

**“Reflections on Disadvantage & Diversity:
Untangling Their Roles in Early Childhood Education”**

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Those of us who work with children and families serve an increasingly diverse population. We are also challenged to provide quality care and education within a social-economic structure that disadvantages some groups of people and advantages others. We must keep learning anew what quality practice means.

Diversity, rightly considered, is a wonderful thing: it is a source of vital learning and support for children and families. On the other hand, disadvantage is a systemic blight that sabotages healthy development. However, in my experience, these two realities have become harmfully entangled in educational thought and practice in the USA and elsewhere. This paper is an attempt to untangle the two, an essential step in the building of a care and educational system and a society that truly nurtures all of its children. In addition, I also suggest elements of educational programs that equitably treat diversity as strength, treat diversity as disadvantage. My comments will focus on how diversity and disadvantage issues play out in the USA. I call on you to translate what I say to the conditions in Ireland.

Disadvantage and Advantage

The dictionary, an illuminating place to start, tells us that disadvantage is a lack of advantage, that as a verb it means to place at a disadvantage or to affect unfavorably, and that there are people, the disadvantaged, who are placed at a disadvantage, particularly with regard to social opportunities. These meanings of *disadvantage* call for a look at another definition—that of *advantage*: the position, state, or

circumstance of being ahead of another or of having the better of him or her; a favoring circumstance, something which gives one a better position, or the result of superior position: and increased well-being or convenience.

The meaning of advantage is the ghost that lurks within the meaning of disadvantage. How we understand the relationship between disadvantage and advantage profoundly influences our thinking about what to do about both. I think of disadvantage as what you get after advantage has happened, the leftovers from the table of the advantaging society. So who gets to the table first and eats most of the meal? Who sets the table and invites the guests, and who decides whose way to toss the leftovers? When we identify the advantaged, we can also identify the disadvantaged.

In the USA, the portrait of economic disadvantage -- being poor - - often has dark skin or is female or is of "diverse" religion or language... Moreover, those who hold economic and political power get to choose the characteristics of those who get advantages and those who do not. Moreover, the advantaged then use the differences from them as the reason for not having, thus the intersection between diversity and disadvantage is constructed. In Ireland, you have had your own long struggle against those who would disadvantage you. At the same time, it is also necessary to look carefully at how current Irish the care and education systems may now be advantaging some and disadvantaging others. Whether this process is intentional or done by people unaware of creating such underlying dynamics, the outcome is equally hurtful.

Diversity and Who Has It

The dictionary tells us that diverse means different in character or quality; not of the same kind; unlike and that diversity is the condition of being diverse. There is a ghost here too, an old meaning for diversity: contrary to what is agreeable, good or right. These definitions raise the

question of whom we mean when we talk about diversity. In another words, who qualifies as diverse, as being unlike or not right?

In the USA we are certainly talking about people with the darker ranges of skin color and both citizens and immigrants whose home language, religion and cultures differ from the dominant white, European American society's. In Ireland you are talking about Travelers, and ethnic minority asylum seekers or refugees whose way of life includes differences from yarn dominant Irish culture. (And, ironically, in your past, Irish culture would have been considered different from and less than the colonial English culture) We are also talking about non-traditional families, including gay and lesbian families; people with physical or psychological disabilities and, girls and women because they may be different from the dominant culture male norms. But, do we talk about the groups who are advantaged in our societies as also part of diversity? I know that in the USA we usually don't. People in those groups are considered to be what is normal and right, not different or unlike.

Thus, in yet another way, diversity meaning different, and disadvantage, meaning less than, get tangled.

A Rationale for the Disadvantaging of the Diverse

In 1971, William Ryan identified the concept of blaming-the-victim as a core ideological dynamic for confounding diversity with disadvantage. Victim-blaming works by "justifying inequality by finding defects in the victims of inequality" (Ryan.,1971, p.xiii), and . operates in a four-step process (Ryan, 1979, pp.8-9). First, identify the societal problem (e.g., school failure; poverty). Second, identify those who are affected by the problem (i.e., the school drop-outs, the poor) and figure out how they are different from the advantaged (i.e., the school successes, the wealthy). The third step is the critical twist: identify the *differences* in the people who are victimized by the problem as the *cause* of the problem. Then, creating a governmental or non-profit agency

program to correct the differences, or, in other words, to fix the victim becomes the fourth step (p.8-9). This solution is decided upon without any real consultation with the people who are experiencing the problem.

(In contrast to victim-blaming stands the work of people such as Myles Horton (1998), who did adult educational and organizing work in the rural south of the USA throughout most of the 20th century, including with many of the people who led the American Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. He relates that when he began his work, he wanted people to have the problems for which he had the solutions. He then learned that he first had to listen to what people saw as their problems and then help them figure out how they wanted to solve the problems they had identified.)

Ryan (1971) also argues that victim-blaming is an attempt to chart a middle course between an overtly repressive view that accepts the disadvantaging of some as necessary to maintain the proper advantaging of others, and the radical view that identifies society as the problem and seeks major systemic changes to create a more equitable society. Victim blaming allows people to maintain their advantages while also feeling good about themselves because they are trying to help the disadvantaged. Consequently, Ryan (1971) calls it "a brilliant ideology for justifying a perverse form of social action designed to change, not society, as one might expect, but rather society's victim" (p.8).

And, when problems of disadvantage are not quickly solved through victim-blaming approaches or the advantaged begin to feel the pinch of a declining economy, victim blaming can turn into the more repressive view. In the USA we are seeing a resurgence of the conviction that the privileges that affluent Americans enjoy (and that most Americans enjoy in comparison to much of the rest of the world) are simply the fruits of natural superiority and therefore deserved.

The victim-blaming perspective operates in care and education programs under the guise of a cultural deprivation argument, which posits that the family culture and language of non-dominant groups are the source of their children's problems in school and, therefore, also the cause of their subsequent low-income as adults. In the USA, this cultural deprivation approach is the framework for much of the policy and programs for disadvantaged children and families. Explanations for the lack of school success range from: they don't have language (because they do not speak English, although they speak fluently at home), they don't have a concept of time, their families don't value education, the children are disrespectful because they abide by different rules of respect to adults, the children do not know how to work independently (their culture encourages them to work cooperatively with others rather than in competition). Therefore, school programs work to teach children different ways of speaking, thinking, and acting—and make clear in many ways that the children's home way of being is inferior. Here is the insidious confounding of disadvantage and diversity with tragically harmful consequences to those diverse children we want to serve. Is that becoming true in Ireland as well?

Ways that Diversity is Disadvantaged in Educational Practice

Policies and practices in schools disadvantage children who are diverse in a variety of ways. Girls often receive subtle and not-so-subtle messages about lower expectations for their academic achievement. Teachers are much more likely to do a task for young girls rather than teach them how to do it for themselves, as the teachers do with boys. Children with various forms of disability face several obstacles to learning at their full ability. Programs may not make adaptation for specific learning problems, because children are all expected to learn the same way and at the same speed. Wheelchairs don't fit into classrooms or doors. Teachers do not know sign language. Guide dogs cannot be accommodated in the school. Textbooks are not available on tape.

Children in low-income families may come to school suffering the harmful affects of economic disadvantage: insufficient nutrition, toxic substances like lead in their environment affecting their health, fatigued because of overcrowding in their homes, untreated or poorly treated health problems. At school they may meet teachers who assume they will not be as intelligent or have too low self-esteem to learn, or blame parents for lack of concern and involvement when their work schedule doesn't allow them to attend school functions. If low-income parents do manage to come to school, they are likely to have significantly less influence than wealthy parents, or they may feel uneasy in the school setting because they carry scars from their own negative educational experiences, or they may be in a hurry because they have to get back to work or else lose income or even their job..

A child from a culturally different family may meet with an unfamiliar school culture and language, and experience the school devaluing her home culture and language. She sees no reflections of her home reality in the educational materials. She may not know the child care center or school's language, rules, teaching styles, but the school expects her to learn as if she did. She doesn't know the school way of being and is not allowed to use her home way of being. In these circumstances, many children begin to experience a sense of wrongness and lowered self-esteem, which then adds to their learning challenges.

When well-meaning childcare workers and teachers realize that the school has to intentionally teach about the school culture; too often they attempt to do so in a way that denies or erases children's home culture. When care and education programs devalue or try to erase home-culture strengths in the name of helping children to be successful in school, they take away the tools children have to be effective, which sets them at an instant disadvantage. Under these circumstances, only a handful of children are able to catch-up with their dominant culture classmates. When they do not succeed, the school and teachers are

confirmed in their initial beliefs of the inferiority of the cultures and families of these children. However, this vicious circle can be interrupted.

Changing Things

If we are willing to develop an early childhood care and education system in which diversity is strength and where everyone is welcome at the table, then you join a life-long journey. To get started on this journey we need to engage in several tasks.

One, we need to understand that, by definition, all children and all families exist within a cultural context, from which they derive identity, meaning, values, connection, security, and strengthen, as well as language and behavioral tools for interacting with people and acting on the world. Furthermore, children need to know the language and rules for success in the dominant culture. Therefore, teachers must promote bicultural and bilingual development. This means supporting the language and skills they are learning within their home culture while also teaching them how to successfully communicate and interact within the dominant culture. (Note that the suffix “bi” means “two”: becoming bi-cultural is an additive, not a subtractive concept.) With the flexibility and curiosity of the young, children are eager to become bi-cultural and bi-lingual. But are we also flexible and motivated enough to learn how to do this?

Two, we must to understand that non-prejudice is not based on ignoring differences, which denies children their birthrights of ethnicity, culture and identity. Rather, we must become respectably aware, knowledgeable and at ease with the range of human diversity: color and race, physical differences and disabilities, differences of language and culture, differences in family structure and status. We must also become comfortable and skilled in discussing human diversity with children.

Three, we need to turn the spotlight on the systemic realities and dynamics of adamantine and disadvantage in our countries. We need to

open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to the realities of these dynamics and to understand how perfectly wonderful and intelligent children are trapped and undermined by them.

Fourth, we need to explore and understand the multiple parts of our own identity: who we are culturally and where we are advantaged or disadvantaged by our societal 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 a care and education system that truly delivers equal educational services for all children.

Embarking on Our Journey

To embark on a journey of change, teachers and parents must also work on the three dimensions in regards to themselves. This means engaging in several areas of reflection and action to:

- Understand your cultural backgrounds in-depth and how it influences your teaching beliefs, styles, and interactions with children.
- Overcome the ethnocentrism that leads you to experience your cultural rules and values as the best or only way to be.
- Get clear about the distinction between diversity and disadvantage and ways they become tangled in care and education programs.
- Uncover and eliminate previously unexamined fears, prejudices and misunderstandings, so that you can become ever more able to engage in cultural negotiation and manage cultural conflicts in the classrooms
- Develop a critical analysis of the societal structures of power and privilege and the impact of these structures on care and education.
- Articulate a vision of the future where disadvantage based on diversity has been eliminated and all people are welcome and equitably share. , What would care and education programs look like if you had all the resources you needed to make them work for all people?
- Connect with others to build the kind of society and care and educational systems that reflect your vision.

The proclamation of the “Provisional Government of the Irish Republic to the People of Ireland” (April 24, 1916) includes the

following statement: “The Republic declares its resolve to pursue the happiness and prosperity of the whole nation and of all its parts, cherishing all the children of the nation equally...” It will be a wonderful day when their hope is truly realized.

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