

Case Study for Gertrude

This piece details aspects of my involvement in migration research, support and activism over the past number of years. As an academic involved in social analysis, I consider it imperative that we challenge normalised dichotomies that separate the academic from the practice of our societies. As sociologists/social scientist our areas of interest are that of society, of people and the social forms in which we live and die. Our academic interests in order to speak to social dynamics, trends, influences and so on are necessarily embedded in the realities of the lives and contexts in which people live out their lives.

For myself, as a woman, a family member with all the associations, visibility and invisibility that goes with those different roles, have always pondered the categorisations we place on ourselves and are placed on us. None of the categorisations with which I have been allocated: daughter, sister, cousin, friend, girlfriend, aunt, wife, mother, daughter in law, sister in law, student, secretary, academic, grand-aunt ... can fully capture what I am and what I have to offer. Furthermore, the public prioritisation and simultaneous invisibilising of one of these categories over the other I have always resisted.

My work then spans the range of my interests and experiences; personal, economic, social, cultural and academic. Below I offer a view of the range of activities in which I have been involved in the area of migration over the past several years. While this is not a comprehensive list, it nevertheless gives an insight into how the academic/activist/personal comes together in our work and lives.

On returning from an overseas volunteer position in East Africa in 1996, I came back to an increasingly diverse Irish society. However, within this society prejudices and biases that divided populations up to now were being expressed more openly and rather viciously, in my opinion, particularly against an emerging population coming to Ireland looking for international protection. The Ireland of Welcomes and overseas charity was not the 'welcome on the mat' such people found - they were not embodiment of the 'Timothy or Pat' as expressed in the popular lyric of my childhood. Rather, suspicion and unkindness characterised media reports that warned of 'asylum seekers taking our women'. Women themselves were discussed at length and targeted as the reason behind stress on our maternity services - apparently staking out their journey to Ireland in order to avail themselves of our services and arriving into the country and going straight to our hospitals. Another example of the vilification of women and concerted monitoring of our reproductive lives, should we need one.

My involvement in challenging such directions in discourse and perspectives located itself in Comhlamh and in the CARASI project whereby we developed anti-racist training, offering it to organisations and groups locally. It also involved the establishment, along with others, of Ethical Development Action, after Comhlamh closed its offices in Cork. In EDI we worked to fill the community Development Education void left locally, organising conferences, training sessions, workshops, seminars and short courses. During this time our involvement with the asylum seeking community deepened and widened and as the role of EDI began to become less - others were now taking on similar activities and our volunteers moving on - we focused more on deportation and challenging it. So Anti Deportation Ireland ([ADI](#)) was formed, with 3 key aims: an end to deportation, full access to employment and education and end to Direct Provision. My work with Anti-Deportation continues and, as I keep saying to myself and to others, we must have hope and we must keep challenging.

While I had been working in UCC for several years, in the Department of Sociology, with Women's Studies and the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education, I started working fulltime at the now School of Applied Social Studies in 2006. Here I joined the BA Early Years and Childhood Studies (BAEYCS) team. In a short time it became obvious to me that our work, encompassing diverse childhoods had global dimensions. With my colleagues, we organised a conference on Early Childhood in Developing World Contexts Global Childhoods Conference in 2011 with funding from the College of Arts, Celtic Studies and Social Sciences and Irish Aid. Inputs from a wide range of academics and practitioners informed the conference, and we published proceedings later with Peter Lang in [Early Childhoods in the Global South](#).

By now my colleagues and I had carried out research that looked at migrant, and especially, asylum seeker children's transitions in education. As our first piece of research with this group we approached our work cautiously and interviewed mothers on their perceptions and experiences of supporting their children as they accessed, participated in and progressed in education. Relationships of trust built through activism were critically important and these derived from that activism and support. Our paper in this volume and presented at the conference looked at the transitions that significantly impacted and contextualised children's educational experiences and those of their mothers in supporting them. The dark veil of Direct Provision loomed everywhere and impacted on all aspects of the children's education and the efforts their mothers made to ensure their rights to education was fully realised. It's realities were not understood by the system or those working within it. The academic work entailed in the research and its analysis only furthered my concern and motivation to make

visible the travesty of childhoods lived in Direct Provision; something that we cannot be forgiven for allowing.

Meanwhile in my work with EDI, our last conference focused on Direct Provision specifically. We held this conference in City Hall Cork on November 2011, again involving a broad range of speakers and inputs from individuals and organisations.

Further research, again with my colleagues in the BAEYCS focused on the [Safe Care for Trafficked Children](#), this time funded by the Children's Rights Alliance and published in 2012. At the time, hostels that had been used to house separated migrant children, which had been in use from the early 2000s had closed. Under the [Equity of Care](#) Policy, separated migrant children were now to be have the same standard of care as other children in care. In the decade of the 2000, 509 separated migrant children had gone missing and there were serious concerns that some of these children were trafficked. Some of these children have never been found. Our report, drawing on interviews with a wide range of organisations involved in the care of separated migrant children pointed to some of the positives of this move to more equitable care and to some of the limitations as well continuing problems faced.

Throughout, my activist and support work continues. With fellow volunteers at EDI, we organised social trips for children and families living in Direct Provision centres locally in Cork. A trip to the beach in West Cork in ??? was a huge success - the weather even turned out and everyone enjoyed the sea, a barbeque, music and a lot of fun. Christmas parties for children were also part of these outings where we came together and had festive afternoons in venues across the city like The Camden Palace, The Circus ???. These also involved 'sharing kitchens' elements where we matched people with working kitchens with, generally women, living in Direct Provision, who then came together to prepare food for the events. Careful driving through traffic and balancing of pots and pans ensured the food arrived at the venues safely and everyone involved enjoyed the cooking banter. As EDI moved on this work morphed itself into the now UCC Staff, Students and Friends Christmas and Easter Parties that is becoming a tradition embedded in our annual schedules at UCC.

The Glucksman initiated a series of multi-media workshops with children living in Direct Provision in 2015. This followed an email that Mike FitzGibbon circulated to staff as part of our Christmas party fundraising and these workshops have gone on to make UCC home for children across the Direct Provision centres locally. My role, along with others and our faithful dog, Noah, was to collect and bring the children to the university, ensure they got to the Glucksman and returned back to the centres safely. In the process I made friends with the children, their parents and companions, as

well as others I met at the centres as I was coming and going. These friends are now treasured and close friends of mine whose companionship and friendship will continue throughout our lives. The children, having opportunities to express themselves and develop their creative skills, of course, won awards and I was privileged to accompany them on two occasions to view their award winning films at the Youghal Film Festival.

In 2016 as conditions were becoming intolerable in Direct Provision Centres, residents started to take actions. Strikes were organised in centres in Millstreet and in Kinsale Road, Cork. ADI offered support where we could as did local businesses. Close monitoring of residents' movements, poor quality food, inflexible and invasive house rules as well as very poor accommodation generally were among the reasons for these strikes. As ADI volunteers we helped to validate and support the residents as they made their demands clear.

In 2018, with a research consortium headed by Comillas University, Madrid, we were successful in getting H2020 funding. This was for a research project on mapping migrant children's integration in education, [IMMERSE](#). Another overnight success - this was, though, the third time we had come together with Comillas to apply for funding, as we had developed other proposals in the previous two years.

This project has now been ongoing since December 2018 with research being carried out in 6 European countries: Ireland, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Italy and Spain. It involves several research strands: qualitative, quantitative, best practice identification and analysis and the aim is that we get a deep understanding of what the realities are for migrant children's access to and participation in education is across the EU. COVID has delayed our work as well as adding complexity, as restrictions have impacted on our access to schools and so on, but we are now on track to carry out the main bulk of the quantitative research from this September.

A key part of this research is ensuring the voices of children are central and we have a Children and Young Person's Advisory Group, who help direct and embed what we are doing in children's realities. This Advisory Group is based in Cork and is working with the UCC team. Again, assembling this group drew on activist and support work and the relationships build up over time and which continue.

In the meantime an idea that had been bubbling for some time finally came to fruition with the publication of [Direct Provision : Asylum, the Academy and Activism](#) in June 2020. While Mike FitzGibbon and I edited this publication, over 40 people contributed to it, telling of their experiences of Direct Provision,

challenging it and its restrictions on people and how coming together benefits all. It's gestation was over three years and it's presence now is a testament to the reality of Direct Provision and its impact on people coming to Ireland looking for protection. In its introduction I apply perspectives on care, drawn from another key area that interests me, personally and academically. With my colleagues, I also focus on the very great limitations on children's play as part of the process of their marginalisation by the system in which they live.

The intersections of live continue weaving themselves together in analysis, trust, relationships and the challenging of restrictive practices.