



# Music at the Margins: Research Briefing

Exploring the Musical Lives of Children  
Living under Direct Provision

Dr Ailbhe Kenny



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This research briefing provides a summary of a participatory music research project with children of asylum seekers living in direct provision in the Mid-West of Ireland. The project explores the musical lives of children living in direct provision in order to inform data-driven policy and programmatic decisions. The project is funded by the Irish Research Council (IRC) and involves a key university-community partnership between Mary Immaculate College and Doras Luimní.

### Who is this research about?

An asylum seeker, as distinct from a refugee, is a person who has fled their country of origin in order to seek asylum in another country. There have been increasing concerns about the demand for asylum seeking across Europe which has now reached a record 1.3 million. This has brought about many challenges in Ireland including the controversial state-funded direct provision system. Set up in the year 2000, this system provides asylum seekers with full board, accommodation and a nominal weekly allowance while they wait for their refugee applications to be processed. One third of all asylum seekers living in direct provision are children which accounts for approximately 1,600 children in Ireland. The research project was based at one of these direct provision centres, Knockalisheen, in County Clare.

### Why do this research?

Direct provision in providing shared, communal, temporary accommodation for asylum seekers sets new contexts where music is experienced for children. This study rests within a broader national and international context of children living within asylum seeking systems.

It is well established that migrants undergo a constant renegotiation of cultural meanings and norms as they leave one country to reside in another. People carry with them traditions, knowledge, language, beliefs, values, stories and songs which then morph, mix and shape into new forms of cultural

expression in different contexts. This is recognised as a complex and fluid process where music can often be one means of mediating these multiple cultural influences. Music can represent a powerful form of cultural maintenance and tradition as much as it can represent hybridisation and globalisation. It can also act as a means to define, negotiate and project identity.

Reports in recent years have focussed on challenges within direct provision settings relating to safety, overcrowding, privacy, food quality, exclusion, poverty and social inclusion. Research on cultural and artistic issues has been neglected. Furthermore, the voices of the *children* who now seek refuge in Irish society are often unheard. For asylum seekers in temporary accommodation settings, new 'musical worlds' are also new social worlds. The research project uncovers how these children participate musically, project musical identities and form 'communities of musical practice' (Kenny, 2016) within this unique setting. The children's music workshops within the direct provision centre aimed to capture these complexities.

### Research aims

Inform policy and practice to ensure inclusion, relevance and access for migrant children's arts and cultural participation.

Contribute new perspectives and knowledge on child migrant experiences of music within asylum seeking systems

Present participatory, collaborative and ethically sensitive approaches to researching the lives of children of asylum seekers

Gain insight and understanding into the quality of life impact of musical participation for children living within direct provision

Highlight the participatory role children can play in research and challenge the oft-existing power imbalances within research

Build capacity for future research collaborations, project development and extended networks within this important area of work

### Who did this research?

Dr Ailbhe Kenny, Lecturer in Music Education, Mary Immaculate College, University of Limerick. The project was supported by an IRC New Foundations Award.



## The project

The music workshops were carried out between April and June 2016. A qualitative case study approach was taken to gain in-depth insights. Participatory approaches prioritised the children's voices in the research. Institutional ethical clearance was granted. Alias names are given to the children in this briefing document to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

- Knockalisheen direct provision centre, County Clare, Ireland
- 6 participatory music workshops
- Researcher as music facilitator
- 11 children aged between 7-12 years
- Children's Nationalities: Albania (1), Georgia (1), Malawi (2), Pakistan (2), South Africa (3), Sudan (2)
- Children living in direct provision 2-7 years approximately
- Data: 6 video-recorded workshops, 3 child focus group interviews, participant observation and researcher reflective log

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*The drive to the direct provision centre was an odd one. I pass by the richest part of Limerick city and then one of the poorest to get there... The road continues to narrow as you leave the city and all of a sudden it feels like you are in the countryside. There is a lot of dumping along the country road and there are no footpaths...I drive in a long road which at one point bears a sign 'Welcome to Knockalisheen'. I then come to a road barrier and a man comes out from the security hut to get me to sign in and explain my reason for being there. I am let through and park. In front of me are a series of prefabricated buildings, some single story and others double, surrounded by green fields. I enter the reception area... There is a hatch in the wall to speak to someone but no one is there. Above it is a large wall mural of green shamrocks that reads 'Fáilte'<sup>1</sup>. (Researcher Reflective log 1)*

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## Key findings

- Music was an important part of the children's lives and many projected strong musical identities.

*'Without music, I would not be me...I cannot explain it but when I come in from school I put on my headphones and play it real loud'. (Oliver)*

*'If I didn't know how to sing then like I wouldn't have anything to do'. (Alice)*

- Music acted as a form of relaxation and emotional release for the children. *'It relaxes me, like you don't need to do anything...you can just sit down and listen'. (Waleed)*

- Music created a sense of belonging for the children especially when performing with friends.

*'Music is important to me, I'm a member of music'. (Miranda)*

- All of the children claimed popular music as their genre preference with hip-hop and rap music cited regularly.

- All of the children were exposed to songs and music from their homelands through their families. This was very much kept within the family environment however.

*'It's mostly my brothers who listen to them...I like them too...I just listen to them too'. (Waleed)*

*'I sing with my friends English songs...my friends don't know my language'. (Hazeema)*

- Dancing was intertwined with a love of music. The children consistently danced when they sang or listened to music in the workshops.

*'Music is important to me because I won't be able to dance without any music...music is like nice in my body, I feel it.' (Carrie)*

- Music was listened to regularly with family and friends through multiple media sources, namely on the television, on computers, tablets and phones. The Internet, and in particular YouTube, was the most significant access point for music listening.

- Children's parties at the centre (such as birthdays) were cross-cultural and cross-national. The parties always involved music and dancing moving between both the traditional and the new, the inherited and the acquired.

*'It's like songs we all know and sometimes we play like my country songs or English or both'. (Waleed)*

- The connection between school music and religion came up regularly for the children.

*'The school choir is religious, it is not my religion'. (Miranda)*

*'They only sing in church and I don't go to the church'. (Alice)*

<sup>1</sup> 'Fáilte' is the Irish language word for 'welcome'.



## Thoughts for the future

The study has shown that musical participation within asylum seeker temporary accommodation settings can provide children with the following:

- A means to improve their quality of life within their temporary living arrangements.
- A potential space for ‘belonging’, social inclusion and integration.
- Access to musical opportunities, facilitation and tuition.
- A site for exploring, negotiating and projecting their multiple and complex identities.
- An opportunity to gain agency and control through musical choices, leadership opportunities, performance and creative challenges.
- Potential to expand understandings and foster respect for multiple and diverse musical cultures.
- A source of emotional support, stress release and form of resilience in a positive environment.
- A site to respond to the interrelatedness of music and movement as a form of embodied non-verbal communication.
- Membership within new socio-musical spaces or ‘communities of musical practice’.

## Extra reading

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