioned money concerns (Arnold, 2012; Faculty of Paediatrics, 2019; UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017). Mothers of children living in DP noted that the lack of finances prevents the children from fully engaged in both ‘social and academic school life’ (Martin et al., 2018, p. 463). Children in DP have fears regarding lack of space and support for homework, as well as purchasing items for school such as uniforms and books (UCC Child Law Clinic, 2017). The children are conscious of the financial impact this has on their ability to go on school trips and other extra-curricular activities. Teachers must be aware of this as it prevents children from actively participating in the school’s extra-curricular activities such as Book Fair and school trips.

Teachers need to be familiar with appropriate forms of communications between home and school. Formal written communication rarely received a response as a result of the parents' limited knowledge of English (Martin et al., 2018). Teachers also blamed the parents for not supporting and supervising their children (Martin et al., 2018). One teacher stated 'It is the supportive back-up that they need from home to help them. Attitudes are a big part of it and you can see the difference with the nationalities there' (Martin et al., 2018, p. 464). This comment is discriminatory and highlight this teacher's ignorance of the DP situation. There is a misconception from teachers that the staff in DP will translate and help the parents respond to the teacher's note because there is 'a good level of collegiality down there among parents' (Martin et al., 2018, p. 465). A principal remarked 'Well I think there is enough people down there [DP centre] who speak English to help each other, that is what I think happens' (Martin et al., 2018, p. 465). This further highlights the lack of teacher awareness regarding the relationship between residents and staff in DP.

A SUPPORTIVE PROGRAMME FOR CHILDREN SEEKING REFUGE

In the state of Victoria in Australia, the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and the Victorian Foundation for the Survivors of Torture (Foundation House) developed the School Support Programme (Block et al., 2014). From engaging in the workshops that used anti-racism pedagogies and initiatives, teachers felt they had a better understanding and empathised more with refugee families. There is evidence of anti-bias education in teaching resources used in the classroom as the programme promoted emotional support and multiculturalism. Teachers were unfamiliar with these materials prior to engaging with the support programme (Block et al., 2014). Block et al. (2014) also noted that from using the programme interactions with families had greatly improved.

Teachers who engaged in workshops that aimed to educate about the challenges facing refugee children in the classroom, confirmed that it gave them an enhanced understanding of the areas that needed support, such as disrupted education, change in curriculum, educational and welfare needs (Block et al., 2014). This could aid the implementation of anti-racism pedagogies and initiatives in schools. Many of the responses from teachers were similar, stating they did not know about the lives of refugee families before attending the workshop (Block et al., 2014). These teachers also felt their teaching improved as they could use certain incidents as teaching opportunities (Kishimoto, 2018). Teachers and school staff were more aware of parental concerns after attending these workshops (Kishimoto, 2018).

BENEFITS OF ANTI-RACISM EDUCATION

Teachers must be familiar with anti-racism; the definition and the approaches involved in order to aid the implementation of anti-racism pedagogies and initiatives. Derman-Sparks and Brunson Philips (1997) are two leading anti-racism educators, and they defined anti-racism education as ‘the beginning of a new approach to thinking, feeling, and acting. Anti-racist consciousness and behaviour mean having the self-awareness, knowledge, and skills—as well as the confidence, patience, and persistence—to challenge, interrupt, modify, erode, and eliminate any and all manifestations of racism within one’s own spheres of influence’ (Derman-Sparks & Brunson Philips, 1997, p. 3). It creates an inclusive atmosphere where children recognise different identities and race (Derman-Sparks et al., 2010). It facilitates children learning skills to challenge both their own prejudices and those of others. Teachers need to be aware that this can be done through using specific reading materials and resources for lessons that challenge stereotypes. This encourages children to think critically about what they know as true and what has been presented to them.

It is essential that teachers are familiar with Dr. Sue’s (2016) common avoidance strategies, ‘Do Nothing, Sidetrack the Conversation, Appease the Participants, Terminate the Discussion and Become Defensive’ and refrain from engaging in these (Sue, 2016, p. 231- 234). The teacher is the facilitator of these conversations. Work must be included by authors from multicultural backgrounds such as in stories, art, and history (Kishimoto, 2018). The children practise drawing comparisons between the portrayal of members of society and the accurate factual information. This increases the children’s awareness of stereotypes and allows the children to become aware of their own biases (Kishimoto, 2018). An increased teacher awareness of the issues of concern that face the children from ranging backgrounds, in their school, also facilitates staff to create resources and programmes that address these areas of concern directly and support the children.

CONCLUSION

This article sought to explore teacher awareness as a key concept when implementing anti-racism pedagogies and initiatives to support children seeking refuge and living in DP. Teachers need to undergo specific training in anti-racism education in order to carry out the methods identified by Derman-Sparks et al. (2010). School staff and teachers must be familiar with the areas where children seeking refuge and living in DP need support. Montano (2019) recognises the need for white students to engage in anti-racism education as they too can find race conversations difficult to navigate. Teachers must be aware that despite whether a class is

predominantly ethnically homogenous or not, it is essential that children have the tools and skills to challenge discriminatory remarks and opinions.

More specifically, regarding supporting children seeking refuge and living in DP, the research identified and highlighted both the barriers and challenges these families and children face. In order to put the correct supportive measures in place for children seeking refuge and living in DP, it is vital that teachers are aware of the challenges that they and their families face. Some aspects that require support are difficult for the education system to address such as limited transport, reduced social interactions and family income. However, they are still limiting children's participation in the school community, and it is important that teachers are aware of this. It would be beneficial for teachers be aware of certain measures that must be introduced, along with an anti-racism initiative. These include a homework club, language supports, creation of specific social interactions in schools, teaching materials that address children's social and emotional needs, celebrating multiculturalism and promoting inclusion, and an increased dialogue between home and school. In order to create teacher awareness:

- Workshops should be created by the Department of Education which focus on increasing awareness about both the refugee experience and the experience of those living in DP, and teachers should be required to attend these workshops. This uncovers any stereotypes the teachers may have and alerts them to the barriers facing children as a consequence of living in DP.
- Teachers must use other methods of communication in addition to written communication. The Department of Education should consider funding interpreter services for schools with high numbers of children from DP and families who have English as an additional language.
- Anti-racism initiatives, using anti-racism pedagogies must be developed and supported by the Department of Education.
- Anti-racism education must be provided to all qualified and pre-service teachers to enhance rather than replace intercultural education. Some courses are available in Black Studies and Racism from the Institute of Anti-Racism and Black Studies (Institute of Antiracism and Black Studies, n.d.). The INTO recently also included a provision of CPD (Continuing Professional Development) in anti-racism. Intercultural education promotes diversity which suggests that learning more about different cultures reduces racism. The issuing of national guidelines on 'Intercultural Education in Primary Schools' developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2005) suggests a

progression towards an inclusive, diverse educational standpoint. However, the conference discussed by Kitching and Curtin, implies that these guidelines have not been successful as the participants were still unsure on which direction to take when it comes to anti-racism education in 2012. Therefore, more specific updated anti-racism education is required, one that encourages an anti-racist inclusive classroom.

- Research needs to be carried out to quantify the level of racism being experienced currently by children in Irish classrooms. This research could then be used to provide solid evidence to the policy-makers that anti-racism education is essential.

Teacher awareness is a key factor when implementing anti-racism initiatives to support children seeking refuge and living in DP. Without teacher awareness, teachers are unfamiliar with anti-racism education and the approaches that create an anti-racist classroom. The lack of awareness about the children seeking refuge and living in DP will result in teachers being unfamiliar with how to cater appropriately for the children's social and emotional learning. It is essential in order for all children in the classroom to be supported and receive education without discrimination.

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