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**Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister  
Inquiry into Building a United Community**

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## **1. Introduction and context of submission**

- 1.1 Early Years<sup>1</sup> is the largest voluntary organisation working with and for all young children 0-12 in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It is a non-profit making organisation and in 2015 will celebrate 50 years of working to promote and develop high quality, evidence-informed early childhood services for young children, their families and communities. Our vision is that children are strong, competent and visible in their communities; physically and emotionally healthy; eager and able to learn and respectful of difference. We have currently over 1,000 members across the statutory, community, voluntary and independent sectors supporting the child care and early education needs of over 30,000 children on a daily basis.
- 1.2 Currently Early Years provides a range of information, training, and advice and support services for parents, early childhood care and education providers, management committees and boards, employers, local authorities, departments and agencies. Projects and activities relate to child focused community based health and education; tackling social and educational inequalities; working with young Traveller children and their families; community development and working with children, practitioners, management boards, parents and carers to respect the various forms of difference in our society.
- 1.3 These and other local and cross-border evidence-based services and projects offered by our organisation also have proved to be internationally applicable through our participation in a number of international partnerships and networks designed to 'export' and share knowledge and best practice concerning peace building, shared spaces and early childhood education and care.
- 1.4 Early Years welcomes this opportunity to submit written evidence. The organisation would also be willing to further participate in the process by giving oral evidence to the committee on anything contained in this submission.
- 1.5 Commentary on elements of the Terms of Reference set for the Inquiry relevant both to our remit as established above and our practice based experience is as follows.

## **2. Exploring perspectives on sectarianism, division and good relations**

- 2.1 It is vital that the approach to a shared future and united communities embraces an ecological framework approach beginning in the earliest years and continuing through primary and secondary education levels. In developing a positive sense of self and others it is essential to address issues of inclusion and exclusion from an early age. It is well documented in early childhood research that children as young as three years old are aware of difference and by age six can develop negative attitudes and behaviour towards others who are different<sup>2</sup>. Such work must be underpinned by a clear perspective on children's rights and universal services to promote accessibility and inclusion of all children towards the best outcomes.

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<sup>1</sup> For more see <http://www.early-years.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Too Young to Notice? The Cultural and Political Awareness of 3-6 Year Olds in Northern Ireland  
Connolly, P., Smith, A. & Kelly, B. (2002)

2.2 Relevant approaches must then also embrace wider support networks involving parents, families and communities as well as schools and education providers. In this area opportunities must be provided for parents from diverse backgrounds to share their beliefs, concerns and positive learning experiences across socio-economic, ethnic, cultural and gender borders with other parents and agencies.

2.3 Engaging with parents and other adults is also vital in order to address the intergenerational transmission of prejudicial attitudes to young children. Engaging with parents, carers and practitioners courageously therefore allows for attitudes and behaviour to be explored, including addressing prejudices and stereotypes. It is vital that space is created that is both safe and challenging for exploring these issues.

### **3. Seeking views on how sectarianism and division can be addressed**

3.1 Early Years has designed, developed and implemented a flagship programme focused on developing respect for diversity and inclusion in the early years which is informed by and includes all of the principles outlined in section two above.

3.2 This is highly innovative in that the approach addresses inclusion in all its aspects focusing on ability, race, cultural ethnic and religious identity through age appropriate programmes. The Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme has been externally evaluated<sup>3</sup> through a randomised controlled trial and found to have a positive effect on young children's attitude towards and respect for others who are different.

3.3 The MIFC Respecting Difference Programme is currently linked to relevant curricula for children aged from two to seven years and consideration is being given to further development of the programme covering the timeframe right through to the end of primary school.

3.4 Through shared parent workshops and in management committee/board of governors workshops, adults have the opportunity to share their own experiences including experiences which as children shaped their identities and attitudes. They also have opportunities in an informal way for discussion and sharing with others who have been raised with different perspectives and attitudes. In this way parents, teachers, pre-school staff, governors and management committee members are themselves engaging, reflecting and building their own understanding of others who are different.

3.5 Many elements associated with the MIFC Respecting Difference programme make clear links into not only the pre-school but also the Foundation Stage curriculum (Personal Development and Mutual Understanding) and Community Relations, Equality and Diversity in Education (CRED) by addressing such themes as self-awareness, similarities and differences, relationships and feelings and emotions.

3.6 The key strengths of MIFC Respecting Difference are that it places a strong emphasis on promoting socio-emotional development as the foundation upon which diversity work can be undertaken and it looks at diversity and inclusion in all its aspects focusing on ability, race, cultural ethnic and religious identity through age appropriate programmes. The programme looks first at sameness before addressing difference. This is done using persona dolls where a character is developed which incorporates different aspects of

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<sup>3</sup> Evaluation of the Media Initiative for Children: <http://www.early-years.org/coral/research.php>

identity. The children see the points of similarity and subsequently the points of difference. The persona dolls are an ideal practical tool to encourage the development of empathy, to see a situation from another's perspective.

- 3.7 It is vital therefore that children's identity is validated in the school or pre-school setting. One of the innovative aspects of the MIFC is that it explicitly addresses issues of identity with young children rather than ignoring or attempting to neutralise identity. In this way the ethos and identity of individuals, families and communities are respected and validated while children also grow in awareness of the identity of others.
- 3.8 Practices that foster multiple identities need to avoid two pitfalls – colour-blindness and tokenism. Colour-blindness is the denial of differences, very often out of an honest concern to treat 'all children equally'. The message children get from this is to be silent about difference. Tokenism is an effort to be inclusive in a limited time-bound way such as acknowledging cultural difference but only on a particular day e.g. Chinese New Year. Such activities risk being both patronising and stigmatising, in that they overlook the complexities of children's personal histories and family cultures and ignore socio-economic and other differences.
- 3.9 An example of this reflection from evaluation was that parents from the Unionist tradition participating in the MIFC programme in the Derry/Londonderry area commented positively on the fact that the programme actively engaged in open, honest dialogue with aspects of their tradition, for example in portrayal of marching bands. They felt that this contrasted sharply with other programmes which attempted to neutralise identity: "Looking at this town, people from the British tradition do tell their children not to mention certain things because of the fear factor. I've even encountered this in integrated education where people are not encouraged to talk about things like the Orders, the parades, it's a no-go area."
- 3.10 We would further draw attention, concerning engagement and partnership working best practice with a shared focus to improve outcomes for children, to the Toybox Project<sup>4</sup> strategic partnership implemented by Early Years - the organisation for young children.
- 3.11 The Toybox Project is a rights-based outreach service development model which aims to significantly reduce social and education inequalities experienced by young Traveller children aged 0-4, maximise participation in available programmes and services and strengthen capacities, engagement and partnership working.
- 3.12 The Toybox project also was subject to an independent evaluation<sup>5</sup> which stated that in terms of service delivery, the project has been very successful in terms of engaging families and supporting the development of children through play. Furthermore the evaluation found that the project has been very successful at filling the gap, and being a catalyst, between families and statutory support services, health visitors, social workers and others in the statutory sector. We believe that this innovative project represents a successful outreach model for enhancing child development outcomes for disadvantaged groups. By using the above practical strategies, informed by a robust programme design, the principles of equality of opportunity and access to education are translated into inclusive practice in the classroom.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.early-years.org/toybox/>

<sup>5</sup> 'Toybox: Early Years development through play for Traveller children'; <http://www.early-years.org/toybox/toybox-evaluation.pdf>

#### **4. Focusing on the challenges at both rural and urban interface areas**

- 4.1 Many communities in rural regions can encounter invisible community division lines with fewer opportunities for rural interfaces and have high levels of new immigrants in the area due to employment opportunities. A greater level of detail and focus is required in these respects to promote social inclusion, equality and respecting difference in the areas of gender, religion, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation.
- 4.2 Over recent years our organisation has been involved in a range of success initiatives and projects in this area.
- 4.3 One practical example of this has been delivery of the Media Initiative for Children (MIFC) Respecting Difference Programme through the Fermanagh Shared Education Programme, to schools in Co Fermanagh to provide a vital foundation for teachers, boards of governors, parents, children and local communities to successfully engage in the provision of shared education
- 4.4 Furthermore, the organisation has been involved in the implementation of a 'Faces and Spaces' project, funded by Atlantic Philanthropies/OFMDFM's Contested Spaces programme, in schools and early years settings in five contested/interface communities in Northern Ireland including urban interfaces in Belfast and Derry and rural contested spaces in Castleterry and Newtownstewart. Such work has given us a model in designing and implementing a robust evidence-based approach with pre-school, primary, youth, parents and the wider community.
- 4.5 The project was overseen by both a regional steering group and importantly by four local partnerships which ensured that the schools, playgroups and SureStart projects had ownership of the project and that a shared community development ethos underpinned the programme.
- 4.6 This approach enabled the development of a community of learning based upon shared beliefs and approaches to inclusion to be created around the needs of all children aged between two and seven in the area. The local partnerships met on a rotational basis in each other's premises to plan the development of the programme. In addition to implementing MIFC within their own settings, the schools and pre-school groups came together for shared implementation, for shared parent workshops and for shared management committee/board of governors workshops.
- 4.7 The shared implementation was very different from a basic contact approach to shared activity. Settings came together to plan purposeful activities that engaged with the programme themes around inclusion. Together, they had opportunities to participate and reflect on issues of identity, culture, race, ethnicity and ability communicated in an age appropriate way.
- 4.8 In further reflection of the significance of such issues in and for rural communities our organisation, in partnership with the Northern Ireland Rural Development Council and the Border Counties Childhood Network implemented a Rural Respecting Difference Programme<sup>6</sup> part-funded under the PEACE programme, based on the MIFC Respecting Difference Programme.
- 4.9 This project brings another dimension to the MIFC Respecting Difference Programme as it gives Early Years an opportunity to engage with harder to

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.early-years.org/rural-rd/index.php>

reach families in rural areas through an innovative approach to inclusion and diversity related work.

- 4.10 The Rural Respecting Difference Programme is aimed at rural-based primary schools and afterschool clubs in a number of geographic areas along the border in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland across counties Armagh, Cavan, Donegal, Down, Fermanagh, Leitrim, Louth, Monaghan and Tyrone.
- 4.11 The Programme includes workshop based training delivered by Early Years Specialists; comprehensive curriculum resource packs containing persona puppets, cartoon/media messages, CD of songs and rhymes, age appropriate jigsaws and games; a Teacher/Leader Service Design Manual; ongoing on-site support from an Early Years Specialist to assist programme implementation; Support for Board of Governors or Management Committees in practical delivery of equality opportunities and anti-bullying policies and opportunities to participate in good relations workshops and develop tailored good relations plan for school or after school.
- 4.12 The Rural dimension of the MIFC Respecting Difference programme has recently been further enhanced with the addition of a new message, persona doll and associated resources addressing issues from a rural perspective.
- 4.13 The content for these was developed by a steering group consisting of representatives from the Rural Development Council, Early Years and the Border Counties Childhood Network alongside the GAA, Grand Orange Lodge of Ireland, Southern Education & Library Board, South Tyrone Empowerment Programme and South Armagh SureStart.

## **5. The role of communities in policy and decision making**

- 5.1 The considerable capacity building in the initial phases and on-going support elements of this work cannot be understated. The work of Early Years has always been underpinned by a strong community development, grass-roots mobilisation ethos focused on helping communities to assess the need for, develop and manage their own early years setting.<sup>7</sup>
- 5.2 Here we would advocate reference to many of the required principles and skill-sets as reflected in the work of a Community Development Team within our organisation which works directly with independent and voluntary organisations in the sector by building capacity and empowering local communities and services; providing start-up support and information and ongoing training, information, coaching and mentoring in governance, leadership and management to develop quality sustainable childcare services.
- 5.3 Early Years firmly endorses participative approaches whereby the active participation of relevant members and the children, families and communities and agencies they represent form an essential part of the development, evaluation and ongoing monitoring of progress on the implementation and delivery of any plans, policies or strategies. Early Years is in the process of implementing and establishing a robust focus on participatory evaluation pedagogy and practice.
- 5.4 Prior to the adoption of this approach, research on and evaluation of the work of Early Years had been carried out by external evaluators and in the main focused on quantitative research methodology. The evidence gathered has

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.early-years.org/committee-mgt/>

provided greater credibility and visibility for the work of Early Years locally and nationally. Building upon this culture of evaluation and research, Early Years now wish to develop a capacity for participatory evaluation within the organisation and sector so that Early Years staff become skilled in on-going evaluation and reflective practice and develop the ability to use this evidence to further improve practice and programmes.

5.5 The enhanced and more developed usage of more participatory approaches to evaluation will not only help us understand how our projects and programmes are improving outcomes for our youngest citizens but it will also enable us to assess our impact and embrace a more fuller and participative method of engaging with our members, customers and stakeholders in truly finding out from them the types of the information, support and materials they need and how best to provide that to them.

## **6. Supporting and enhancing the policy and decision-making process**

6.1 The effective linkage and adequate commitment to resourcing of such key strategies as Delivering Social Change, Together: Building a United Community, the Programme for Government, the Racial Equality Strategy and other policies and strategies to tackle inequalities with specific attention paid to multiple identities, multiple discrimination and inequalities experienced is strongly encouraged. To these we would further add the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Child Poverty Strategy, the Traveller Child in Education Action Framework and, given not only the considerable developmental benefits for young children but also wider employment, economic and social opportunities and benefits<sup>8</sup>, the Bright Start Child Care Strategy, presently under development.

## **7. Consideration of best practice both locally and internationally**

7.1 Early Years continues to build upon a significant knowledge base derived from practical experience and evidence-based research relating to diversity and inclusion with our youngest citizens, their carers and families and the communities in which they live.

7.2 We feel that it is vital that practice is informed by impact based evaluations of previous initiatives and through international and local best practice and partnerships. We support the development of such measures and see this as vital in the growth of future social and economic developments.

7.3 Services and projects provided by our organisation also extend to the Republic of Ireland, through HighScope and other cross-border initiatives, and beyond through a number of international partnerships and projects designed to 'export' knowledge and best practice. Some recent examples of this include:

7.3.1 An *International Network on Peace Building with Young Children*<sup>9</sup> project leading the sharing of best practice across countries experiencing conflict and post-conflict situations through the use and development of internationally applicable programmatic tools and resources and ongoing implementation of a Masters Programme on Applied Peace and Conflict Studies with early years, in partnership

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<sup>8</sup> See 'Contribution of the Voluntary, Community and Independent Early Years Sector in Northern Ireland' report; Early Years; 2011 <http://www.early-years.org/policy/state-of-sector.php>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.early-years.org/international/>

with the International Conflict Research Institute (INCORE) at the University of Ulster;

- 7.3.2 Participation in the Network for the Quality in Early Childhood Education from 0-6 years (NetQ6) , which is a cooperative network with educative and training institutions in Europe. The project aims are to compare, analyze and face the socio challenges that arise in the growth of early childhood and compile the best practices in the field to find solutions for the new realities and special needs found in a range of education systems;
  - 7.3.3 Contribution to the work of the *Partnership for Reconciliation through Early Childhood Education and Development in Europe (PRECEDE)*<sup>10</sup> which aims to support civil society influence over reconciliation process and cohesion through education in early years in the Balkan region and Europe. It will develop a sustainable Balkan Region Network of civil society organisations concerned with young children and promoting acceptance of others and respect for diversity; develop sustainable country level networks of civil society organisations promoting acceptance of others and respect for diversity through early childhood education (ECD) in the Western Balkan region countries; and will link country level networks and the PRECEDE Network of civil society organisations with the International Network for Young Children in Conflict and Post-conflict Countries;
  - 7.3.4 Participation in the Determinants to Reduce health Inequity Via Early childhood, Realising fair employment and Social protection (DRIVERS) project funded by the 7<sup>th</sup> Framework Programme to promote health equity through policy and practice in early childhood development, employment & working conditions, and income & social protection;
  - 7.3.5 Supporting the delivery of pre-school programmes within Serbia and Turkey;
  - 7.3.6 Hosting annual Service Learning Trips in partnership with Wheelock College, Boston to allow students from the College undertaking disciplines in psychology and early childhood development a unique opportunity to experience the work that is currently underway in Northern Ireland and study exemplary peace building efforts in early childhood settings;
  - 7.3.7 Hosting visits by Turkish delegates from the Ministry of Education and UNICEF to view models of good practice, visit settings and participate in round table debate; and
  - 7.3.8 Advocating, along with other members of the Early Childhood Peace Consortium<sup>11</sup>, UNICEF and the Global Movement for the Culture of Peace, for the next Millenium Development Goals and a new UN Resolution to include peace building through Early Childhood Development.
- 7.4 Such activity enables Early Years to both consolidate and extend its international relationships and to continue to work to develop practice materials, training, advocacy tools and strategies on reconciliation and peace building through early years programmes to the benefit of local and international service providers.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.tacso.org/doc/PRECEDE%20corrected.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://childstudycenter.yale.edu/international/peace/ecpc/index.aspx>



## **8. Expression of interest in the further submission of evidence**

8.1 Early Years welcomes this opportunity to submit written evidence. The organisation would also be willing to further participate in the process by giving oral evidence to the committee on anything contained in this submission.