This paper is taken from

Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges. Selected papers from the fifteenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2013

Edited by Peter Cunningham
Technical Editor: Angela Kamara and published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-20-1

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as
Rojas-Bustos, K. (2013) 'Dispositions towards language/s in early years practice in England', in P. Cunningham (ed.) *Identities and Citizenship Education: Controversy, crisis and challenges.* London: CiCe, pp. 669 – 677.

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This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a selection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

Dispositions towards language/s in early years practice in England

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Abstract

Every Child a Talker (ECaT) was one of the many initiatives implemented by the Labour government to increase the quality of early years services in England. ECaT was designed to 'strengthen children's early language development by improving the quality of language provision in the early years settings' (DfCSF, 2008b). This paper analyses the position that 'other languages' were given in this initiative. ECaT was interpreted as a market in which its members were engaged in institutionalised activities to produce, reproduce, exchange and accumulate valued capital (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991). Critical Discourse Analysis (mainly inspired by Fairclough, 2010, 2009) was applied to unveil discourses about language/s. The conclusions indicated that in the discourses generated in the official documents, for instance, ideologies about quality-language-provision, 'other languages' were slightly included and, at the same time, extensively excluded. An example of this is that success was only considered to be achieved when children were able to perform in English to a certain level. There was no indication of how children who were learning more than one language could meet the standards for success. The analysis also indicates that the market promoted very few exchanges in which 'other languages' were valued capital. This research demonstrates that there is a pervasive process of legitimation of one language among many others and exposes contradictory discourses about inclusiveness and multicultural practices in the early years sector.

Keywords: *early years, language learning, English as an additional language, multicultural matters, inclusive practice, Theory of Practice, Pierre Bourdieu.*

Introduction

The previous Labour government (1997-2010) made a significant investment in increasing the number of services and the support for young children and their families. Many initiatives were implemented during this period to ensure *quality provision* (Sylva and Pugh, 2005) in the early years sector. These initiatives were *framed* by the policies and programmes implemented by the National Early Years Strategy, *inspected* by OFSTED (Office for Standards in Education) and *reinforced* by Local Authorities. This paper intends to problematise the position of 'other languages' in the early years curriculum and related policies and to critically review the impact of the intensive external regulations (Osgood, 2009) on multicultural and inclusive practices in the early years sector in England.

ECaT started in September 2008 with every each Local Authority selecting 20 early years settings to take part in this project. The children in these settings had the lowest levels of attainment in language development according to local statistics. The settings included different types of provision, such as pre-schools and Children's Centres (both maintained by the government) and day nurseries and childminders (private sector). The

project began with a self-auditing process to evaluate the quality of the language-learning opportunities that were provided for young children. In this way, each setting identified the areas of practice that required further development and acted appropriately. Within this context, it could have been expected that an initiative about language provision for young children in multicultural contexts would place a high value on the language/s that young children were learning at home. However, an initial overview of the documents and guidelines that accompanied the ECaT project indicated that little emphasis was placed on supporting home-language learning while children were acquiring English. This raised questions such as why the initiative did not appear to be interested in young children learning other languages and what the position of 'other languages' in early years provision was.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1991) theory of practice was applied to analyse early years practice and the position of other languages. Bourdieu's work has contributed greatly to the way in which language is analysed and studied. His work has had a significant impact on social research, as his theoretical framework can be adapted to broad areas in social science (Hanks, 2005). In this study, concepts such as *legitimacy*, *markets*, *cultural capital* and *dispositions* (among others) were applied to contextualise the position of other languages under the ECaT initiative. For example, other language/s could be taken as the cultural and social capital that individuals possess. Some *cultural capitals* are more valued than others in certain markets, providing a *profit of distinction*. This is defined as an estimation of the *value of profit* (accumulated prestige or honour), which can be translated not just into *economic capital* (material wealth, stocks and shares, property, etc) but also *cultural capital* (knowledge, skills and qualifications, among others).

Multicultural and linguistics studies have already identified the positive impact that home language/s have on language development. Advantages such as using the home language as a bridge to learning a new language; the ability to communicate with the child's family and community; valuing the child's identity and cultural background; and the asset of being bilingual have been broadly documented (Anderson *et al*, 2008; Genesee, 2004; Baker, 2003; Valdes, 2001; Kenner, 2000; Cline and Shamsi, 2000). Nevertheless, research into local multicultural practices in England has indicated that other languages, as cultural capital, are not rated equally. Brooker (2002), using one specific example from her study, shows that regardless of the prestigious position of the father of one little girl in the bilingual community, the girl's pre-school did not have the knowledge (and the appreciation) of the social capital of that family. Similarly, Kenner (2000) discussed how Meera's:

> biliteracy development was restricted by institutional constraints due to the lack of status afforded to literacies other than English in the educational system (p.13).

According to Bourdieu, the educational system is one of the principal influences of legitimising practice, and it therefore affects what constitutes valuable capitals. For this reason, this study focused on scrutinising the ECaT project implemented by the National Early Years Strategy. ECaT was taken as part of *the institution* that contributes to the *legitimation of language/s* in early years practice. Within this context, did ECaT value home languages?

Methodology

The ECaT initiative was documented via a set of guidelines that were directly distributed to the early years settings involved in the initiative. A selection of these documents was used to interpret the ECaT initiative, applying the theory of practice proposed by Bourdieu (1977, 1991). The exploration of Bourdieu's concepts and their application to this research suggest the need to examine themes such as: the *power relationship between institution/s* and consequently the *subordination of the members of the market;* the systematic attempt to provide a *'sense' of what is appropriate* (and not) in specific social contexts – as a process of inculcation or 'common-sense'; and the use of language to create *discourses of reality.* In this paper, a presentation of how the ECaT documents contributed to the creation of institutionalised discourses about early years practice is reported. Critical Discourse Analysis was applied with the intention of tracking how ideologies about quality-language-provision were 'projected in the texts' (Fairclough, 2010).

The analysis reported in this paper mainly focuses on the construction of discourses of reality (van Leeuwen, 2009) during the process of self-evaluation (auditing) of the effectiveness of the setting's practice in supporting language development for young children. The auditing was interpreted as the instance in which the gaps between the *imaginary representations* of quality-language-provision (this is what practice should 'look like') and what is (*perceived-as-) real practice* (Fairclough, 2010) were generated. Through this analysis, it was intended to explain how an effect of unification of the market was instilled using symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1977, 1991).

Special attention was also given to 'how the work of texturing, making texts as part of making meaning, [..] contributes to the dissemination' (Fairclough, 2010, p.263) of the legitimation of language/s. This analysis focused on the terms that were used in the ECaT markets to *talk* about the other language/s and the 'conditions of use' (*ibid*, p.37) of *other languages*. These were represented by the employment of certain words, expressions and specific ways of making meaning. Another important part of the analysis was based on those places in which *other language/s* were excluded. The aim was to indicate the position that discourses about *other language/s* have in relation to the 'order of dominance' of mainstream discourses (*ibid*, p.265) such as *quality-language-provision*.

The analysis of the ECaT documents reported in this paper was later used for the re-contextualisation of two semi-structured qualitative interviews with two Early Years Consultants from different Local Authorities in South London. Early Language Consultants were appointed by the Local Authority and helped each setting with the implementation of ECaT. The interviews were taken as local accomplished *talks* (Silverman, 2006; Alvesson, 2002 and Rapley, 2001) about practices. The intention was to track traces of the institutionalised discourses of *quality-language-provision* and to analyse dispositions towards *other language/s* during the auditing process (forthcoming publication).

Dispositions in the ECaT market

Dispositions were defined by Bourdieu (1977, 1991) as the ways in which individuals act and re-act in specific markets (or fields). Dispositions are part of what is perceived as appropriate 'enabling agents to generate an infinity of practices adapted to endlessly changing situations' (Bourdieu, 1977, p.16). The aim of this research is to critically

analyse dispositions towards the other language/s that young children have when starting pre-school settings. The critical analysis of the institutionalised discourses about *other languages* is one of the steps to understanding dispositions towards language/s in the early years sector. This paper presents an analysis of a selection of ECaT guidelines, firstly, to appreciate the lexicalisation of how 'other languages' were represented in the guidelines and, secondly, to comprehend how the institution, in this case the National Early Years Strategy, created an effect of unification of the market for the subordination of its members.

The lexicalisation of 'other languages'

'Other languages' were presented mainly in two separate sections. One was in the appendix called *Guidance on supporting children learning English as an additional Language (Guidance on Supporting EAL)*. This document was part of the Guidance for the Early Language Lead Practitioner (ELLP). The other document was an additional guideline, which was published the year before the implementation of the ECaT programme, and was mentioned in the ELLP and the ELC handbooks. This document was called *Supporting children learning English as an additional language (Supporting EAL)*. The terms English as an Additional Language and EAL were used throughout these documents. Occasionally, the term home language was also used. The text, in general, built up a positive perspective of children learning another language. Statements such as 'bilingualism is an asset', 'it is widely accepted that bilingualism confers intellectual advantages' (DfCSF, 2007, p.4) and 'speaking more than one language is a positive and beneficial skill and should be celebrated' (DfCSF, 2008a, p.53) were presented. In addition, the document *Supporting EAL* was organised around 'key principles' with positive remarks about being bilingual. Another element in these documents was a permanent message that 'the principles of good practice' for EAL children 'will enrich the experience of **all children**' (DfSCF, 2008a, p.53; this is also mentioned on pp.54, 55, 56 and 57 and in DfCSF, 2007 pp.2, 5 and 8 – my emphasis).

However, the documents also offer a range of contrastive relational structures, such as *x* but *y*, *x* to catch up with *y* and *x* is more likely to be *z*. For example:

> English as an Additional Language learner: a child who can communicate effectively in their own language ***but*** has not yet learnt English (in 1st audit tool; 2008b, p.11 – my italics and bold).

> Children may become conversationally fluent in a new language in two or three years but may take five or more years ***to catch up*** with monolingual peers in cognitive and academic language (DfCSF, 2007, p.5 – my italics and bold).

The second statement implies that monolingual children are more cognitively and academically advanced than bilingual children. Many statements in these two documents talk about 'a gap' in relation to the expected outcomes for the Foundation Stage and the need of EAL children to catch up with them ('to catch up' is mentioned on pp.3(x2)). On top of that, there is one statement that suggests that EAL children could be more 'vulnerable to poor outcomes' and could be the 'lowest achievers' (DfCSF, 2007, p.2 and p.3 respectively). Regarding assessing children's outcomes at the Foundation Stage (including language assessment), none of the documents distributed by ECaT explicitly advises on what considerations should be taken into account for assessing children who are learning different language/s at home. It is possible that the

lexicalisation of 'other languages' exposes a tendency to perceive learning more than one language as an asset for young children; however, underachievement, gaps and vulnerability are terms also used in association with those children (and their parents).

The majority of the sections of the ECaT documents did not explicitly include 'other languages'. Taking into account that the aim of the Every Child a Talker was to improve the quality of the language-learning opportunities that early years settings could provide, it is very significant that home language was 'extensively excluded' from these guidelines. That it is not mentioned could become a stronger message, which would influence the legitimisation of 'other language/s' (Bourdieu, 1991). It is for that reason that an important part of the analysis focused on identifying where 'other languages' were excluded. This is when there was not an explicit (and implicit) indication of the possibility that young children were learning different language/s at home. For example, the Early Language Consultant's Guidelines did not mention 'other languages' among the aims or among the outcomes expected after the implementation of the ECaT initiative. This implies that this matter was not relevant for the intervention or for the achievement of *quality-language-provision*.

'Other languages' were also extensively excluded from topics regarding increasing knowledge and skills about young children learning more than one language. The implications are that in order to achieve 'greatness' (Fairclough, 2010) this type of knowledge did not constitute a valuable capital. Therefore any further effort to train in or gain further knowledge about 'other language/s' would not be officially recognised.

Nevertheless, 'other language/s' were slightly-included in the main ECaT documents. There were three points under which English as an Additional Language was included in the ELC guidelines. Mostly, it was about recognising what services and resources were already available in each Local Authority. Similarly, in the ELLP, there was only one opportunity to consider 'other languages' during the audit of practice.

Subordination to the ECaT market

The 'auditing process' was mainly supported by two different guidelines. One was for the Early Language Consultant (ELC) who is 'an expert' in the field of language development. The second document was for the Early Language Lead Practitioner (ELLP) who was already an early years practitioner working in the selected setting. The ELLP's role was to 'have the opportunity to improve [their] knowledge, skills and expertise' (DfCSF, 2008a, p.4) about language development. It was expected that both the Consultant and the Lead Practitioner would work together using these guidelines. Nevertheless, the lexico-grammatical structure used in the documents revealed different approaches, regarding 'audit' for example:

Table 1

ELLP – Guidance for Early Language Lead Practitioners	ELC – Guidance for Consultants
What is an audit? An audit is a way of looking at and improving what goes on in your Early Years setting. It involves looking closely at where you would like to be and what are the ideals and goals for your setting. It then involves you evaluating what is happening right now and what you would	A key function of the ELC's role is to promote alignment within the LA and between the LA and other service providers. Initially, the ELC will facilitate an audit of existing provision in the LA. All relevant organisations e.g. the Primary Care Trust (PCT), Speech and Language Therapy Service, Children's

like to change. An audit is a positive process that helps you to identify areas where you need help or guidance so that your setting can support children and staff in the best ways possible. There are different types of audit and this model is based on the idea of going on a journey (DfCSF, 2008a, p.6).	Centre Strategic Leaders and organisations providing training should be involved in this audit. This will ensure that relevant information is collected in each LA and that services are not duplicated (DfCSF, 2008b, p.5).

There are very interesting features that are worth pointing out when comparing these two texts. The most evident is the use of the second person 'you' in the ELLP text (which differs from the use of the third person, 'the consultant', in the ELC document. These pronouns were consistently used throughout the documents). The use of the second person is in line with Osgood's (2007 and 2009) arguments that there is a tendency in policy discourses to appeal to 'individuals' to raise quality. This is a particular feature in the English early years system in which the increased transformation of practice has been justified with top-down measures and the creation of an 'over-regulated' early years sector.

In the same vein, the ELLP text generates implicit normative force (Fairclough, 2010) by creating a 'commonsensical' way of doing. Statements such as 'audit is a positive process' and 'your setting can support children and staff in the best way', imply that it is obvious, common sense and morally appropriate (if you are a practitioner who cares) to do it in-this-way. In addition, the same paragraph requests subordination to the external power: 'you [..] identify areas where you need help or guidance'. The text proposes that, first of all, ***you*** need help and help is for you (externally) because we know and can show you 'the best way'. The text calls for 'personal loyalty' and 'all the virtues honoured by the ethic of honour'. In this case, the Lead Practitioner becomes the chosen one with the privilege of being involved in this programme, as it 'provides an opportunity for you to become involved in a national programme which focuses on a national priority' and ***she***, (as the pictures included showed only female practitioners) in order to support children and staff, needs to subordinate herself to the external power. Bourdieu (1991) identified this as a subtle means of exercising power through what he called 'symbolic violence'.

In contrast, the Consultant's text does not provide a definition of 'audit'. Taking into account that 'audit' was a very important part of the Consultant's role, it is possible to suggest that this knowledge was already expected in these professionals and this is why further explanation was not required in the Consultant's handbook. The text presented in Table 1 uses the third person, with explicit normative statements and instructions: 'Initially, the ELC will facilitate an audit of existing provision in the LA'. Similarly, statements of expectations in which responsibilities and obligations for the implementation of the programme were also provided 'ensure [..] that services are not duplicated'. The text gives the sense that the Consultant had less control over his/her actions and acted as 'facilitator' only for the implementation of the ECaT. The exercise of power is more explicit in the ELC document than in the ELLP guidelines.

Conclusions

The analysis of the lexicalisation of other language/s in the main documents distributed during the ECaT project indicated that the exclusion of 'other languages' was substantial, especially in the auditing process. For example, it is not clear that home-language/s were perceived as an important feature of language development for young

children. In addition, there were no questions regarding what practitioners knew about young children learning more than one language. The exclusion from the aims and outcomes was particularly significant, as the imaginary representations of high-quality-language-provision did not include other languages as valuable cultural capital. As a consequence, there was less possibility of production, re-production and exchange of 'other language/s' and multicultural practices.

The *text* in the ECaT documents was clearly presented in different styles to address different audiences. For instance, the use of 'you' and 'your' and appealing to personal loyalty in the Lead Practitioner's handbook suggests the use of symbolic violence to exercise power. By contrast, the *text* in the Early Language Consultant's handbook was constructed with explicit normative statements (i.e. instructions and restricted schedules). The Consultant appeared as a facilitator representing a more powerful force, whereas the lead practitioner was persuaded to subordinate herself to 'more-knowledgeable' external forces.

Within the institutionalised discourses about quality, quality-language-provision implies the legitimation of one language among many others. Quality provision is generated and controlled by external forces in which 'other languages' were slightly included and, at the same time, extensively excluded. Occasionally, 'other languages' were seen as positive attributes as a bridge to the learning of English; however, at other times children who spoke them were perceived as being at a disadvantage in comparison with monolingual children. The implications are that there is less room to value home-language, which in turn marginalises practices that celebrate and encourage young children to maintain their language/s. There is the implicit message that English is what matters and the status of 'other languages' is subordinated to one of being needed only to obtain a better assimilation of English (Anderson *et al*, 2008).

The findings demonstrate that the guidelines reveal contradictory discourses about language development in young children as they failed to recognise the importance of home-language in young children's linguistic development. Moreover, it appears that the inculcation of what constitutes 'quality-language-provision' is detached from the principles of inclusiveness and multicultural practices in the early year's sector.

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