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Author(s)	McGregor, Caroline; Dalikeni, Colletta; Devaney, Carmel; Moran, Lisa; Garrity, Sheila
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TITLE PAGE

TITLE: Practice Guidance for Culturally Sensitive Practice When Working with Children and Families Who Are Refugees or Asylum Seekers: Learning from an Early Years Study In Ireland

Authors: Caroline McGregor, National University of Ireland Galway

Colletta Dalikeni, Dundalk Institute of Technology

Carmel Devaney, National University of Ireland Galway

Lisa Moran, Edgehill University

Sheila Garrity, National University of Ireland Galway

Practice Guidance for Culturally Sensitive Practice in Working with Children and Families Who Are Asylum Seekers: Learning from an Early Years Study In Ireland

Abstract

This article is based on a study of two early years services in the West of Ireland which was attended mostly by asylum seekers. Using a sample of the findings for illustration (we discuss how the study captured an example of culturally sensitive practice that demonstrated an ability to counteract some of the negative effects of being an asylum seeker through the particular philosophy and practice model. Eight specific guidance points for practice are drawn out and considered within the context of the ecological model (Bronbrenfenner & Morris, 2006). We argue that a duality of attention to agency –recognising the importance of the actions of each individual and to structure – recognising the inherent power differences, structural inequality, social injustice and prejudice – is essential. We show the importance of agency and of an ecological framework. We make the case for an approach to 'cultural competence' that emphasises the importance of interactions at micro level. . While we are focused in this paper on the early years sector, here is also wider applicability from this specific study to general practice in the field of social care and social work with with diverse populations.

Introduction

Often when culturally sensitive practice is discussed, it is done so with the context of 'cultural competence'. This is a complex terms and denotes many meanings and interpretations. To begin with, it can be described as the ability to maximise sensitivity and minimise insensitivity in the service of culturally diverse communities. It also means the development of a greater understanding of self by the practitioner with regard to personal reactions to client differences as well as wider awareness of cultural limitations and barriers.

Laird (2008) offers one of the most comprehensive accounts of cultural competence. While she acknowledges that there are dangers and contradictions in developing models of cultural competence for practice, she contends that "cultural competence is now one of the greatest challenges for the social work profession" (2008, 159). The same may be said more broadly for social care and early years work with families.

In this article, we are focused on the experiences of one group of families who were mostly asylum seekers, availing of a service that provides early years education and care. We draw learning for training and practice in the fields of social work, social care and early years services as much of the learning has wider applicability. This article is important because in Ireland specifically, while we have changed dramatically in terms of cultural diversity in the past 20 years, clear evidence of confidence and competence in engaging with families from different countries and cultures remains elusive and inadequate from micro to macro levels. At the wider structural macro level, there is insufficient recognition and emphasis placed on cultural differences in legislation and policy though the HSE Intercultural Guide (HSE, 2009) Child Protection and Welfare Practice Handbook (HSE, 2011) pays some attention to this. At a service exo-system level, there is also a lack of agency policies and procedures to recognise differential needs for specific minority groups. For example, the attempt to operationalise cultural competence in Ireland through the *Intercultural Health Strategy* (2007-2012) met with limited success due to lack of practical models for translating concepts into practice situations through systematic skills training and other implementation tools (Cairde,2015). In the early years sector, Siolta (CECDE 2006), Aistear (NCCA 2009) and the recent *Diversity and Equality Charter* (DCYA 2016) demonstrate the attention to *identity and belonging* as a focus of practice. However, despite two decades of policy attention,

actions to support the development of a professional workforce in new and challenging contexts (Mathias et al, 2011) have been slow to emerge (See Sylva et al., 2004; DCYA/POBAL, 2016).

The focus in this article is specifically on working with asylum seekers. In Ireland, families living in Direct Provisionas asylum seekers means that families are in various states of limbo in their country of application and are nearly always impacted psychologically, emotionally and socially by their interim and semi-permanent position (See for e.g. Christie & Burns, 2006; Christie, 2003; Foreman & Ni Raghallaigh 2017a; 2017b). Conditions have in fact been found to breach human rights standards (Arnold, 2012; Irish Refugee Council, 2013) and there has been a call for closure of Direct Provision since its inception in 2000 (Fanning et al., 2001; FLAC, 2009; Aikidwa, 2012; Irish Refugee Council, 2013; O'Reilly 2013) which has yet to be heeded. Some more recent improvements in conditions of Direct Provision have been reported in response to the McMahon Report (2015) which reviewed for the first time the living conditions of those in direct provision. For example, the Ombudsman for Children have opened up the option for children in Direct Provision to make complaints (Ombudsman for Children's Office 2017). There is also presently a move to allow residents in Direct Provision for more than 6 months to work albeit only in restricted instances (SeeBardon, 2017). Horgan & Ni Raghallaigh (2017) give prominence specifically to the needs of unaccompanied minors. They emphasise the importance of recognition of the diversity of the refugee population group and the need for Irish services to examine care options offered. Our research supports this and points to the need for a more specific focus to be placed on the diverse need of asylum seekers in terms of how we engage and interact in response to their individual and wider societal needs (See also Ni Raghallaigh et al, 2016).

With this backdrop in mind, the article has four main sections to follow. Firstly, we provide a brief literature review leading on from our commentary above. Secondly, we describe the project on which the study is based. Thirdly, we outline eight guides for practice based on a selection of findings using the ecological model based on the work of Bronfenbrenner & Morris(2006). We then develop a discussion and conclusion aimed at informing the advancement of guidance for practice.

Brief Review of Literature Relevant to Cultural Competence.

Within the term cultural competence, related concepts include cultural literacy, cross-cultural knowledge and cultural skills in direct practice. Cultural consciousness is another important term sometimes used (e.g. Azzopardi & McNeill 2016). Cultural competence can be considered in terms of personal, practitioner, organisational/service and institutional/policy levels(Sawrikar 2017). In this article, we focus on the term cultural competence as denoting the abilities and skills of a practitioner to be able to engage in culturally sensitive practice. At the same time though, we recognise the concept remains highly problematic. The way discussions in relation to culture are often conflated with race or ethnicity is highlighted by authors such as Griffin (2006), Barker (2008) and Share et al. (2012). Also, Johnson & Munch (2009) argue that cultural competence frameworks are problematic for a number of reasons: they can be too epistemologically based on a priori knowledge of culture; they can lead to classification of cultures and group norms that is stereotypical; they can lead to over-sensitivity to cultural group rights and privilege group over individual; and they leave open the question of whether cultural competence can ever be achieved.

There is a well-established international literature and research on the need for developing cultural competence in social work and related fields of education (Abrams and Moi 2009;Bean 2006; Boyle & Springer; 2001; Harms 2009; Jani et al 2016; Kohli et al, 2010; Mlcek 2013,) and in social work practice with refugee families in child welfare and

protection services (Okitikpi and Aymer 2003; 2010; Pine & Drachman , 2005;, Harrison and Turner, 2011; Sawrikar 2017). A number of different models of cultural competence to draw from have also emerged (e.g. Carballeira, 1997; Camphinha- Bacote, 2002; Laird, 2008; Sue 2001). Literature which provides specific models for anti-oppressive practice (Thompson, 2006; Dominelli; 2008, Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014) and a focus on multi-culturalism and interculturalism in service provision (cf. Semmler and Williams 2000; Rockquemore and Laszloffy 2003) offers another dimension to this field of literature. Commonly cited models include the work of Sue (2001), Domenelli (1997) and Thompsons (2006). Each of these authors offer a conceptual layered framework highlighting the different levels on which prejudice operates and how racial discrimination might be addressed. While useful, on their own they remain too generalist to adequately inform practice application and the need for more specific, focused and nuanced approaches to compliment them has been demonstrated (see for e.g. Robinson, 2013; Strier & Binyamin, 2013; Rush & Kennan and Mlcek, 2013).

Within the Irish early years sector specifically, a separate literature is also emerging. Murray (2002) and Murray et al (2004; 2011) developed an early national literature around culture emerging from work with the Traveller community in the mid-1990s (Murray and O'Doherty, 2001). This was then broadened to consider practice from an 'anti-bias' approach, drawing on the work of Derman-Sparks (1989) and largely informing initial national guidance for early years practice (OMC, 2006). Irish policy documents including the *National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Development and Education*, *Siolta* (CECDE, 2006), the *Early Childhood Curriculum Framework, Aistear*, (NCCA, 2009) and the recent *Diversity and Equality Charter* and supporting practice guidelines (DCYA, 2016) privilege the concepts of 'identity and belonging' to address diversity and inclusion. Within the early years sector, evidence indicates increasing numbers of families from minority ethnic

backgrounds attending early years services, with over two-thirds of services reporting at least one child attending with English as an additional language (EAL) (DCYA/POBAL, 2016). However, a review of the initial *Early Years Education Focused Inspections*, recently initiated by the Department of Education and Science (Duignan, 2016), indicated shortcomings across services in the area of: provision for children with EAL; approaches to support children's 'identity and belonging'; and lack of confidence in communicating with parents. Whereas state policy initiatives privilege a greater awareness of the variety of cultures, languages and identities reflected in the children and families engaging with early years services in Ireland, a recent survey of practitioners (DES, 2016) indicates this is an area where nearly half of respondents (47%) expressed a lack of confidence and expertise. A similar level of respondents indicated their knowledge of Siolta (50%) and Aistear (44%) and their competence to engage with these frameworks to be poor. As these guides are key tools to consider children's rights, inclusion, diversity, children's identity and belonging , this perceived deficit of knowledge can be seen to impact on the cultural competence of the workforce.

The specific area of working with unaccompanied minors addressed in the work of Christie (Christie 2003), Ní Raghallaigh (2013) and Ní Raghallaigh and Sirriyeh (2015) is significant. . Related research focused asylum seekers living in Direct Provision (e.g. Ni Raghallaigh et al, 2016; Foreman & Raghallaigh, 2017a ; 2017b) offers further important insights into how practice can be developed in response to this particular population. The urgent need for greater attention to improvements in practice and training is apparent in this work.

Research such as that of Dalikeni 2 (2013, 2016) highlights additional challenges when it comes to child protection with asylum seekers and refugee families. Author 2 carried out the

first and only study in Ireland on child protection with families who are asylum seekers and refugees living in direct provision. She showed that the problem of cultural sensitivity vs cultural relativism was particular stark. Despite an awareness of cultural differences shown by social workers, Dalikeni found tension and misunderstanding between families and social workers about acceptable norms. From the families perspective this was due to a lack of understanding of acceptable child rearing practices in Ireland caused by the isolation due to living in Direct Provision centres excluded from mainstream Irish society with little to no opportunity for integration. Psychological stress of parenting in direct provision, anxiety around their uncertain immigration status of being an asylum seeker and lack of knowledge of the Irish child protection system exacerbated the problem. Cultural issues and parenting styles which brought parents to the attention of social workers included leaving child home alone and slapping children. Mistrust of social workers by families was caused by families' perception of social workers as state representatives and the view that the role of the social worker differed from their prior knowledge. For social workers the challenges included assessing unfamiliar child rearing practices and knowing when and how to intervene and challenge behaviours they may have considered inappropriate. This was exacerbated by social workers fearing that in challenging certain behaviours they could be labelled as racist (Dalikeni, 2013; 2016)

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While the issues were accentuated due to the child protection concerns, the findings of this study have resonance for developing social work and social care education more generally. This has likewise been emphasised in recent research in Australia by Sawrikar (2017) who found that in situations where cultural practices are considered harmful, social workers need to work in a way that clients do not feel their entire culture is under threat of being erased. To do this, they propose that a balance is struck between 'cultural absolutism'- the position

that culture does not need to be considered in child protection matters and 'cultural relativism' – the position that culture is so important it could trump child safety. (Sawrikar, 2017, p3). Okitipi & Aymer (2010) offer an approach that advances the work discussed through their consideration of the interaction between both legal and structural issues alongside individual personal factors. They suggest that 'the first recognition of discrimination is the contact and interaction between people. It is within this encounter that prejudices, unfairness and discriminatory values, attitudes and behaviours are initially played out' (2010. 155).

In the discussion section, we use this brief literature to inform how we can critically consider this duality between agency and structure within a socio-ecological framework. We argue that this adds the necessary complexity and depth needed to influence the advancement of better practice in certain contexts such as working with families who are asylum seekers caught within a slow and bureaucratic system while trying to live a day to day life. We also suggest that much of this learning can be applicable more widely to social work and social care practice.

Overview of the Study

As detailed in Author 4 et al 2016; 2017 and Author 5 et al 2017, this study focused on a crèche and community preschool. The services were accessed primarily by members of the asylum seeking community from a Direct Provision centre in a town in the West of Ireland. Utilising a qualitative approach, the study involved narrative interviews with service users (i.e. parents), key informants and staff members in both services. Ethical approval was provided through the university ethics committee. The research aims and processes were agreed in partnership with the agency. The findings illustrated the positive impacts of the services on the educational, social and cognitive outcomes for children, and informal supports

for families. Drawing on social theoretical approaches to family support (cf. Author 3 et al. 2013), the project highlighted that the services provide invaluable emotional and material supports for parents, many of whom report that they remain 'stuck' in asylum for extended time periods. We drew upon the ecological approach of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) to contextualise and broaden our understanding of family support in the lives of asylum seeking children and families that participated in our study. The ecological approach was pivotal at the research design and data analysis where we mapped interview responses with factual information from key informants to determine how and where agencies, organisations and people might appear in the social ecologies of participants. As Darling (2007) notes, the ecological approach recognises the significance of context and acknowledges the constantly evolving person within this. It posits that how the person represents and sees her/his life circumstances is also continually transforming so that epistemological frames and 'mental maps' are in states of flux. Using diagrams, we looked at the interactions between agencies and actors and placed them at different layers of the socio-ecological framework which informed the analysis and write up also.

Through this work, the need for a more culturally responsive approach to policy making was called for. The research findings of Author 4 et al (2016, 2017) demonstrates strongly the value individual asylum seekers placed on relationships, a sense of being valued; service to their children as children first and ethnicity second and the ease with which difference and diversity were valued and celebrated. In Author 5 et al (2017; 14), the authors draw out the findings further with an emphasis on the learning for the early years sector by offering a broad framework for practice. The combined elements of the practice guidance from Moran 4 et al (2017) and Garrity et al (2017), both derived from the study Moran et al (2016) can be summarised as follows:

1. A conceptual framework underpinned by socio-ecological theory, social support theory, resilience and family support (adapted from Moran 4 et al, 2016).

2. A clearly articulated philosophy that values diversity and promotes respect for all families and children .

3. This philosophy is lived in settings and reflected in practice and management .

4. A well developed and thoughtful pedagogy which is based on care, interculturalism and community .

5. An approach that is adaptive to the childs needs.

6. Strengths based approach to working with families. (2-5 adapted from Garrity et al, 2017) .

7. A culturally responsive approach to policy making.

8. Use of research based on narratives from service users to give impetus to the key messages (6-8 adapted from Garrityet al, 2017)..

Practice guidance for culturally sensitive practice as derived from research findings

As mentioned earlierwe generated diagrams for each participant as well as a more general one, which represented a culmination of the different narratives and opinions about the effective functioning of people and organisations concerning family support. The microsystem and meso system levels comprised of matters such as supports that the child encounters on a daily basis (e.g. school, family) and personal interactions. The exo-system was composed of interactions and experiences with the wider service and community. The macro-system was composed of issues with regard to dominant attitudes, knowledge cultures and ideologies of society on the one hand and structural challenges of dealing with the

asylum system on the other. Interactions based on stereotyping and racism were identified at individual and at community level. Experience of very positive interactions between members of the asylum-seeking community and citizenries from the region region were also reported. At the chronosystem, we considered how the establishment of the asylum-seeking centre in the town might have affected interactions and relationships in the community in a broader sense, and how the Direct Provision centre had become an important feature of the social fabric of the area through cultural embedding. We also thought about the historical context surrounding national policies on asylum seeking in Ireland, considering policies as temporal and social spaces (cf. Coffey 2004; Moran 4 et al, 2016).

In sum, the findings from this preschool and crèche evaluation show how the overall approach enabled positive interactions with a mix of children and family members from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds due to the clear philosophical and pedagogical orientation. This facilitated intercultural learning and promoted respect for people of different faiths, cultures and nations. The findings show how practices were constructively developed to enhance cultural engagement and value of diversity in the two specific settings uder study. The findings illustrate clearly the importance of a strong value base and open ethos of dialogue and partnership.

With this in mind, we outline below the eight features of the practice guidance derived from the research and provide a short commentary and illustrative quote in each instance with a view to informing early years practice specifically and social work and social care practice more generally. The aim of this guidance is to be illustrative and specific rather than attempting to over-generalise or simplify. Even though we are offering 'guidance', we also recognise that attempting to develop guidelines for practice in this area is generally problematic. Laird (2008) argues that guidelines can oversimplify the issues. Conflicting

views exist as to what it means to be culturally competent and how one measures this. (e.g. Jani et al 2016). There is also lack of clarity demonstrated in current evidence as to what individual practitioners need to demonstrate to show they have attained such competence (Abrams & Moio 2006, Ari -Ben Adital & Stier, 2010, Harrison &Turner 2011). A study by Harrison and Turner (2011) explored in depth the meaning that social workers in Gailsland, Australia placed on what they described as a "murky" concept in practice. The study found that participants valued training but were also aware of the danger or tokenism; for example: 'you tick it off and then you're done' (2011, pp. 344). By contrast, in the same study, all participants endorsed 'training in critical thinking, openness, reflection, respect, non-judgmentalism and experiential learning as key capacities that workers need to develop in order to work effectively with people from different background' (2011, p.344). Findings from Jani et al 2016 produced similar findings and h highlighted the need to differentiate between practice skills and practice behaviours. They argue that cultural competence was seen as"more of a practice approach, or mind-set, that of being open, than a skill." (Jani et al 2016, p. 317).

We suggest a similar approach in the discussion that follows.

With regard to the first practice guidance point - *A conceptual framework underpinned by Socio-ecological theory, social support theory, resilience and family support* the following quote illustrates the challenges from a parent's perspective:

'There will always be this inferiority, like these people are more superior than I am. I don't know my status in this place, so I don't know what I will do or the way I will act that would

attract this kind of reaction from other people in the community. They don't see me – it's the people up the hill'.   (Parent; Moran et al, 2016, p. 61)

Overall, the study highlighted the value of using a socio-ecological model based on resilience, family support and social support to maximise the ability to engage effectively with a variety of cultures. Thjs included the ability to understand the impact of wider macro issues on the micro level experience.   In a context where parents felt stigmatised and not accepted as the quote above suggests there was a high value placed on the services being approachable and understanding: 'if I had a problem, I could talk to them and I don't mean just about school, I mean about other things. They are great people and it is a good service' (Parent, ibid, p. 59).

The second practice point relates to a *clearly articulated philosophy that values diversity and promotes respect for all families and children*. As one parent commented: 'Parents perceive that children attending the crèche and preschool are treated with equality and respect by staff members at the services' (Parent, *ibid,* p. 68). Overall, the findings of this study confirmed that the expressed philosophy of valuing diversity was recognised and valued by the parents. The following quote captures how this was experienced by one of the parents.

'. One day I was in crèche and one little girl came to me and said, 'Oh, I like your colour. Yes, my Mum is white but you are…' I look at her and say, 'You do like my colour; I love your colour as well.' So what they see is what they say, you know? So from that crèche down here they see a lot. It makes them feel like, Wow, this is another world again'. (Parent, *ibid* p.67).

The value of open dialogue about culture also permeated the findings:

'We talked about skin colour and things like that always. If something comes up we'll go with it. So skin would be a big thing and we would have books about different colour skin, different colour hair. One of the children went to Pakistan for about six weeks: 'Where is he gone?' 'Oh, he's gone home to see his family, because that's where they came from.' You'd be talking about it and 'He's going to be back in six weeks, which is a long time.'   (Staff, *ibid*, p. 77)

The third aspect we can draw out as practice guidance is that a . *this philosophy is lived in settings and reflected in practice and management* . As one staff member commented:

'It's about people getting on, is actually working together, having fun together for the children in here, building relationships, real relationships. Acknowledging difference, accepting it; we can learn from everybody. Integration to me is more on the ground. It's society getting on with each other' (Staff, *ibid*, p, 71)

Staff were of the view that intercultural learning was seen as important for promoting positive relationships between children and adults. Parents reinforced this as reflected in the following quote:

'There's no prejudice. They don't look at our children as asylum seeker children but as children. And the environment that we live in depends on the people that you live with as well. Your child cannot play, children need to play, they'll be small, they're running up and down, they are making noise so they are just confined, whereas [in] the crèche and the

preschool they can run and be free, they enjoy themselves, they play and learn. (Parent, *ibid*, p.61)

The fourth practice guidance theme to draw from the findings relates to *a well-developed and thoughtful pedagogy which is based on care and community*. This comment from a parent captures this lived philosophy well:

'They are very caring towards the children. They are wonderful, good, and all the children, there is no child say: 'I hate this teacher', they love them. It's nice when our children can be children, they are not afraid to express themselves and play, even bring friends over to the hostel, they are free, but the crèche and the preschool, they're really good… that children will have more interaction with community'. (Parent, *ibid*, p. 63)

Parents saw the crèche and preschool services as important for fostering children's imaginations, intelligence and creativity, improving children's school readiness, and enhancing their social and educational outcomes intercultural learning and engagement with community. This was recognised by key informants also: 'The staff and the service we have here, and the emphasis on being inclusive and sensitive to the needs of different people within the community – that's allowed it to gain credibility and has sustained it. We've got a very good team'. (Key informant, *ibid,* p, 92)

The fifth element to note is that practice takes *(a)n approach that is adaptive to the Childs Needs* with a ''focus on the well-being of the child' as explained by key informants. As one respondent put it:

'That particular community had a whole range of needs, but you can't always deal with them in one go. Begin with the children. I can't imagine that to have left them would have led to anything positive in the future… people who'd feel alienated or resented and how they had been treated'. (Key Informant, *ibid*, p. 89)

The value of this approach was emphasised by parents. For example, one parent stated that: 'Without the services our lives would be horrible. Because when they go out you have time to breathe, time to run around, do shopping, when they come in you know that they have learned different things'. (Parent 2016 p.60). The crèche and preschool were also viewed as significant for enhancing children's feelings of freedom and giving the children a break from everyday routines in the DP reception centre. As one parent commented: 'It's good because it's a place for our children to be normal where we are not normal. I think the situation in the system… We stay in one room with your children with other children. I swear it's not enough for the children to play'. (Parent, ibid p. 61)

The evidence of value of a *strengths based approach* is the next feature of practice drawn out from the findings and was strongly connected to feelings of being respected. Key informants observed how staff 'recognise that there was a problem and they'd say to the parent, 'There are leftover shoes in here or leftover clothes and we need to clear them out' (Key Informant, *ibid,* p.90). The approach was valued especially with regard to how it showed respect for parents in difficult circumstances. As one parent noted: 'It's a good place, I think, because we feel respected and heard by them and so do the children, and the children will learn that they have to respect others and it will teach them that'. (Parent, *ibid*, P. 61)

The seventh point drawn out for culturally sensitive practice is the importance of *a culturally responsive approach to policy making.* For example, the data presented in this report indicates that despite the complex social and cultural needs of the community, the area lacked many types of supports to assist local families, such as a dedicated family upport worker to give practical advice and emotional supports to families in need. As one staff explained:

'They have a fear of the community, not just the asylum seekers, a lot of the people that we're dealing with have a fear of other agencies, not so much the public health nurse but maybe speech and language, they feel like it might be a slight on them. It's about building their knowledge – this is what we've got to do. It's what's best for the child. And having somebody to talk to at their level is vital.' (Staff, *ibid,* p. 79)

The final element of the practice guidance relates to the *use of research with service users to give impetus to the key messages for practice.* The significance of the narrative approach as a specific form of interviewing tool and of ethnography is that they accord importance to the participant's life stories; their experiences in their home countries, their experiences of 'displacement' and being 'in' and 'out' of place (cf. O'Reilly 2012; Wengraf, 2001). In this context, the narrative approach emphasised the importance of trust and human emotion which shape and reflect people's experiences in Direct Provision. It also led to the identification of points of confluence and convergence in participant's narratives about life in Direct Provision on the one hand, and 'official' policy discourses on the other. The narratives from parents and children which were relayed as part of this study underlined the importance of policies that are grounded in cultural sensitivity, and that are adaptive to their everyday 'life worlds'.

Discussion and Conclusion

As aforementioned, the critical practice approach outlined is intended to be illustrative and indicative rather than prescriptive and generalised. It is based within a broad socio-ecological model and relies on a conceptual framework. The focus is on specific interactions at different specific moments and points within the eco-system of the family (micro) and the agencies and professionals (mezzo and exo).

.By using the socio-ecological model the importance of the inter-personal interactions within a wider systemic context is emphasised. The findings show the powerful impact of creating a sense of belonging for a group of service users who are dominated by a structure they have little control over, a predominance of Irish/white culture around them and evidenced experiences of racism at individual, collective and societal levels. As Okitipi & Aymer (2010) argue, we need to take an approach to practice based on reflexivity 'where knowledge, values and actions are inextricably linked' and 'where there is no concept of the universal professional or the universal service user' but rather a situation where the notion of 'critical subjectivity' is 'given credence' (2010; 150). They argue that while we can and must look out to structure and oppression we also need to look in to how individual practice can be so impactful with regard to culturally sensitive practice.   On the other hand, too great a level of reliance on the agency of the individual workers to ameliorate the negative impact of racism, structural inequality and oppression from a macro level is a risk especially in working with asylum seekers where the system has such great power over their everyday lives. It is not a matter of one or the other but rather a case of tackling social justice and rights issues at each layer of the system not giving precedence to one over the other.

Overall, the findings of this study can inform training of a range of professions engaged with children and families from early years educators to teachers, youth and community workers, social care workers and social workers. There is also wider applicability from this specific study for working with diverse populations for social workers and social care practitioners in a range of different settings. There are also key messages specific to the early years sector. By way of conclusion, we advocate for a focused and critical practice approach that problematises the idea of 'practice guidance' and 'culturally sensitive practice' while at the same time recognising the need for both. We show how use of an ecological framework that can help to map and understand the complexity of interactions at micro, meso exo and macro levels for families who are awaiting a decision about their asylum status (Moran et al, 2016) moving is beyond generalised critique towards more applied and grounded considerations.We also highlight the problem where too much focus and reliance is put on relationships and agency over structureand recommend an approach based on the research findings that focuses on developing 'culturally sensitive practice' that canemphasise the importance of attention to interactions throughout the different levels of the socio-ecological system from direct day-to day practice to advocacy for wider policy and social change.

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