EARLY CHILDHOOD DISCOURSE: PROBLEMATISING SOME CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN STATUTORY FRAMEWORKS

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Introduction

Against a backcloth of increasing cultural diversity and emergent enmities, young children are struggling to live, learn, and play in Ireland today. While there has been significant ideological debate on asylum issues and the development of an immigration policy in the print and broadcast media (Cullen, 2000), young children have been actively developing their own ideas of diversity. Specifically, children have been making sense of race, ethnicity, gender, class, ability, and community in commonsense ways and embedding these understandings in classrooms, playgrounds, and neighbourhoods. Much conventional discourse in early childhood education, paradoxically, is rooted in a series of denials (Kelleghan, Weir, O'hUallachain and Morgan, 1995). One of the most acute denials is the failure to recognise that diversity is an everyday reality for rising generations of young children of different races, ethnicities, and classes.

The denial of diversity is evident in varying degrees in a spait of recent statutory and policy frameworks on children and families (National Commission on the Family: Strengthening Families for Life, 1996; Report of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education, 1998; White Paper on Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn, 1999; Primary Curriculum, 1999; and National Children's Strategy: Our Children, Their Lives, 2000). I focus here on a critical examination of a particular seam in the early childhood education discourse. This seam runs from the Report of the National Forum on Early Childhood Education (1998) through the White Paper on Early Childhood Education (1999). Specifically, I use selected discursive statements from the White Paper as a lens for examining the contexts and possibilities for research and policy in early childhood education

After O'Sullivan (1989), I believe that we need to break theoretically and conceptually with existing intellectual traditions and empirical discourses in the social, educational, and political sciences for "the purposes of penetrating our understanding of it" (p. 219). In an attempt to move beyond conventional orthodoxies on educational disadvantage and social exclusion, I use a policy-as-discourse methodology grounded in Popkewitz's (2000) critical ideas on rethinking epistemologies of research.

I first provide aspect on the introduction of the 1999 White Paper on Early Childhood Education. Using the Foucauldian idea of episteme, I then consider some of the key conceptual challenges in reviewing the extant literature on diversity. Next, I critically examine populational reasoning as a means of social regulation, and constructions/reconstructions of children and childhood. Throughout the discussion, I suggest alternative research lines directed at potentially shedding fresh light on our understandings of diversity. Finally, I conclude with a set of purposeful questions or "signposts" for future research on young children and diversity. Taken together these responses represent a homologous "mix" of historical, sociological, political, and economic literatures.

The White Paper on early childhood education

In December 1999, Michedl Martin, the then Minister for Education and Science, launched what was described as the "first ever" White Paper on Early Childhood Education: Ready to Learn (Press Release, p. 1). When introducing the White Paper, the Minister explained that to date Ireland's policy in early childhood education had been "piecemeal and incomplete" (p. 1). In general, he stated that "the focus has been on creating places for children rather than on the quality of the education provided." The Minister announced that the White Paper represented an attempt to "shift the debate" (p. 1). Included in the set of governing principles is a commitment to target resources on the children most in need, build on provision within the existing regulatory framework, and implement change on a phased- and consultative-basis.

The statutory context for the operational definition of educational disadvantage used in the White Paper derives from the [Irish] Education Act of the previous year. Section 32, Education Act (1998) defines educational disadvantage as: "the impediments to education arising from social or economic disadvantage which prevents students from deriving appropriate benefit from education in schools" (cited in Section 8, White Paper, 1999, p. 97). Section 8 of the White Paper borrows this definition as a legitimating statement for the focal section entitled "Children who are Disadvantaged." The arguments presented in Section 8 owe much to "models of social pathology and subjective discrimination" (Mac an Ghaill, 1989, p. 273). Models of this kind tend to support mono-causal and reductionistic

explanations of what happens in highly developed instances of social and   economic disadvantage.

What is remarkable is that the prevailing discourse on young children and disadvantage has endured as the "commonsense" of reform and renewal since the landmark Rutland Street Project thirty years ago. The question becomes how and to what extent the debate has meaningfully shifted or simply shuffled in recent years. This question has received little attention in the hiatus since the publication of the White Paper (Gol, 1999). The present paper examines not only the content of contemporary discourses but also some of the largely forgotten and hitherto neglected prior questions surrounding the "reasons and reasonings" (Popkewitz and Fendler, 2000, p. 23) underpinning contemporary social and educational policy.

Conceptual challenges of reviewing diversity

The rhetoric of episteme—what Foucault (1972) proposed as the sum total of circulating and authorised ideas that become self-evident for thinking, mapping and acting about certain subjects--is rooted in the host idea of educational disadvantage in social analysis. In similar vein, MacDonnell (1982) defined episteme as "the ground of thought on which at a particular time some statements-and not others-will count as knowledge" (p. 87). In the White Paper what counts as a knowledge/equity axis includes providing children with a quality early start in life and school, breaking the cycle of intergenerational disadvantage, and linking homes, schools, and communities. Few could find fault with these meaningful and useful aspirations. Whether existing state interventions have run the gamut of their own possibilities or not, however, needs to be questioned. In the near- absence of benchmark empirical evaluations, with the notable exception of the Early Start Preschool Programme Evaluation (Educational Research Centre, 1998), it is difficult to provide categorical responses. This paper draws attention to some of the existing theoretical and conceptual fissures and raises possibilities for alternative research lines on young children and diversity. A distinguished lineage of discursive practices on "difference" abounds in literary and social domains in Ireland. In counterpoint, "sameness" has generally remained undertheorised in social critiques, despite its deep-seated connections to cultural nationalism and majority religions for most of the last century (0 Buachalla, 1988). Variants of sameness and difference have gradually and incrementally insinuated themselves into educational discourse. Such a development is not unique in the broader discourse on sameness and difference, most notably in the US where the concept of diversity is a contested terrain in educational discourses.

What is remarkable is the largely uncritical use of a clutch of "double logics" (Popkewitz, 2000, p. 41), for example, same/different, equal/unequal, advantaged/ disadvantaged, included/excluded, and targeted/untargeted. I argue that the conflation of the logics of disadvantage without reference to advantage and exclusion without reference to inclusion both diffuses and generates considerable conceptual confusion.

The benign juxtaposing of these logics has been glossed over in a range of official discourses. In counterpoint to restricted expressions of disadvantage, exclusion has been expressed not only in terms of national and ideological contexts, hut also in relation to discussions about the new poverty and inequality (e.g. single-parent families), discrimination, marginality, foreignness, alterity, affiliation, dispossession, deprivation, and destitution (Silver, 1994/1995). In the context of this theoretical and conceptual cauldron, Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000) argue that empiricist stances on methods and results alone cannot confront the wide slew of issues implicated in the inclusion/exclusion debate. Alternative conceptualisations that could potentially "unlock" prevailing double logics are needed, if we are to make sense of the complexities of diversity in contemporary cultures.

I now critically examine populational reasoning as a powerful instrument supporting the double logic of inclusion/exclusion in early childhood education.

Populational reasoning as social regulation

Popkewitz and Fendler (2000) wrote that "we can think of populational reasoning as securing identities through assigning individuals to particular groups associated with probability statistics" (p. 23). Their writings on the etiology of statistics as a political arithmetic used in social administration are resonant in Section 8 of the White Paper (GoI, 1999). Specifically, the political arithmetic employed uses measured and measurable indices of location and hardship to derive a percentage for resourcing the needs of the most vulnerable in society. The arbitrary and convenient operational variable is sixteen per cent.

The calcified cells for social administration are described as "designated disadvantaged schools." Power and Tormey (2000) have advanced useful challenges to the reliability and validity of the operational variable (i.e. "designated disadvantaged schools"). The White Paper significantly negates any kind of a broad-based commitment to confronting social injustices and oppression related to diversity. What is remarkable is that the White Paper eschews any reference to race or ethnicity, other than to a two-paragraph nominal reference to Traveller children and families. What is truly perplexing

is that the variable remains a constant throughout the virtues and vicissitudes of unprecedented social, economic, and scientific development.

State interventions in early childhood education

A threefold series of state interventions described as Early Start, Breaking the Cycle, and Home School, Community Liaison are chronically implicated in the network of "designated disadvantaged" schools. While these initiatives have been well-received by teachers and parents at a popular level, it is noteworthy that we do not have a holistic rubric for calibrating their success. Their success has been dimensionalised and evaluated across a limited set of behavioural and cognitive indices. In her review of state interventions, O'Toole (2000) endorsed "the notion that targeting towards more disadvantaged children and their families is an initial prerequisite in the challenge to educational disadvantage" (p. 125). She captured the general optimism echoed at professional conferences and seminars throughout the country in recent years in describing the threefold scheme as "significant impact early interventions."

The White Paper (Gol, 1999) acknowledges that Early Start preschool intervention programme was dedicated to the development of cognitive and linguistic skills, with the disclaimer that "due recognition is also given to social and personal development" (p. 99). While the White Paper abounds with statistical data related to cognitive, language and motor behaviours, "due recognition" with respect to social and personal development is left at a tacit- and taken for-granted level. In Apple's (1992) terms there is clearly a tension between text and context. While few would argue about the lasting effects of literacy and numeracy for young children advocated in the White Paper, the absence of any reference to the social constructions of cultural reality is a grievous neglect. Priorities on literary and numeracy, notwithstanding, more than cursory and benign references to culturally neutral and jaundiced notions of self, other, and society will be needed, if we are ever to come close to the reality of diversity on the ground. Put simply, a reconceptualisation of texts for contexts, most notably the context of increasing diversity, is needed in early childhood discourse.

The Breaking the Cycle intervention scheme was the outcome of a detailed study by the Combat Poverty Agency and the Education Research Centre, Drumcondra. The study covered approaches to the identification and support of pupils in disadvantaged areas. The White Paper deploys a promissory strategy on evaluation research. O'Toole (2000) reminds us that it will be published in the "near-future" (p. 139). Her critique is typical of others that have relied essentially on derivative and additive ideas of how we conceptualise space, time, and disadvantage. These factors beggar a useful heuristic in research

for deconstructing the notion of designated-disadvantaged schools as "stable spaces controlled by time" (Popkewitz and Lindblad, 2000).

Constructions/reconstructions of children and childhood

While the boat is full in the harbour, as Cullen (2000) metaphorically captures the influx of refugees and asylum-seekers, we know little about how the "tightly-braided" relationships of culture, knowledge, and power could potentially develop in young children's lives. Specifically, we know little about how children of particular races, ethnicities, classes, genders, abilities, and communities make sense of the structures and processes of being children in the present culture of schools, homes, and communities. What is especially lacking is research on children's sharing and social participation attempts to deal with confusions, fears and conflicts, and resistance to adult rules and authority (Corsaro and Eder, 1990).

Chapter 1 of the White Paper (GoI, 1999) argues that the "essential starting point is to define what we mean by early childhood education (p. 3). While ostensibly a logical starting point, the White Paper leaves the prior question about what we mean when we talk and write about children and childhood at a tacit- or taken-for-granted level throughout the remainder of the document. While the singularity of "the psychological child," is not evident in the text, the implicit binarism of classic socialisation theory, which casts the child in a perpetual state of becoming an adult, is present. It is revealed in an excess of psychologising about what Barre (1981) described as the individualistic, abstract, and outcome indices of development. Indices such as "behaviour," "motivation," and "problem-solving" are juxtaposed as incontrovertible epistemes in the White Paper. This excess is particularly evident in a series of punctuated references to IQ to support assertions focusing on identification and targeting.

While there is generally a significant carry-over of apposite ideas from the Background Paper to the National Forum on Early Childhood Education, the Forum Report and, in turn, the White Paper, the focus on IQ is seriously disproportionate to other conceptual issues raised by the presenters and authors of the forty representative groups to the National Forum on Early Childhood Education. Allied to these imbalances is an over-representation of data on educational achievement, as opposed to social processes and fatuous aggregate analyses of stereotypical processes in young children's lives to the neglect of individual and small group differences, among other sociocultural variables.

Merging national and international discourses on children

Fortunately, there are international discourses that could potentially shed light on the diffusive and generative nature of race, ethnicity, gender, class, disability, and community on children's social lives in schools in Britain and the United States. I argue, as does McCarthy (1990), that a conjunctural or middle level theory is necessary if we are to get a better handle on the nonsynchronous or contradictory ways that children's peer cultures operate in schools.

In the United States, McCarthy (1990) argued against the limitations of Apple and Weiss's (1983) parallelist position when applied to institutional settings. Apple and Weiss (1983) argued that the unequal processes and outcomes of teaching and learning and of schooling in general are produced by constant interactions among three dynamics (race, gender, and class) and in three spheres (economic, political, and cultural)" (p. 25). McCarthy advanced an alternative framework--what he called the contradictory or nonsynchronous position. He argued that the dynamics of race, complements and counterpoints what we have learned from hypo- deductive research on behavioural and cognitive indices of diversity.

I suggest that we need to examine the hybriditv of race, ethnicity, gender, class, economy, community, and ability, or indeed any unique or contingent variable of analysis that might exist in a particular sociocultural milieu (McCarthy, 1990). After Popkewitz and Lindblad (2000), what 1 understand as hybridity is the interrelation of discourses of race, ethnicity, gender, and class not as arbitrary and convenient divisions but overlapping discourses of no singular origin as they enter into the problem-solving of policy and educational practices.

I suggest that the following set of questions, derived from the international discourse on diversity in majority-white contexts as a useful starting point:

Why, and under what circumstances does diversity emerge as an appealing and plausible mode of reasoning for young children?

What are the conditions that prompt young children to nneratinnalice diversity as an organising framework for their everyday experiences in sharing and social participation, attempts to deal with adult confusions, fears, and conflicts, and resistance to adult rules and authority?

What are the implications for developing culturally responsive teaching, learning, curricula, and resources in educational settings?

In sum, our existing discourse on early childhood education needs to shed its near-exclusive reliance on a linear research trajectory and derive a fresh impetus from international discourses grounded in the social and political stakes of research. What is needed is research that helps to raise the silenced voices of young children and families on what matters most to them in their everyday lives.

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