

# **EXPERIENCES, BARRIERS AND IDENTITY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF A WORKSHOP TO PROMOTE UNDERSTANDING OF AND EMPATHY FOR THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE**

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**Abstract:** This article explores the development of a workshop that was designed to provide participants with a safe space in which to explore and empathise with the experiences of migrants. In this case the Irish centenary commemorations (1916-2016) provided an opportunity to explore the links between the Irish experience with emigration in order to help the participants develop empathy for present-day migrants. The development of the workshop was based on a review and mapping exercise followed by focus groups which explored themes related to the experiences faced by migrants in Limerick, barriers to integration, and the role played by identity in framing perceptions for both migrants and the host community.

**Key words:** Intercultural Education; Migration; Development; Pedagogy; Workshop; Experiences; Barriers; Identity; Sequential Design; Narrative Enquiry.

## **Introduction**

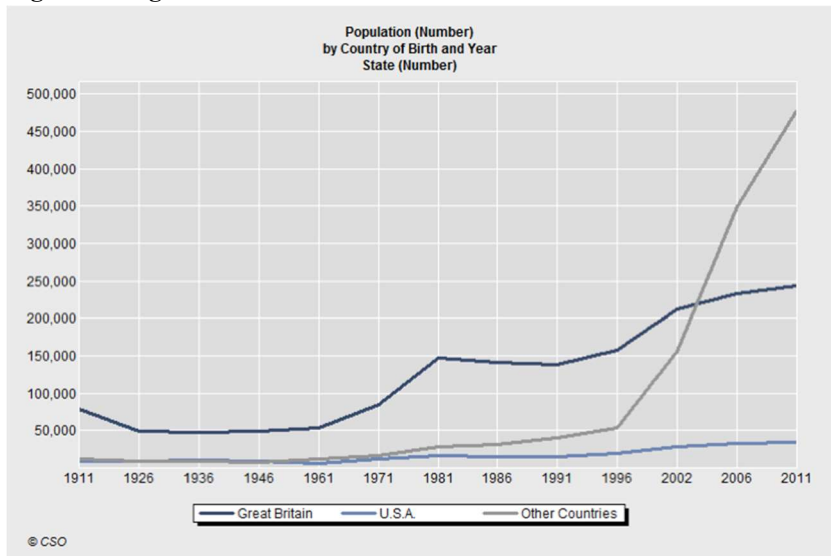
This article sets out the experiences of the authors in designing and delivering a workshop to raise awareness and empathy for the challenges faced by migrants while reflecting on the historical development of migration in Ireland. The opportunity to design a workshop was initially made possible through a call for research examining societal changes since 1916 as part of a series of tertiary level events marking one hundred years from the 1916 Easter rising in Ireland, a rebellion that represented the starting point for the establishment of the Irish Republic. A combination of quantitative mapping and qualitative focus groups provided a basis for the themes which would later be used in the workshop. The quantitative results will be outlined to form an introductory picture of the topic, then the overall methodology will be explained. This will be followed by an overview of the results from the

qualitative phase of the research. Finally, the article will explore how the workshop was designed and outline feedback from the workshop participants.

### **Quantitative look at migration in Ireland over one hundred years**

Phase one set out to capture a quantitative understanding of the period from 1916-2016. The timeframe revolved around the centenary following the 1916 Easter Rising, a rebellion against British rule in Ireland, which became a focus of national reflection, discussion and commemoration. However, data from 1911-2011 was utilised as this time-frame provided the closest census data to the centenary years. In addition, the quantitative review of migration in Ireland revealed that the measurement of emigration and immigration data does not always provide sufficient information to understand migration patterns (Gilmartin, 2012). Furthermore, examining historical changes in Irish migration is complicated by the fact that data collection has changed over time which is reflected in the changing categories of migrants. Nonetheless, this study has confirmed that migration in Ireland evolved over the one hundred year period to reflect a shift in migration flows resulting from political, economic and technological changes (Fitzgerald, 2016). Awareness of the historical record can provide a framework for more recent discussions regarding migration which tend to be framed around the arrival of migrants as a result of economic growth during the Celtic Tiger era - a period of rapid growth driven largely by inward investment from transnational corporations in the period 1995-2005 - and the expansion of the European Union (EU) (Gilmartin and White, 2008). The one hundred year review also provided an opportunity to examine Irish migration from a historical perspective thereby providing a framework for the focus groups and workshops.

**Figure 1. Migration in Ireland 1911 – 2011**



(Central Statistics Office [CSO], 2016).

In 1911, less than one per cent of the Irish population was born outside of Ireland, however, by 2011 this proportion had increased strongly to 11.2 per cent illustrating the importance of inward migration in recent times (CSO, 2016). This change relates to developments in modes of travel amplified by economic draws during the Celtic Tiger era and membership of the EU (Fanning, 2016). A focus more specifically on the city and county of Limerick gives a further insight into the recent migration trends. The 2011 census indicates that the migrant population of Limerick city represents 12.1 per cent (6,847 persons) of the city's total population (CSO, 2011). Persons of Polish nationality represent the largest minority group in Limerick city, comprising 4.5 per cent (2,572 persons) of the city's total population.

**Figure 2. Persons usually resident by place of birth and nationality in Limerick City**

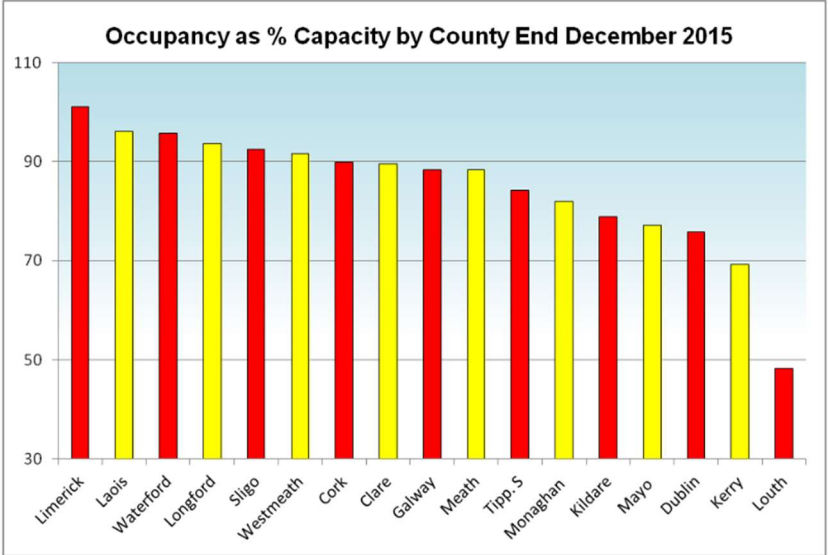
<b>Location</b>	<b>Birthplace</b>	<b>Nationality</b>
<b>Ireland</b>	47,943	48,859
<b>UK</b>	2,137	685
<b>Poland</b>	2,393	2,572
<b>Lithuania</b>	284	301
<b>Other EU 27</b>	1,386	1,414
<b>Rest of World</b>	2,378	1,875
<b>Not stated</b>	0	815
<b>Total</b>	56,521	56,521

(CSO Census, 2011).

Another significant indicator of cultural diversity in a region is language (Amit and Bar-Lev, 2015). This is evident in both the quantitative statistics on migration in Limerick and also came across strongly during the focus groups as a barrier to integration. The 2011 census reveals that a significant proportion of people living in Limerick city, 12.5 per cent (7,063 persons) speak languages other than English and Irish. The most widely spoken language in Limerick city other than English or Irish is Polish, with 2,450 speakers representing 4.3 per cent of the city’s population. A further 11,388 speakers of foreign languages reside in the county, bringing the total number of foreign language speakers to 18,451 persons. In the focus groups language was identified as a barrier to integration for participants who spoke of needing to adapt their language and accent in order to ‘fit-in’ in Irish society. The figures above may reflect this need to adopt spoken English as a tool to integrate into Irish society.

A review of migration in Ireland also highlights the role played by residential centres for asylum seekers, known in Ireland as Direct Provision centres, in creating and maintaining spatial and psychological barriers to integration (Smith, 2014). The impact of these centres is evident in Limerick and the surrounding area where approximately 400 asylum seekers live in state-sponsored accommodation centres (Reception Integration Agency, 2017). While statistically the number of Direct Provision residents is low relative to Polish residents, the asylum seeking population is highly visible due to media attention around the issue of asylum seeking and the location of the Direct Provision centres close to the city centre. As demonstrated in Figure 3, Limerick has the highest occupancy in Direct Provision as percentage of capacity of the centres.

**Figure 3. Occupancy in Direct Provision Centres as percentage Capacity**



(Reception Integration Agency, 2015).

In addition to the quantitative data which highlights the changes in population based on migration the historical narrative regarding migration

and the Irish identity provides further insight for workshop development. Outside of the one hundred year period being examined by this study it is important to note that emigrants also experienced vilification and were placed within the category of unwanted migrants following the Great Irish Famine – a period of mass emigration from Ireland from 1845-52 (Ross, 2003). These experiences of vilification which took place largely in the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK) through images in the press and media stories is reminiscent of some current media stereotyping of a ‘migrant’ as someone unable to integrate.

Some recent media portrayals of migrants in Ireland are tinged with a sense of foreboding and threat (Devereux, Breen and Haynes, 2006). This can be seen in recent local media coverage such as the front page headline for the *Limerick Post* (2016): ‘Limerick asylum centre claims extremists have infiltrated the system’. This sense of threat is also evident in the Irish national media such as a recent *Irish Independent* article stating that the Irish government was ‘Planning to grant asylum to 20,000 un-vetted migrants’ (Ryan, 2016).

A review of the quantitative data and current literature within Limerick along with material produced by local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and the Limerick Integration Working Group points to a common set of themes which relate to the migrant experience in Limerick (Doras Luimní, 2013; Limerick Integration Working Group 2010, 2013). The central themes which emerge are related to the perceived impact of migration on the changing population and the experiences of migrants integrating into Irish society (Feldman et al, 2008). These experiences include the perception that is often propagated by sections of the media that migration is a threat posed to the Irish worker who fears the migrant ‘taking our jobs’ or ‘threatening our way of life’ (Cross and Turner, 2006). In addition, migrant representative organisations, NGOs and the Irish government have documented the perceived barriers to integration experienced by migrants (Gilmartin, 2012; Limerick Integration Working Group, 2013). Migrants regularly face a crisis of identity where their

allegiance and identity lie somewhere between the home they left behind and their new community (Ralph and Staeheli, 2011). The recognition of the ‘themes’ of experiences, barriers and identity provided a framework for the focus groups and workshop discussed below.

## **Methodology**

While the aim of this research was the development of a workshop, the initial research which informed the workshop took the form of an ‘Explanatory Sequential Design’ (Creswell and Plano Clarke, 2011) involving two phases, beginning with a mapping exercise using online census data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO). This largely quantitative phase was followed by a qualitative exploration of the topic in a local context. During phase one, census figures from 1911-2011 and specialist census data produced for the aforementioned centenary following the Easter Rising by the CSO were examined to identify changing trends in place of birth of the Irish population.

Qualitative data was then collected during phase two of the research to enable the researchers to give context and a human perspective to the mapping. The use of a second qualitative phase to further explore initial quantitative results is advocated by Creswell et al (2003). This second phase was undertaken to capture the experiences of individuals who have been affected by migration in Limerick. Dóchas (2006: 4) maintains that when teaching or learning about situations it is essential to ‘ensure those whose situation is being represented have the opportunity to communicate their stories themselves’. Therefore, it was of paramount importance that when exploring the effects of migration, the voices of those directly affected by migration were listened to.

Focus group interviews were used to collect these stories and were guided by narrative methodologies (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry methodologies are founded on the principal of mutual respect between the researcher and the participants, and acknowledge that participants in a study bring important knowledge and expertise with them (Stuhlmiller, 2001). Indeed, Patton (2002) posits that narrative analysis

champions the story itself; the interviewees' own life experiences. The researchers were firmly positioned toward the learners in this way.

In order to capture a representative sample of Limerick, the focus group included participants from both minority communities, including economic immigrants; refugees; asylum seekers and second generation immigrants, and also Irish participants with experience of emigration. Irish participants represented only two of ten participants. Participants for the focus groups were identified through a local NGO, Doras Luimní, which supports and promotes migrants' rights. Additionally, economic immigrants and Irish participants were identified through the personal networks of the researchers. Diversity focused group interviews are outlined by Patton (2015) as an opportunity to bring together people with diverse perspectives and experiences regarding a mutual issue to allow the interviewer to compare and contrast their perspectives as they interact. Focus groups were used in this instance to allow participants to interact with and react to opinions and experiences different from their own. Two focus groups took place with a duration of between 60 and 90 minutes. The aim of the focus groups was not to generate generalisable data pertaining to migration, but rather to capture the richness of real-life stories of people in Limerick affected by migration.

Both focus groups began with a simple introductory activity which allowed participants to introduce their own culture and personality to the group. Following this activity, the participants were made aware that the focus group would explore themes of experiences of migration, barriers to integration and their perceptions of the link between identity and migration. From here, participants were given the opportunity to speak about the links between the themes and their own lives. Following the focus groups, the sessions were transcribed and a thematic analysis of the interviews allowed further themes and patterns to emerge which permitted findings to be extrapolated for the workshop. Transcripts from audio recordings made of both focus groups were examined for cultural narratives while paying close attention to the stories which were treated as factually correct in keeping with what Silverman (2005: 154) outlines as the researcher 'in pursuit of a



different, “narrated” reality in which the “situated”, or locally produced, nature of accounts is to the fore’.

### **Focus group findings**

Overall the focus groups highlighted the fragility of social identity and the key importance of intergroup relationships for people in a new country or setting. The findings from the focus groups have been grouped under the three themes which emerged from the quantitative work.

#### Experiences of migration

From the outset of this research project, both researchers began with knowledge of racism and discrimination experienced by many immigrants in Ireland and expected to hear stories of struggle and even resentment (ENAR, 2016; Doras Luimní, 2013). However, a theme which ran throughout multiple participants’ personal narratives of their experiences of living in Ireland was their love of the country. In particular, one participant spoke about how he came to Ireland to earn money during the ‘Celtic Tiger’ era but when the recession hit he returned home, only to find that he missed Ireland and has now returned to make Ireland his long term home:

“during my living in Ireland I was decided I would actually like to stay here for longer or even for my life... when I was living here for 2/3 years, I went back to my country and I would say Ireland is a much more friendly country...when I moved to [home country] I feel the difference”.

Irish participants in the focus groups also spoke about their pleasure at returning home after living in other countries, or their strongly held desire to remain in Ireland at a time when large numbers of Irish people are emigrating to other countries to find work.

Despite the knowledge that high levels of discrimination exist in Ireland (ENAR, 2016), these narratives must be treated as factually correct statements reflective of these participants’ true experiences of living in Limerick. This highlights a tension between quantitative reports of racism

(Ibid) and the lived reality of people actively choosing to make Ireland their home. In contrast to participants' self-professed strong appreciation for life in Ireland, many of the same participants spoke about experiencing contrasting attitudes from Irish people dependent on their country of origin. Media headlines, literature (Yarris and Casteñeda, 2015) and participants' personal stories suggest that there is a widely-accepted cultural narrative regarding 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' countries of origin for immigrants.

One woman, who is an Irish citizen and of African birth reported having been asked 'where did you get our passport?' highlighting that people felt she did not have the right to an Irish passport due to her racial and cultural background. This type of experience is broadly reflective of the trend toward racialised differences in Ireland where those who appear different or speak with a different accent are perceived to be not truly 'Irish' (Lentin and McVeigh, 2006). In contrast to this, other participants who were white reported being mistaken as Irish on a number of occasions. When these participants corrected people and told them their country of origin, they were often told it was of no consequence, that their country of origin was accepted easily in Ireland.

The contrast between these two narratives suggests that there may be a fragmented approach to immigrants within Irish society. Although many migrants enjoy living in Ireland, they still experience resistance from members of Irish society. Indeed, Devine (2013; 284) posits that migrants become valued (or not) for the contribution they can make to the country rather than their personal value. Indeed, he highlights a contrast between 'high-end' migrants who add to the talent pool and contribute to economic growth of the country in comparison to children who 'become potential liabilities and "risk" when their performance lowers that of the country nationally in comparative PISA scores'.

### Barriers to integration

When asked to speak about barriers they experienced as migrants, many participants spoke about the difficulties they experienced due to their

language use and accents. Many participants described changing their accent depending on who they were speaking to, or the colloquialisms which they use in their home country but which they consciously remove from conversations in Ireland. This theme speaks strongly to the feeling of discrimination experienced by many immigrants in Ireland who do not feel as though they can be themselves but must carve a new identity to present to Irish people.

One participant spoke extensively about the impact that this social pressure had on her life and the lengths she had gone to in order to feel a sense of belonging, stating that ‘I cut all Polish people out of my life, not because they didn't speak good English, I just did not want to speak Polish’. This participant consciously and systematically attempted to remove a part of her own identity in an attempt to create a connection with Irish society. Significantly this participant spoke Polish, the third most widely spoken language in Limerick after English and Irish, yet she still felt pressure to hide this part of her identity. We can suggest from this narrative that immigrants begin to notice certain terms and conditions they must meet in order to live and work and fully participate in Irish society.

Another recurring discussion was about Direct Provision for asylum seekers and the role this system played in building barriers between communities. A number of participants had personal experiences of living in Direct Provision and cited this system as a major barrier to their integration into Irish society. Due to the strict rules enforced on asylum seekers in Direct Provision, such as the inability to work or to study full time. In addition to minimal financial support, participants noted that integration into Irish society was almost impossible while living within the system due to the limited opportunities for meaningful engagement.

#### Role of identity for migrants

In addition to the confusion of experiencing both discrimination and welcome as a migrant, many participants described feeling as though they also had a split identity, never feeling fully Irish or fully a member of their

home country. One woman, who has been living in Ireland for a significant length of time outlined what it felt like for her:

“I would love to say I’m African for my identity but then that gets a bit more confusing because I’m Cameroonian and then ... because I have spent 13 years in Ireland and in Limerick, I would love to say I’m from Limerick but that in itself is very confusing, so I am neither here nor there.... I go back to Cameroon and I can’t fit in...The different stages of identity are so confusing for some of us immigrants”.

This feeling of confusion could be as a result of the participants’ perceptions of the extent to which they needed to alter their own identity in order to feel accepted in Ireland, as evidenced by their accounts in relation to language and accent. Alternatively, this may be explained by a sense of belonging to two different communities which do not appear to be compatible. Indeed, Irish participants who had returned to Ireland after a period living abroad described experiencing a similar sensation in other countries where they were sometimes the only Irish person surrounded by people who had only a stereotypical perception of what it means to be Irish.

The culturally defined narratives in these themes paint a picture of Limerick as a place where non-Irish cultures are welcomed, but only on certain terms, highlighting a resistance to personal change to accommodate others. This juxtaposition experienced by immigrants has led to a confusion of identity for many who are not sure where they belong or the extent to which they are willing to alter their own identity in order to fit in. We can suggest from these findings that although people in Limerick appear welcoming, there is a resistance to celebrating diversity which may be due to a lack of knowledge and understanding of other cultures and of specific issues faced by immigrants. Indeed, de Chickera et al (2016: 192) describe the dichotomy between those who view migration as ‘a universal, normal and positive reality with significant pluses for international development’ and those who view inward migration as ‘a negative trend, one that threatens

economic and political stability and established “ways of life”. This dichotomy of approaches to migrants was also experienced in Limerick by focus group participants.

## **Workshop**

Using the themes from the first stage of the research along with information from the focus groups, a workshop was developed to explore some of the changes happening in Limerick as a result of migration. The workshop was designed with the aim of creating a safe, non-judgmental space to teach about issues relating to migrant rights in Ireland. Although it was designed as a formula which could be adapted to teach about multiple issues relating to migration depending on the focus taken, the workshop being discussed here focused on Direct Provision and the process of seeking asylum in Ireland. This focus was taken as it represents a theme which was highlighted as a barrier to integration in both focus groups and literature. Everyday objects were used in the workshop to critically engage its participants in a manner similar to what Kitching (2011) described as an opportunity for teachers and students to deconstruct desirable and undesirable subjectivities by examining everyday, context-bound practices of identity.

The workshop had several intended outcomes for participants. These included the intention that participants would develop an awareness and understanding of issues relating to migrant rights; develop empathy with people living in Direct Provision in Ireland; challenge personally held stereotypes in relation to refugees and asylum seekers; analyse the use of language to describe people; and feel comfortable to ask questions relating to the issues covered. The teaching profession was used as a target audience due to the ‘ripple effect’ of teaching. The researchers felt that by encouraging and providing a space for teachers to engage with issues relating to migration, this would have a long term impact on the way society in general approaches these issues (Bryan, 2009).

The structured workshop follows three phases which include discovery and drawing conclusions; meeting the owner of the bag; and

reflection. During the first phase a bag is placed in the centre of a room and people are invited to remove and examine items from the bag and to use these items to begin to form a picture of the person who owns the bag. When participants have examined all the contents in the bag, the facilitator clarifies their chosen description of the owner using notes taken.

Phase two allows for participants to meet the owner of the bag, who is introduced through video. For this workshop a video was shown of a woman who lives in a Direct Provision centre in Limerick with her three children. On the video the woman talks about her personal experiences of being a migrant and the process of seeking asylum in Ireland through the themes of experiences, barriers and identity. The items from the bag are also shown and explained on the video.

The final reflection phase provides participants with space to voice their reactions and to ask any questions they have about the topic or specific issues raised by the video. The facilitator also highlights the language used during the discovery phase when participants were attempting to formulate a picture of the owner of the bag. At this stage, the facilitator can highlight any inappropriate language used. To conclude, the facilitator will draw comparisons between assumptions we make daily and stereotypes that we hold about entire groups of people, and offer conclusions on the links between assumptions, stereotypes and discriminatory actions.

At the time of writing this article, the workshop has been delivered three times including being piloted at the National SPHE (Social, Personal and Health Education) Conference with people working in different branches of the Irish education sector. The workshop has also been run as a training session for Amnesty International's 'Rights Sparks' workshop series (2017) with a group of primary school teachers. Thirdly, the workshop was run with a group of student teachers at Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. Although the workshop has been successfully delivered each time, differences in group dynamics in each case contributed to the flow of the workshop, where sometimes it ran smoothly with little need for intervention

and at other times required the facilitator to use prompt questions throughout the discovery phase.

At the SPHE conference some participants were able to discern the identity of the owner of the bag quite early on while others who were unfamiliar with Direct Provision were unsure. This created interesting dialogue between participants regarding their perceptions of refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland. For example, the inclusion of flyers for part time education courses and business cards from university lecturers led some participants to surmise that the owner of the bag was a student while others believed that the person could not have been accessing education as an asylum seeker. Once the video had been played which identified the owner of the bag and shed some light on the asylum seeking process in Ireland, the participants who had been unsure during the discovery phase asked many questions and spoke both of their empathy for people going through the process and their desire to involve themselves personally in action and volunteer work relating to Direct Provision.

During the session with the primary school teachers there was a clear consensus early on from all participants that the owner of the bag was an asylum seeker. However, when it came to discussing the finer details of the person's character this group made some false assumptions. In the bag there was a rubber bangle for the Samaritans, an organisation working on mental health issues with whom the owner of the bag volunteers using her own training in mental health care. The group, however, came to the conclusion that because they knew the person was an asylum seeker the person must have been accessing the services of the Samaritans for her own mental health needs. This group was confident in its idea of who an asylum seeker was and what their life must be like. During the reflection portion of the workshop, many participants commented on the many similarities between their own lives and that of the owner of the bag and how their common humanity had become lost in the picture they had of who an asylum seeker must be.

Working with student teachers posed unique challenges which were not present when working with the other two groups. The student teachers were initially uninterested in the bag and its contents unlike the other groups who had been fascinated from the outset. Where the first two groups carefully picked over every item in the bag the student teachers glanced over many items without examining them in any detail. The students also struggled to formulate workable suggestions as to who might have owned the bag. However, once the video was played the students' disinterest quickly turned to curiosity and to empathy. The students asked many questions on the realities of Direct Provision in Ireland and about the owner of the bag as a person. As with the group of teachers, the students also began to make links between their own lives and the life of the woman in the video. In all three cases the video helped to deepen participants' engagement with the issues. Although participants displayed differing levels of curiosity at the discovery phase, the video personalised the issue for all participants who were able to identify similarities between their own experiences and those being shared through the video.

Due to the positive feedback received following the three workshops, it would appear that the workshop met its aims. One participant outlined that 'the human element helps to develop a real sense of empathy and understanding of the realities' while many more participants indicated, both in written and verbal feedback, that they had learned a lot of new information about a topic they believed they were already familiar with. Participants in all three workshops asked large numbers of questions at the conclusion of the video which was a testament to the success of the safe space created through exploring a controversial issue in a non-threatening way. As this particular workshop has been run successfully three times, the researchers are now confident that it can be adapted to explore other issues of migration identified through focus groups. Future iterations of the workshop are likely to look at the life of someone who has migrated for economic reasons. This focus would allow the researchers to focus on language and accent as well as the concept of 'acceptable' and 'unacceptable' countries of origin for migrants; both of these themes emerged strongly from the focus



group interviews. Teachers who took part in the workshop indicated that they intended to create a workshop based on a child's experience of migration in order to use this workshop formula with their own class groups.

## **Conclusion**

This article has explored three core themes of experiences, barriers and identity which were used to frame research and a workshop designed to enhance our understanding of the topic of migration in Ireland. Although the categories of migrants have changed since 1916 the experiences of those migrants remains similar in regard to the emotional ties with their home country and the feeling of having an identity split between two locations. This continuity of experience is in contrast to the changing landscape through which migration occurs.

As was reflected throughout the research the overall portrayal and narrative regarding a 'migrant' has a direct impact on migrants themselves. The workshop provides a space for addressing some of these key themes in a safe environment. Although the topic of migration can often be a difficult one for people to relate to without their own experience, the focus on a real life individual provides a space for engaging on a more personal level with a topic which is often portrayed in the media as a 'migrant' or 'refugee' crisis.

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