

Other voices: the power of music for children in direct provision

By Ailbhe Kenny, Mary Immaculate College.

Opinion: a series of music workshops and interviews with children in a direct provision centre has shown how making music can foster a sense of belonging and community.

Friday afternoon and time to peel myself away from the computer to drive to the direct provision centre. The six kilometre drive takes me through Limerick city, past the tree-lined Ennis Road, blurring into rows of dark-bricked houses in Moyross and quickly onto the country roads of Co Clare. A turn at a low yellow wall winds its way to a dead end. There it is, the Knockalisheen centre, a series of one and two-storey prefabs surrounded by green fields, otherwise known as home for 200 asylum seekers.

Reports in recent years have focussed on challenges within direct provision settings relating to safety, overcrowding, privacy, food quality, exclusion, poverty and employment rights. Cultural and artistic issues have been neglected and, furthermore, the voices of the children who now seek refuge in Irish society are often unheard. One third of all asylum seekers in Ireland are children and this accounts for approximately 1,600 children in our care. Direct provision in providing shared, temporary accommodation for asylum seekers set new contexts where childhood is experienced – on average for four years.

All of the children spoke about music being important to them.

My task was to enter their musical worlds, to play music with them, sing songs and hear their voices. Through a series of music workshops and interviews, I sought to uncover how these

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children make music, project musical identities and form "communities of musical practice" within this unique setting.

10 year old Miranda from Albania highlights the need for such workshops in these centres: "music is important to me, I'm a member of music". Throughout my time there, all of the children spoke about music being important to them. Miranda's reference to the term membership is revealing, signifying how making music can foster a sense of belonging and community.

Music is also seen as a way to relax amongst the children, with Oliver (11, from Malawi) saying "I cannot explain it but when I come in from school I put on my headphones and play it real loud". Oliver loves hip-hop and rap music and strongly identifies with the music he listens and dances to when he explains "without music, I would not be me".

Alice from South Africa also has a strong musical identity at 12 years of age. She lives to sing and each time she does the other children cheer loudly and exclaim, "Go girl" and "That's why we call you mini Beyoncé!". She spoke often about intending to enter Voice of Ireland when she gets older and, despite her current insecure legal status, she is clearly looking to her future to be a voice of Ireland.

Forced migration drives those who are displaced to transform themselves in order to adapt to new cultures, communities and contexts. This transformation is often coupled with the conflicting desire to remain connected to the homeland. What came to light in Knockalisheen was that the children are constantly negotiating between these identities which often crossed race, religion and cultures due to the communal living space.

For instance, Hazeema, aged 8 from Pakistan, is an avid Bollywood movie fan and watches these films regularly with her family. She can sing all the popular songs from these films but

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she can also give a hearty rendition of Disney's "Let it Go" and eagerly shared the Irish song "Éiníní" with three of her friends at one of the workshops. It has repeatedly been shown that music can represent a powerful form of tradition as much as it can represent hybridisation and globalisation. These children in Co Clare moved with seeming ease between the inherited and the acquired.

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One of the musical worlds the children inhabit is within the primary schools they attend.

Again and again, the children make explicit connections between school music and religion:

"the school choir is religious, it is not my religion" and "they only sing in church and I don't go to the church". This is most interesting to consider in light of ongoing debates about church-state relations in education in Ireland. We clearly have much to learn about ethically-sensitive, inclusive and meaningful ways of engaging with children of asylum seekers in our schools. Music offers unique opportunities to set about this task.

My time at Knockalisheen presents an important window into how music workshops can provide spaces for belonging, a means to explore changing and complex identities and an opportunity for these children to gain control through performance and creative tasks. As an inherent part of everyday life, music often acts as an important channel for communication and expression when language fails us. Continued research and practice in this area, as well as across the arts, helps inform new directions to promote inclusion, relevance and access for migrant children's cultural participation. There is much to be gained through informed understandings of the asylum seeker child experience. We just need to listen to them.

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