

The Media Initiative For Children 'Respecting Difference' Diversity and Inclusion in the Early Years

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Introduction

This paper discusses the pilot and evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference, an early years programme designed to help young children develop positive attitudes to difference. The paper also discusses the launch of the programme in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland and the development of the training for practitioners and teachers implementing the programme in early years settings.

The MIFC is an innovative programme which was developed by Early Years - The Organisation for Young Children (formerly known as NIPPA [Northern Ireland]) and the Peace Initiatives Institute (Pii, USA). It combines a series of cartoon media messages with a pre-school programme. Together they aim to build a better understanding among children of physical, racial and cultural differences. A more recently developed, additional media message, addresses bullying behaviours. The messages are shown on television three times a year with the aim of reaching the wider community and giving support to the programme.

The cartoons are set in a play park and feature animated characters that young children are attracted to and can easily identify with. The cartoons focus on the experiences of the characters around exclusion and diversity issues. In the cartoons one character is initially left out of the play because they are perceived as being different. The messages in the cartoons are reinforced in early years settings through the use of resources including a DVD of the cartoons, puppets of the characters, jig-saws, feelings cubes, lotto games and activities around the resources that prompt children to talk about their feelings and attitudes to the issues explored in the cartoons.



Figure 1. The main characters from the Media Initiative for Children (© Pii)

Background

Although a number of studies have been published in recent years exploring older children and young peoples' experiences and attitudes living in conflict-affected societies (Koplewicz, *et al.*, 2003; Connolly and Healy, 2004; Muldoon, 2004; Jones, 2005; McEvoy-Levy, 2006), there is a lack of research on very young children's attitudes and experiences.

The only such study relating to Northern Ireland is that of Connolly *et al.* (2002). It was this study that greatly influenced the development of the MIFC as it showed that by the age of six a significant proportion of children (one in six) were making sectarian remarks.

However, it was decided that the development of the MIFC should not just address the issue of sectarianism but focus on all aspects of difference. Many early years practitioners were already working with children around diversity issues and it was felt that the MIFC would build on this good foundation.

An Advisory Council was set in place from the onset, to oversee the development of the MIFC. Membership of the council is wide ranging and currently includes representatives from the Community Relations Council, two regional universities, Channel 4, the statutory sector, integrated sector, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Ombudsman for Children (OCO) and several Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Three media messages and curricular materials were initially developed around disability, race/ethnicity and sectarianism during 2003 and piloted in February/March 2004. An additional media message and accompanying materials were developed around bullying behaviours in 2006. A message around the Traveller community is currently being developed.

Evaluation of the Pilot Programme

The pilot programme of the initial three media messages was implemented in ten early years settings across Northern Ireland over a three week period. During this time, the media messages were also shown on television in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. Evaluation of the pilot programme was led by Professor Paul Connolly from Queens University Belfast. The methodology and findings are summarised below:

Methodology for the Evaluation

The methodological approach took the form of a quasi-experimental design involving ten pre-school settings; five settings (n=95) undertook the pilot programme and five (matched) settings (n=70) acted as a control group. The evaluation measured children's attitudes before and after the implementation of the pilot programme.

Before the programme was implemented in the intervention groups, children in all ten groups were shown photographs of a number of different children, including children wearing eye patches, children from the Chinese community, children wearing Celtic and Rangers tee shirts etc. Each child was asked which child he/she would like to play with. As the child pointed to a photograph, that photograph was removed and the child was then asked which child they would like to play with now. The removal of the photographs continued down to the last photograph.

Photographs were also shown of a group of children playing together and one child looking on. Each child was asked if she/he knew what was happening in the photographs.

Objectives

Objective of the evaluation was to measure whether the pilot programme had any effect on the children's:

- ability to understand how being excluded makes someone feel
- ability to recognise instances of exclusion without prompting
- willingness to play with others, including those who are different to themselves.

At the end of three weeks all ten groups were shown the same photographs again. Results showed a small but significant difference in the attitudes and awareness of children in the intervention groups as shown in the tables below.

Table 1: Ability to recognise instances of exclusion without prompting

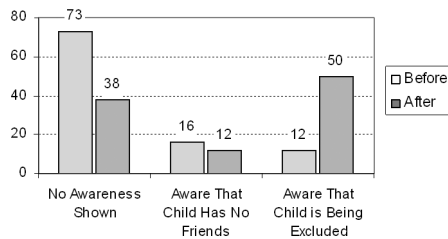


Table 2: Ability to understand how being excluded makes someone feel

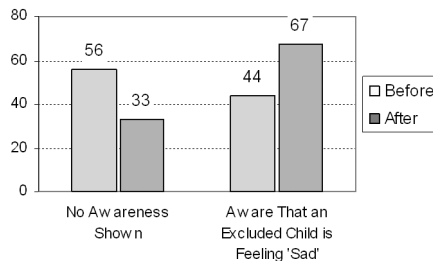


Table 3: Willingness to play with others, including those who are different

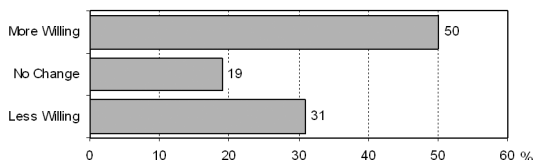
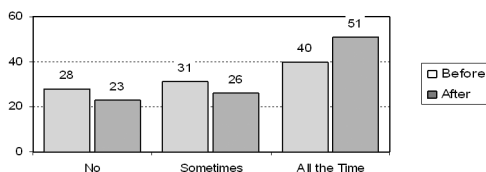


Table 4: Willingness to play with others, including those who are different
Willingness to Play with Chinese Girl



Summary

After just three weeks, the pilot programme was found to increase children's willingness to play with others, including some of those who are different to themselves. The children's ability to understand how being excluded makes someone feel also increased as did their ability to recognise instances of exclusion without prompting. See: www.pii-mifc.org for the full report.

Feedback from Practitioners

The feedback from the practitioners who had participated in the pilot programme was very positive. They reported that children had been very attracted to the media messages and the accompanying resources. They did however feel somewhat uncomfortable about implementing the third media message which addresses sectarian issues. Staff acknowledged that they needed more training and guidance in this area. As a result, a comprehensive programme of training and support has been developed.

Programme Launch, Training for Practitioners and Partnership with Parents

The training of early years practitioners to implement the programme is a vital component of this initiative and since the pilot, much work has gone into the development of this. Training currently consists of a two-day introductory course, which gives practitioners an opportunity to reflect on their own values, attitudes and prejudices as well as a chance to look in detail at the programme. Diversity is translated into practice as practitioners are given ideas to help them maximise the potential of the MIFC resources.

A one-day follow-up course, designed to take feedback on how the programme is going and to give practitioners an opportunity to explore cultural differences in Northern Ireland is also available. This element of the work builds up practitioners' confidence and provides an opportunity to discuss cultural differences. It also creates a good model of communication across the communities.

Since November 2005, the training has been delivered on a cross border basis. Early years' staff from more than 450 settings in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland have now completed the introductory training.

Connolly *et al.* (2006) suggests that showing the messages on national television has helped to avoid the development of misunderstanding among the wider community about the MIFC as well as attracting the interest of young children. This has made implementing the programme in early years settings much easier for practitioners and teachers.

Engaging meaningfully with parents and the development of a community outreach approach is another crucial component of the programme. Home-links exercises have been incorporated into the programme. Sample letters are provided suggesting activities to open up conversations between parents and children around feelings, disabilities, different sports and different cultural activities. Staff in early years settings are also encouraged to invite parents to view the media messages and resources to allay any fears they may have of their children participating in a programme addressing issues of diversity. It is also planned to increase staff training from three to four days in order to extend the section on working with parents.

Conclusion

A key objective of the MIFC is that children will have an opportunity to discuss similarities and differences between themselves, their peers, families and members of the community. Its aim is to enable children to effectively express feelings associated with similarities and differences including those of inclusion and exclusion and begin to understand the meaning of acceptance and respect for others. It is also hoped to make the training and resources available to every pre-school in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in the voluntary and statutory sectors.

New research in sixty settings in Northern Ireland and twenty settings in the Republic of Ireland will take place from November 2007. This research will be carried out over a six month period and will not only look at outcomes for children but also outcomes for practitioners and parents.

The research carried out to date has shown positive outcomes for young children. The next phase of research aims to also show outcomes for parents and practitioners in terms of increased awareness of the importance of doing diversity work with young children and the types of approaches required. The main objective is to increase confidence among adults when dealing with diversity issues with children and to reduce prejudices held about others in relation to race, religion and disability.

References

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