

## **Participants Perspective on the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups**

**Caroline Rodgers, Manager of Inagh Ark Creche and Pre-school, June 2012**

I pride myself in running a very successful childcare centre in County Clare – called Inagh Ark. It is purpose built and has so much warmth and love within. I qualified with Distinction and First Class Distinction from Portobello Dublin in 2001. As we all know qualifications are all well and good – it's what you do after and while you are working on the ground that's the real test and what's most important! I have travelled far and wide with my childcare qualifications. I lived in Northern Italy and also lived and worked throughout Australia and New Zealand. I'm now back from Australia over 4 years and Inagh Ark is everything and more that I had set out to make it! To think that you know everything about childcare is when you need to close your doors! You can never know enough. You must always update and literally keep re-educating yourself to stay in tune and focused on your job at hand - Providing the best possible service you can for your attending children. A service which exudes love, kindness, warmth, honesty and respect. So I decided to take on another course TO AGAIN better myself and full fill the needs of all the children in my care daily.

In April of last year (2011) I started a course titled – Equality and Diversity in ECCE. This course introduced me to a whole new way of thinking and approaching my daily life in childcare through the teachings of the magnificent Ann Halligan. Ann opened my eyes and ears in a way I had never experienced before. It made me look and reflect on my own attitudes and values- which is the first step to succeeding in this line of work. You must firstly examine and reflect upon yourself BEFORE you can do any of this work and carry it through to a successful result. I was introduced to the anti-bias approach. The anti-bias approach has goals for both adults and children. This was a whole new way of thinking for me on one hand but exactly what I needed on the other! A freshening up yet again! I have to say I attended the first evening 'SO UNENTHUSED'! The sun was shining outside, the long evening's had just come into swing and the last thing I wanted to do after already working 10 hours was sit for another 3 being re-educated in childcare!

WELL- it wasn't long before all that lifted and I spent many nights getting only a few hours' sleep. Between anxiousness and worrying! Was I doing my job at all??? Was I even coming close to providing what I should be providing??? I had no idea anymore! From that to being so excited about a project which I had to undertake for the course!

Ann our tutor is so kind and passionate about what she does and delivers – that it's easy learn from her. It's easy to feel her passion and take it on. It's easy for one good childcare practitioner to learn from another amazing one. She has this untouchable ability to make you aware, think, behave, acknowledge, change and not procrastinate! After each attendance she makes you feel that you want to 'move into' your childcare centre! You couldn't possibly take the weekend off! There's simply way too much improving on your improvements to do. And none of this is done by lecturing you or shoving it down your throat. She is merely so passionate and educated about what she is delivering in Equality and Diversity in Early Childhood Care and Education – that you simply feel so overjoyed, empowered and ready to change the world after each session. Clearly single handedley I can't change the world but I can always improve my service for the greater good of each and every attending child.

The course is very in depth on many sections of childcare. It's so rewarding and beneficial and easily allows you to implement a new approach to something within your setting. The areas that I have chosen to study and get in depth on are 'empowering children to stand up for themselves and others'. Respect. Having each child see themselves clearly and positively reflected and seen in the service.

This work is just as important for minority children as well as majority children. Equality and Diversity is not just about representing minority children from minority cultures. We need to work with each and

every child that is in our setting. They need to be comfortable with themselves, be comfortable with difference before then looking at the wider community. We look at the wider community to see what diversity is out there so that we can then introduce them to it. We need to get out into the community to seek and receive accurate information for our children so then they can grow and mingle in society and be completely at ease with difference in themselves and others. We want our children to feel comfortable and most importantly be part of the diversity.

I have made many positive changes in my service over the past few months. A service mind you that was already glowing but with this course and Ann's input still found many ways to improve even further. Part-taking in this course has been the most eye opening experience I have had in all my years in childcare. It showed even me- who is always open to suggestions, change and input that even I could improve and merely take on a new and fresh way of thinking.

We are now implementing the anti-bias approach at Inagh Ark. By implementing the anti-bias approach we are now implementing Aistear and Síolta. We realize that parents are the primary educators of their children. Parents are our biggest support and tool to receive accurate information from. We work on the anti-bias approach through its Goals for children and adults. We constantly talk to our children about developing tools that will empower them from within. As a quality service it's not all about doing activities with the children. It's not about standing over a Pre-School child to ensure that they colour inside the lines so that the children can have "a perfect product" going home that we think the child needs to have to portray a quality service that's 'picture perfect'. Well this certainly isn't what we do now at Inagh Ark. Art work and the likes are useless if they are only portraying an unhappy and uncomfortable environment that lures in the background. A true quality service is about knowing each child as an individual. It's about respecting each child as an individual. It's not about a tokenistic approach to cultures, countries or the likes. It's about reflecting, representing and respecting each child that is in our service and having them represented and working on their background, their family make-up and their values. We need to quality proof our classroom environment and ensure that there are no tokenistic approaches being displayed or portrayed. Our children that are present in our classroom are what is most important.

What this course simply does is empower good childcare practitioners to open their minds even further. It empowers us to empower our children to stand up for themselves and others in the face of prejudice and bias. Now if that's the only thing a child should leave my childcare centre with- Well, isn't that just amazing- because that is a POWERFUL tool placed proudly within that they shall have for life.

Doing this work has a hugely positive ripple effect. By starting work through issues of Equality and Diversity with these young children it will cause this ripple effect to take place and a more just society will be surrounding and available to all children and adults.

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**Debbie O'Callaghan, Manager Cuddles Pre-school**

**June 2012**

Cuddles Pre-school is a community pre-school which has two sessions, one in the morning & one in the afternoon. We are currently participating in a project which the Clare County Childcare Committee are supporting; the Pre-school Education Initiative for Children from Minority Groups. We began this training in April 2011. I wasn't quite sure what to expect from this training, I knew I would be introduced to diversity & equality concepts, attitudes, values and legislation but I wasn't prepared for how this training was going to change my whole way of thinking. We have always had a very diverse group in our service and thought by treating all children the same and by treating them fairly (or what we view as fair), that we've been doing a good job. This training has made me realise that we're not all the same and that difference and similarities should be celebrated. Children notice differences from a very young age so why aren't we talking about it? I have learnt that everyone has a culture including myself and everyone's culture should be represented/displayed in the service. By not representing a child's culture we are sending out negative messages e.g. we're not respecting who they are. It would be impossible to explain in this piece how much I've learned from this course but I would definitely recommend it.