

Reflections on Diversity and Equality Concepts and Language

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Regardless of what new method or latest technique is attempted, the mind brain will always choose to reduce such practices to fit entrenched assumptions and beliefs. To really restructure/change anything we must restructure our thinking and shift deep connections in our psyche.

(Caine & Caine, 1997)

Introduction

Early childhood care and education, along with other educational sectors, plays a central role in the social transmission of cultural values and in influencing the attitudes and values of young people in society. I am going to look at diversity and equality concepts as relatively new in the early childhood sector discourse. I will argue that while these concepts are continually evolving they are also contentious. The question is how does the early childhood sector understand and engage with these concepts and what vision does it have for the inclusion of every child and their family. I contend that critical reflection and critical dialogue is necessary if equality principles are to be comprehensive, understood and effectively implemented at all levels of the sector.

Conceptualisation of diversity and equality

Concepts of diversity and equality are not easy to define. Nor is the ancillary language attached to these concepts, such as, access, participation, outcomes, equal opportunities, social justice, critical interculturalism etc. These concepts and terms mean different things to different people. They are also used in the political, cultural and economic contexts to promote particular values or interests (Thompson, 2003). These concepts continue to be challenged by academics and by social movements and this has resonance for the early childhood sector where the concepts are only emerging with corresponding implications for the development of appropriate responses to working with and caring for children.

The vision for a more equal society is the starting point for any framework for action for equality. While Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have driven the diversity and equality inclusion in the Irish context, historically this broader societal concept has not been a focus of the early childhood discourse. Now with an increased recognition of the need to address diversity issues there is a growing awareness for the need for equality principles as part of early childhood practice. It is obvious that an *ambition* for equality in early childhood requires a *quality of the analysis* of these concepts as this analysis will affect the potential impact of any framework for addressing inequalities in early childhood sector. It will have implications for all levels of the sector including policy, training, mainstreaming and targeting and professional development.

I would like to focus on the concept of equality and draw out some of the complexity associated with the concept. From the outset let us be clear that far from being a single concept, equality refers to countless ideas, which may have varying implications and even be incompatible. The modern notion of equality cannot be divorced from the evolution of citizenship an important position as it draws our attention to the links between equality and rights. Conversely, inequality can be seen to involve the undermining or denial of rights.

Equality, viewed in the most general light, is a relationship of some type between two or more people or groups of people regarding some aspect of their lives. If equality were a simple idea, it would be clear what this relationship is, who it is about and what aspects of their lives it concerns. Unfortunately none of these is obvious, which is why there are many different conceptions of equality (Baker et al, 2004:21).



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Concepts of equality include basic equality, liberal equality and equality of condition, in contemporary egalitarian theory (Baker, 1998 in Lynch, 1999; Baker et al, 2004).

Basic equality is founded in the idea that all human beings are equal in dignity and worth and therefore equally meriting concern and respect.

Liberal equality upholds each person's equal moral worth and human sameness. It recognises the stratification of society and is concerned with equal opportunities for various types of mobility, including education, regardless of the starting point of individuals or groups (Rawls, 1996). The assumption of human sameness within the liberal understanding of equality is problematic, as it does not fully value differences and rationally assumes that people *should* treat each other with equal respect. The central problem however with liberal equality is that it accepts and coexists with significant levels of inequality. Tolerance is also emphasised as a key dimension in the management of diversity in society and the problem with tolerance, while having its virtues, is that it can too readily co-exist with ignorance and even contempt. Going beyond liberal equality is about ensuring meaningful choices which is a key characteristic of the next definition of equality, equality of condition.

Equality of Condition is much more ambitious but also more positive in that it does not accept that major inequalities are inevitable and that social structures cannot be changed, especially the structures of domination and oppression, such as racism, sexism and socio-economic disadvantage. Equality of condition addresses the structures and systems of society, including education and care, and focuses on the root causes of inequality promoting a need to review how we manage and organise society and services. Dimensions defined within Equality of Condition include the dimensions: respect and recognition, resources, love, care and solidarity, power relations, working and learning, while the systems of engagement are defined as economic, cultural, political and affective¹. All elements should be regarded as interwoven when challenging inequality and promoting equality within society.²

Consensus

What is clear is that there could be a consensus at the table on the rationale for equality and inclusion. There could be agreement on which groups to focus on in equality strategies and in framework developments. There could be a shared concern at the persistence of inequalities and agreement on the need for change in the economic, political, cultural and caring domains including the educational system. Yet along side all this is a contest of ideas that could coexist-essentially about how far society or the early childhood sector needs to go or should go in terms of the level of equality sought and in terms of the mechanisms that can be deployed to achieve this level of equality (Crowley, 2006).

Accepting that while this is a brief and therefore simplistic overview of the key characteristics of equality concepts it does, however, highlight the need for an in-depth discussion at policy level on equality issues as relevant to the early childhood sector. It also raises questions of transference into practice.

In my experience in Ireland these concepts are emerging in early childhood policy documents. Through various discussions and some limited research at policy and ground level it is clear that there are many interpretations of the concepts of diversity and equality (Murray, 2006)The discussion on equality can range from treating children as the same, to segregated service provision, to the celebration of diversity. There is confusion at policy and ground level and I contend it relates directly to the lack of understanding of equality

¹ Baker et al: (2004: 21-72)

² Baker et al: (2004: 61)



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concepts and critically to the lack of debate around these issues. The inclusion of the concepts is positive and very welcome. The sector now deserves the space for the critical reflection on what is needed to provide appropriate supports to support the development of transformative practice.

National and European Contexts

Inclusion of diversity and equality concepts at national level vary in different countries driven sometimes by equality legislation. It is clear there are challenges in moving forward the discussion in the Irish sector. Imagine the complexity of the discussion at transnational level. Within the network clarity of concepts is an issue and also can be contentious as each partner articulates their understanding and approach to inclusion. Even if it is clear that those both nationally and transnationally believe in the importance of the inclusion of equality in early childhood, how that individual or organisation understands the concept of equality will have a significant influence the content and on the actions for the implementation of a programme they are visioning.

On the other hand there are those who are opening up to the issues of inclusion. If these concepts have not been unpacked, by them or with them, *at all*, they may find themselves using the language of equality such as access, participation, equal opportunities etc. without being aware of their implication for training and practice. Effectively this can mean that very different things are being discussed by those sitting at the table or in the early childhood setting.

To conclude my view is that early childhood can be done differently, with the objective of making the world a better place. Indeed, early childhood can be seen as a site with a unique opportunity for transforming inequitable relations of gender, 'race', class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability and age for every child in both majority and minority communities. This is not an easy task, nor is it one for which there are simple, clear and comprehensive roadmaps; however there are ample possibilities to ensure sustainable change and social justice for every child. It is my contention that clarity of concepts is fundamental to achieving this aim. The early childhood care and education sector faces a choice. It can choose to be actively involved in transformation of inequalities in their work or implicitly involved in reproducing inequalities.

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