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Cultural and linguistic capital in early years education and care

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INTRODUCTION

This paper first discusses the concepts of culture and cultural and linguistic capital and then critically applies these concepts to early childhood education in Ireland. It takes a broad socio-cultural and ecological perspective on the subject in order to challenge a one-dimensional appreciation of the culture we wish to transmit to children in early years settings.

'Culture' is one of the most contested words in contemporary discourse (Grenfell and Kelly, 2001), but it can be defined as 'the way of life of its members, the collection of ideas and habits that they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation' (Mesthrie, 2009). It is more than 'high culture', the musical, literary and artistic achievements of a society, though it does include these. Children are socialised into their culture within the family, peer group and nested circles of influence, as described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) in his ecological theory. The transmission of knowledge through culture was also of great interest to socio-cultural theorists such as Vygotsky (Smidt, 2009). Norms for appropriate behaviour and values by which to lead one's life are acquired and social roles ascribed. As Bourdieu says, there is no way out of the game of culture, there are no non-participating spectators (cited in Robbins, 2000: xi). Culture is enacted by everyone.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Language is an integral part of culture and embedded in a social and historical context. Fishman (1991) discusses the links between language and culture in detail and Baker (2011) provides a summary of Fishman's views on these links under three headings:

- ◆ *A language indexes its culture:* a language and its culture will have grown together over a long period of time and will be in harmony with each other. A language expresses the worldview of its culture through vocabulary, idioms, metaphors, etc., at both cognitive and emotional levels.
- ◆ *A language symbolises its culture:* a language symbolises the culture and people with which it is associated. Speaking English often symbolises modernity, affluence, youth culture and achievement. In other contexts, English may symbolise colonial subjugation. A language that is spoken by a minority of the population may symbolise low status
- ◆ *Culture is partly created from its language:* culture is often enacted and transmitted

orally. The songs, memories and traditions, folk tales and proverbs are stored and relayed in its language. It is difficult to translate accurately from one language to another because meaning, alliteration and wit are not transmutable. We can only hope for an approximation. This is particularly relevant in relation to children's lore, the songs, rhymes and stories of childhood.

Bourdieu describes cultural capital as a form of symbolic capital or non-economic asset that is possessed by different groups in society and is made visible in institutions such as education and early years centres (Robbins, 2008). Linguistic capital is a subset of this form of capital and refers to linguistic competence and control of linguistic resources. Cultural capital can exist in three forms (Moore, 2008; Robbins, 2000):

- ◆ *In an embodied state*: in the form of the durable dispositions or principles of consciousness in the individual and in physical features such as body language, lifestyle choices and language intonation.
- ◆ *In an objectified state*: materially present in the form of cultural goods, books, pictures, instruments, laboratories, etc.
- ◆ *In an institutionalised state*: a form of objectification that must be kept separate, for example in educational institutions or scholastic titles.

A third expression of capital is in the form of habitus. Habitus does not have a material existence in itself. Rather, it includes attitudes and dispositions, for example attitudes towards language. It can refer to the rules of language or to the rules of chess, but these are only visible when they are put into practice. The formation of habitus takes place initially within the family, but for Bourdieu the most important agency is education and educational institutions in their physical and conceptual guises.

Forms of symbolic capital cannot be divorced from the person (they are embodied or cultured) and they can only be acquired over time. They incline people to act or behave in certain ways, which may be fairly homogenous for people from similar backgrounds (Vann, 1999). Examples include learning how to speak in particular contexts such as the family, the peer group or the school. These dispositions reflect the social conditions present during their acquisition. They affect the individual's linguistic practices and his or her anticipation of their symbolic value. Linguistic habitus is the product of experience and inculcation. McKinney and Norton (2010) argue that cultural capital has a differential exchange value in different social fields, for example in education or in business.

DISCUSSION

What can we take from the above discussion to lead us to examine early years practice? Early childhood experiences are long-lasting as children are socialised into their culture and the practices of that culture, which include languages, ways of behaving, attitudes and dispositions towards people, cultural artefacts and institutions. Language is intrinsically linked with culture. It is part of culture and contributes to culture through lived experiences and through literature, including children's oral and literary culture. It symbolises that culture through the status we afford that language or languages. Cultural and linguistic capital are forms of non-economic assets that can lead to rewards in lifestyle, education or employment. Attitudes and disposition towards language, cultures and many other fields

(habitus) are acquired over time within the family and in education. The attitudes and dispositions towards languages and cultures that are transmitted during early childhood are therefore of great importance.

Role of oral language

It is difficult for insiders to describe their own culture but in general Irish people are well known for their love of talk and conversation, their enjoyment of a good turn of phrase and of storytelling (Kiberd, 1996). In the past oral language was regarded mainly as the pathway to literacy. By analysing recent documents that discuss language and literacy, we appear to be on the cusp of a change of emphasis. *Aistear* (the early childhood curriculum framework) discusses the role of oral language and recommends the provision of rich and varied opportunities for babies and young children to learn language from others; support for language development through a range of strategies including stories, games, songs, rhymes and language play; and practitioners modelling good language use (NCCA, 2009b: 34–40). Practitioners are also charged with providing a print-rich environment.

The national strategy for literacy and numeracy requires the early years community to improve the communication and oral language competence of young children (DES, 2011: 17) and to provide parents with information about resources that they can use to support their children's oral language development (DES, 2011: 22). Furthermore, those involved in training and education courses are to ensure that their programmes contain units of both content and pedagogical knowledge in literacy, including oral language and a focus on additional language learning (DES, 2011: 29). The strategy recognises that early intervention for children with language difficulties should take place in ECCE and Junior Infants settings, rather than at a later stage (DES, 2011: 49). This in turn means that early years practitioners need to be trained in recognising language problems.

Regulation 5 of the Childcare Act (Department of Health and Children 2006) outlines some concrete evidence of a language-rich environment and states that the inspection process will take note of the provision of oral language activities such as singing, music, rhymes, storytelling and conversation as well as the provision of books.

Each of the above policy documents strongly recognises the role of oral language in fostering child development for the present and also acknowledges the importance of oral language in laying the foundation for literacy development.

Languages in Ireland

Ireland has a long history of linguistic diversity and has two official languages: Irish and English. The Irish language and culture are part of the heritage of Ireland (NCCA, 2005: 12) and as such should be made real and available in appropriate ways to the children in our care. Children's lore is predominately oral, that is oral in content and dependent on oral transmission. With the language shift from Irish to English in Ireland since the nineteenth century, children's traditional lore continued in Gaeltacht communities, but a great body of oral culture was lost to generations of English-speaking children.

Children in early years settings have a right to the totality of their linguistic heritage. The intercultural guidelines for primary school teachers in Ireland state that psychologically, historically and linguistically an experience of both languages is the right of every child (NCCA, 2005: 23). This paper proposes that this is also true of every early years child and can be provided in a variety of ways.

Naíonraí (Irish language pre-schools) opt to deliver their service through Irish. Other services decide to offer part of their sessions through Irish, providing some routines such as roll call in circle time or making use of Irish songs, rhymes, words of praise, etc. In this way, children learn through first-hand experience that there are a number of ways of saying things: English is one way, Irish is another way, and both have a place in their lives and are valued. For some practitioners, there is a real challenge in accessing the Irish language. However, simple routines such as greetings, phrases for praising children, children's books and recorded songs and rhymes can open up the area for children and provide first steps in accessing the rich children's tradition in Irish (see www.naionrai.ie for resources).

Walter Ong (2002) describes recorded oral lore as secondary orality in an electronic age of telephones, radio, television and other recorded media. These items are part of our children's world and offer ways into oral culture that might not have been as accessible before. This means that it is not strictly necessary (though obviously an advantage) to be a fluent speaker of the second language in order to access it at some level.

Music, both vocal and instrumental, folk and more formal, is also culturally marked. Early years practitioners can draw on the wide range of musical traditions of Ireland, including instrumental and vocal music, in both Irish and English. They can also make use of collections of children's street rhymes and games (for example *Spraoi le Chéile*, published by Donegal County Childcare Committee). Children can also learn about musical traditions from other cultures and other times, such as classical music or world music. This is a far richer learning experience for the children in our care than remaining closely tied to CDs from a well-known chain shop of educational toys. Through experiencing a wide range of musical traditions, children can be facilitated in developing positive emotional and cognitive responses to the diversity of musical genres in our society (NCCA, 2005: 84).

Ireland has a rich tradition of folk wisdom and strong connections to place. Some of these links are changed by families moving away from their home areas, or to different parts of the country, but each local area has its own heritage and lore. Heritage and traditions have the power to stifle or to empower, depending on social contexts and personal views, but they have the potential to keep us grounded in the past while also moving forward. This is what Gibbons (1996) terms dynamic tradition and he holds that it can have a transformative effect. It raises the question of how connected early years services are to their local communities. How can early years settings draw on the local heritage and tradition of the area in which they are situated? The aim, as Kirby et al. (2008) state, is not to substitute a reified past for an uncertain present. In the early childhood education context we should strive to provide a space in which we can draw on the wider linguistic and cultural heritage of Ireland. This should not be an ethnocentric view but one that encompasses the heritage languages of newcomer children and families as well as Irish traditions and languages.

Home language maintenance for immigrant children

Many of the children of immigrant parents attending early years services are learning English as an additional language. This clearly implies that they are speakers of other languages. Research (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2011) shows the importance of valuing and, where possible, providing support for the home languages of newcomer children. The experience in countries with longer histories of immigration than Ireland, such as the United States, shows that unless steps are put in place, immigrant children can lose their home languages to the dominant societal language at an early age (Bernhard and Pacini-Ketchabaw, 2010).

This international research shows that parents often experience schools as unsupportive or oblivious to mother tongue retention and that their children's cultural and linguistic identity takes on a new and unfamiliar shape in a short period of time. Parents' capacity to explain the nuances of their home culture to their children often diminishes over time. Minority children's cultural capital (i.e. their understanding and knowledge of their own culture) is rarely considered as a valuable resource and the knowledge and experiences of families are ignored as vital funds of knowledge.

Early years training should include an awareness of the value and role of languages other than English in order to avoid the tendency of considering monolingualism as the default or normal position. Additional languages are more than mere add-ons to the status quo. Small-scale studies in Ireland (Mhic Mhathúna and Hill, 2007; Dillon, 2011) and larger studies abroad (Cummins, 2000) have shown that early childhood practitioners value diversity but find it hard to put supportive practices in place. The focus is often on surface-level inclusion through multicultural activities rather than on more deeply embedded practices that draw on and develop the knowledge of newcomer children. Due to the frequent presence of children from many language backgrounds in any one early years group, it must be recognised that specific language support is a challenge. However, strategies such as using/making dual language books, CDs and videos of storytelling in diverse languages, involving parents in learning activities and employing bilingual staff on a temporary or permanent basis offer useful ways of enabling all children to benefit from the diverse cultural and linguistic resources within the group.

Culture and language in the early years curriculum

There are many ways of expressing culture in the curriculum. *Te Whariki*, the New Zealand curriculum, is premised on Maori values and traditions and highlights the values attached to family and place through an integrated curriculum using the symbol of a woven mat. The Welsh foundation phase for three- to seven-year-olds, the Curriculum Cymreig, highlights indigenous culture through providing a separate strand, Welsh language development, and also advocates integration with the other curricular strands. Pre-schools that operate through Welsh are not obliged to provide this strand but must follow the guidance for the educational programme of the language, literacy and communication skills area of development for first language speakers.

The Foundation Phase contributes to the Curriculum Cymreig by developing children's understanding of the cultural identity unique to Wales across all Areas of Learning through an integrated approach. Children should appreciate the different languages, images, objects, sounds and tastes that are integral in Wales today and gain a sense of belonging to Wales, and understand the Welsh heritage, literature and arts as well as the language.

(Welsh Assembly Government, 2008)

Aistear and Síolta frameworks

In Ireland, a different approach has been taken. *Aistear* (NCCA, 2009a) is the early childhood curriculum framework and *Síolta* (CECDE, 2006) is the national quality framework for early childhood education. They are broad frameworks, leaving wide scope for interpretation on individual practitioner and wider societal bases. Both Irish and English are mentioned in the 'communicating' strand of *Aistear*. Irish can be acquired as a first or second language.

Emphasis is placed on the fact that not all children or their parents will have Irish or English as their first language.

The two frameworks follow a long tradition of naming new ventures in Irish. Edwards (2009) holds that naming is an important maker of identity and that names can be given by insiders or ascribed by outsiders. By choosing names in Irish for *Aistear* and *Síolta*, the symbolic nature of the Irish language is evoked. The two early childhood frameworks are marked as being Irish, but are open to influences from further afield.

The four main themes of *Aistear* and linked themes in *Síolta*, as outlined in the audit of similarities and differences between the two frameworks (NCCA, 2009b), will be examined in order to identify how culture and language may be developed through the framework statements.

The theme of Well-being is about children being confident, happy and healthy.

(*Aistear*, NCCA, 2009a)

Ensuring that each child's rights are met requires that she/he is enabled to exercise choice and to use initiative as an active participant and partner in her/his own development and learning.

(*Síolta* Standard 1: Rights of the Child, CECDE, 2006)

Both frameworks advocate for the well-being of children, physically, mentally, socially and emotionally. They propose that children should be given choice and opportunities to use their initiative. Research (Cummins, 2000; Baker, 2011) indicates that it is necessary for children's well-being that their cultural and linguistic background is acknowledged and valued. There is a grave danger of lowering self-image and self-esteem if their home language and culture are not respected or if they are denied opportunities to use their home language.

In agreement with the principles of the *Aistear* curriculum statement and the *Síolta* standard, all children in early years centres should also have the right to learn the Irish language as part of their heritage. This right should be included in official policy and guidance documents for early childhood care and education settings.

The theme of Identity and Belonging is about children developing a positive sense of who they are and feeling that they are respected as part of a family and community.

(*Aistear*, NCCA, 2009a)

Promoting positive identities and a strong sense of belonging requires clearly defined policies, procedures and practices that empower every child and adult to develop a confident self and group identity, and to have a positive understanding and regard for the identity and rights of others.

(*Síolta* Standard 14: Identity and Belonging, CECDE, 2006)

Both statements emphasise the concepts of individual and group identity and the need to actively promote respect for all cultures. The statements can be interpreted in many ways but they are open to the development of strong local and cultural connections and to the inclusion of the home languages and cultures of children from diverse cultures.

The theme of Communicating is about children sharing their experiences, thoughts, ideas and feelings with others with growing confidence and competence and in a

variety of ways and for a variety of purposes.

(Aistear, NCCA, 2009a)

Fostering constructive interactions (child/child, child/adult and adult/child) requires explicit policies, procedures and practice that emphasise the value of process and are based on mutual respect, equal partnership and sensitivity.

(*Síolta* Standard 5: Interactions, CECDE, 2006)

The above statements are concerned with language and other means of expression such as art, music, song and dance. They indicate that children should be facilitated in expressing their thoughts in all their languages, including their mother tongue and any additional languages they may be learning. The emphasis is on process rather than outcome and the role of the adult is in supporting children to extend their learning.

The theme of Exploring and Thinking is about children making sense of the things, places and people in their world by interacting with others, playing, investigating, questioning, and forming, testing and refining ideas.

(Aistear, NCCA, 2009a)

Encouraging each child's holistic development and learning requires the implementation of a verifiable, broad-based, documented and flexible curriculum or programme.

(*Síolta* Standard 7: Curriculum, CECDE, 2006)

Both statements advocate the active exploration of the environment through play, language and investigation in the context of a well-defined, broad-based curriculum. Children should be encouraged to understand that their experiences can be expressed in several ways and in many languages. Some of the learning opportunities to be provided by adults could include language-learning activities.

Taken together, the *Aistear* themes and *Síolta* standards support a strong focus on language and culture, valuing both the local or Irish culture and the contribution of knowledge to be made by children and adults from diverse cultures.

Regulation 5 of the 2006 pre-school regulations (Department of Health and Children 2006) also notes the importance of cultural context. It states that the statutory inspection should take account of children who may have additional needs regarding cultural diversity and special needs. It also advises that the child's cultural context be taken into consideration in facilitating the holistic development of the child.

Strategy for the Irish language

Aistear, *Síolta* and Regulation 5 reflect government policies. The *20-year strategy for the Irish language 2010–2030* is another government policy document and reminds us that the key role of language in the expression and transmission of cultural heritage is recognised in the 2003 UN Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (Pobal, 2010: 5). The UN Convention states that language is not just the vehicle that contains the cultural heritage, it is the essence of oral traditions. The section of the Irish language strategy that covers pre-school and parental support states that it is intended that some level of pre-school Irish language education will be offered in all localities, whether through immersion language education or through an Irish language dimension in English-medium

provision (Pobal, 2010: 13). Childcare and pre-school facilities will be facilitated to offer an Irish language dimension and create a language-friendly environment for children through, for example, the provision of supports such as Irish language DVDs geared for young children, and teaching nursery rhymes and games in Irish.

CONCLUSION

Irish early years education and care is undergoing unprecedented change and development. On the one hand, there is increased regulation regarding health, safety, child development and management. On the other, flexible frameworks offer opportunities to consider issues, to reflect on practice and to make informed decisions. With increasing numbers of third-level graduates entering the sector and the wealth of experience of existing practitioners, Irish early years education is in a good position to make a positive contribution to the lives of the children in its care. High-quality care demands ongoing debate of relevant issues and, above all, placing the rights and needs of children first. As Derman-Sparks and Fite (2007: 52) said:

We need to explore and understand the multiple parts of our own identity, who we are culturally and where we are advantaged and disadvantaged by our social institutions. We need to learn how to view social reality through the lens of multiple perspectives and to make a commitment to keep working until we have built care and education systems that truly deliver equal educational services to all children.

A cultural and linguistic critical awareness of our identity (Kirby et al., 2008: 206), coupled with a healthy respect for other traditions, will help us develop a shared sense of purpose that will enrich the lives of children and of those who care for them.

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