Multilingualism in the field of early childhood

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse early childhood centres, expounding what a quality early childhood centre entails. Early childhood centres nurture children socially, emotionally, cognitively and intellectually (Phillips & Lowenstein 2011; Backer & Nærde 2017). Employing a multilingual curriculum in early childhood centres may help promote quality childcare. There are more than a billion people who speak more than one language fluently (Okal 2014). Therefore, early childhood centres should work to implement a multilingual curriculum as this can greatly benefit the children. Unfortunately, most early childhood centres lack a multilingual curriculum as their policies do not enable it. By assessing the Luxembourg government's language policy, one can discern how policy imposes certain truths. To efficaciously deconstruct the use of policy, I will implement the work of Michel Foucault.

KEYWORDS

EARLY CHILDHOOD CENTRES

MULTILINGUALISM

POLICY

FOUCAULT

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood centres are settings in which a child's development should be enhanced. While attending an early childhood centre, a child is expected to display social-emotional, cognitive and intellectual development (Phillips & Lowenstein, 2011; Backer & Nærde, 2017). Therefore, early childhood centres are to provide quality care for their children. According to Cottle & Alexander (2012), what constitutes 'quality' early years care and education and its intended benefits are dependent on politicians, parents, managers, practitioners and children. 'Quality', then, cannot be easily defined, as it is based on subjectivity. Dahlberg et al. (2007) confirm that

'quality' is values-based and thus a subjective matter, while Tobin (2005) asserts that standards of quality are culturally established. With these definitions in mind, I would suggest that a quality early childhood centre is one which incorporates a multilingual approach to teaching.

Michel Foucault by Arturo Espinosa on Flickr

MULTILINGUALISM

Okal (2014) states that multilingualism is the ability of an individual to efficiently express him or herself with proficiency in several languages. A multilingual individual, depending on the languages and how many he or she speaks, will be able to communicate with various groups of people in both professional and personal settings. As more and more individuals are exploring the world, one is likely to experience difficulties in another country where one does not speak the native tongue. Lacking the specific lingual skills required in a specific place may cause one to struggle with the most mundane and basic tasks (Blommaert et al.2005).

Along with the ability to communicate and adequately execute simple tasks in foreign countries, there are other benefits to being multilingual.

There are about 7,000 languages in the world, with over a billion people speaking more than one language with proficiency (Okal 2014). While a significant number of those individuals speak multiple languages because their country of origin has a national tongue and several indigenous languages, others are knowledgeable because of international trade. Okal (2014) insists that the increase of individuals speaking more than one language is due to innovation, trade and commerce, along with technological advancements. The field of work of an individual may require them to speak another language in order to effectuate communication amongst business partners.

As has been made evident, multilingualism leads to effortless communication. In addition to this, it heightens an individual's creativity and intellectual flexibility (Okal 2014). King emphasises that at an early age, children who grow up in an environment supportive of multiple languages are more intellectually flexible and insightful than monolingual children. Children who speak more than one language fluently do better in school than their monolingual counterparts as their reasoning, thinking and cognitive abilities are greater, as well as having greater social adaptability, and being superior lateral thinkers (King 2007, as cited in Okal 2014). Multilingualism broadens an individual's mental ability.

Just as important as a child's intellectual flexibility and creativity is the understanding of different cultures. Barasa affirms that multilingualism allows one to become multicultural in nature as it provides insight into the comprehension of various cultures (Barasa 2005, as cited in Okal 2014). As language relies on mind, society and culture, the experiences acquired through learning several languages change skills and attitudes, while expanding the individual's

worldview (Okal 2014). Multilingualism increases appreciation of the cultural values of a given society. Through multilingualism, individuals are better able to relate to others as there is a better understanding of different cultures.

Introducing multilingualism at the early years level will adequately prepare children for the world in which we live. Multilingual children may be seen as global citizens because of their capacity to communicate efficiently with individuals from various walks of life. Given these points, why do only a limited number of early childhood centres implement a multilingual curriculum when there are over a billion individuals speaking more than one language?

POLICY

An especially significant factor as to why early childhood centres do not implement a multilingual curriculum is based on policy. Policies governing early childhood centres highlight the values of the centre, along with its objectives and how those objectives will be enforced. While there are many different ways that policy can be defined, here it will be defined as 'an attempt by those working inside an organisation to think in a coherent way about what it is trying to achieve... and what it needs to do to achieve it' (Fitzgerald & Kay 2016: 3). In effect, policy-makers create the environment in which children learn and develop. Therefore, policy-makers are generating the truth that is being implemented in early childhood centres. It is important which truth is being highlighted in an early childhood centre as it is used as a means to construct such institutions, and relationships, around what is regarded as childhood and how children should develop. MacNaughton (2005) accentuates that according to Michel Foucault, we are governed by institutionally constructed and sanctioned truths: 'regimes of truth'. Foucault states that a regime of truth establishes power relations, which, in turn, create rules that categorise and govern behaviour (Foucault 1984 as cited in MacNaughton

2005). Power relations are a continuous theme in life; and as Foucault establishes, it is not feasible for individuals to be isolated from power relations (Moss et al. 2008). There is always a particular truth controlling the behaviour of others.

'Micro-practice of power' – normalisation

To illustrate, I will briefly critically analyse Luxembourg's government and its language policy in response to its multilingual inhabitants. According to the Statistical Office of the European Union – EUROSTAT (2018), at about 48%, Luxembourg has the largest percentage of foreign nationals as of 2017. Despite the foreign nationals and their native tongues, Luxembourg can be deemed a trilingual country. The country's Chambre des Députés/Chamber of Deputies (1984) states that along with Luxembourgish being the national language, French and German are also recognised as the official administrative and legal languages (as cited in Neumann 2015). Multilingualism is recognised as the unique characteristic of the Luxembourgian society as it culturally adds value to the life of its residents (Neumann 2015). With this in mind, one would anticipate that the education system of Luxembourg would include a multilingual curriculum commencing with the early childhood years. Nevertheless, a multilingual curriculum is not implemented in Luxembourg's early childhood centres.

Furthermore, multilingualism is considered a threat to the 'social cohesion and the preservation of the nation's identity' (Neumann, 2015: 28). Luxembourg's government is exercising its power by asserting its truth that in order to establish the nation's identity, a specific language should be enforced in early childhood centres. Neumann (2015) confirms that Luxembourgish is the true national language of Luxembourg, and that it should be the language implemented in early childhood centres. Utilising a Foucauldian lens, one of the eight micro-practices of power which was expounded on by Gore (1995) is made evident in the

Luxembourgian government's language policy: normalisation. Gore (1995) defines normalisation as comparing, conforming, requiring and invoking a certain standard as normal, constructing it as truth.

In short, the Luxembourgian government is implying that an individual is not truly a Luxembourgian if he or she does not speak Luxembourgish. Through normalisation, a powerful disciplinary tool (Foucault 1977, as cited in Gore 1995), an individual's behaviour will conform to a society's norms, which then have the ability to alter the individual's perception of who he/she is and wants to be (Weberman 1995). By implementing this language policy in early childhood centres, the Luxembourgian government instils in the children the norms of their society. Although the Luxembourgian government maintains that promoting Luxembourgish as the common language is not a political strategy for assimilation (Neumann, 2015), requiring that early childhood centres utilise solely Luxembourgish says otherwise. As part of a multilingual country with a variety of foreign nationals, early childhood centres in Luxembourg should consider implementing a multilingual curriculum.

CONCLUSION

Early childhood centres are fundamental in the life of children. As Phillips & Lowenstein (2011) state, they are environments in which children are expected to flourish, developing socially, emotionally, cognitively and intellectually. To effectively sustain an environment in which children can develop to their maximum potential, early childhood centres need to provide quality care for their children. One manner in which to maintain a quality early childhood centre is by implementing a multilingual curriculum. Multilingualism has many benefits, which not only include effortless communication, but also heightening an individual's intellectual and creative capabilities, along with providing the individual with a broader worldview (Okal 2014). Most early childhood centres lack a multilingual curriculum as the policies governing the centres do not permit it. Policies accentuate the truth that policy-makers, and even a government, want to enforce. By utilising a Foucauldian lens, one can successfully deconstruct a policy to deduce the truth that is being normalised. As coined by Foucault, these 'regimes of truth' govern one's behaviour (MacNaughton 2005). Policy-makers and/ or governments should be intentional about their policies not only being political strategies but benefiting the individuals onto whom the policies are being enforced. Early childhood centre policies need to be cognizant that their audience is children, and children need optimum care. A multilingual curriculum is one way in which early childhood centres can provide advantageous care. ■

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