

# A capital idea?

Reference to 'cultural capital' in the draft Education Inspection Framework has sparked a number of concerns in the early years sector, finds consultant and author **Helen Moylett**



**A** new phrase has entered the early years lexicon: cultural capital. Associated with the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, the term now appears in the draft Ofsted Education Inspection Framework (EIF) and accompanying handbooks – and already it is raising questions and concerns.

Cultural capital refers to values, beliefs, norms, skills, tastes, knowledge, understandings and status that we acquire through being part of a particular social class and/or cultural group.

Ofsted's use of the term in the revised inspection framework implies that some children do not have sufficient cultural capital to narrow the achievement gap. Settings will be expected to 'adopt or construct a curriculum that is

ambitious and designed to give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life' (draft EIF).

However, it is important to acknowledge that every child has cultural capital. As the New Zealand early years curriculum Te Whariki says, 'I come not with my own strengths but bring with me the gifts, talents and strengths of my family, tribe and ancestors.'

## OFSTED DEFINITION Early years handbook

The draft *Early Years Inspection Handbook* notes, 'Inspectors will evaluate how well leaders ensure that the curriculum they use or create enhances the experiences and opportunities available to children, particularly the most disadvantaged... It is the role of the setting to ensure that children

One concern is that 'cultural capital' might be narrowly middle-class

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experience the awe and wonder of the world in which they live, through the seven areas of learning.'

And a footnote explains, 'Ofsted's definition of knowledge and cultural capital matches that found in the aims of the national curriculum. Cultural capital is the essential knowledge that children need to be educated citizens.'

## Schools handbook

The definition is expanded in the *Schools Inspection Handbook*, 'Inspectors will consider the extent to which schools are equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life. Ofsted's understanding of this knowledge and cultural capital matches that found in the aims of the national curriculum. It is the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been

thought and said and helping to engender an appreciation of human creativity and achievement.'

In fact, the national curriculum (NC) does not refer explicitly to cultural capital. It seems that Ofsted has decided that 'the best that has been thought and said' plus 'an appreciation of human creativity and achievement' equal cultural capital. This tinkering with the NC is surely outside Ofsted's remit as a regulation and inspection body.

## THE PROBLEM WITH 'CULTURAL CAPITAL'

### A question of class

In our multicultural, diverse society, children (as well as families and practitioners) will have many different ways of talking and thinking about the world.

Bourdieu maintained that although we all have cultural capital, not all forms of it are valued equally by the education system. School is somewhere working-class children are taught to be more middle class – thus by default working-class culture is devalued, working-class children do not feel as 'at home' and they are more likely to struggle in education as a result.

Several studies (for example, Tizard and Hughes's 1980s research) show children being self-assured at home but losing that confidence when confronted with the sort of adult talk that happens in early years settings. Meantime, middle-class children and mothers tended to be more familiar with what might be expected and, therefore, better able to respond appropriately.

Cultural capital is not only evident in adult interactions. Practitioners need to be sensitive as to how children's different 'funds of knowledge' may influence their play, learning and peer relationships (Chesworth 2016).

### A question of culture

Clearly, cultural capital is not confined to issues of class, with early years settings welcoming children from many different cultural, religious and language backgrounds and from many different types of family.

Some studies (for example, Lahman and Park 2004) found parents wanted their children to learn English as an additional language yet were also fearful this would cause their children to lose their family culture. In other words,

parents understood that the language we use is not just words but an expression of culture and identity.

Teachers (who did not share the parents' cultural background) were found to value the parents, yet were unsure how to welcome them into the setting and communicate with them effectively.

This is an example of how some forms of cultural capital gain prestige. The teachers wanted to include all parents but found they weren't 'on the same wavelength' with some parents. The parents who don't share our cultural capital are more likely to feel their contributions are less valuable.

Ofsted's use of the term does not include any acknowledgement that 'cultural capital' might be a contested or problematic concept. In fact, Ofsted seeks to make it uncontested by defining it as 'the essential knowledge children need to be educated citizens'. However, do we all agree on that essential knowledge, on 'the best that has been thought and said' or how we help children appreciate 'human creativity and achievement'?

### A question of skills

Educated citizens need to know how to learn more than they need to know masses of facts. The Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) are what drive children to learn and are universal lifelong learning skills, yet they are not mentioned in this context, Ofsted preferring to go for 'the awe and wonder of the world in which they live through the seven areas of learning'.

### Other questions

Among the many other questions raised by the term 'cultural capital' and the decision to include it in the EIF are:

- Where has this definition of cultural capital come from, given it is not actually in the NC?
- Is it appropriate for Ofsted to be a curriculum design body as well as responsible for regulation and inspection?
- Who decides what is the best that has been thought and said?
- Does appreciating human thought and creativity start with appreciating your own critical and creative thinking and making? How might encouraging practitioners to value children's engagement,



## REFERENCES

- The draft framework and handbooks for the new inspection system are at: <https://bit.ly/2GjmneV>
  - Bourdieu P 'The Forms of Capital' in *Handbook of Theory of Research for the Sociology of Education* by Richardson J (1986)
  - Tizard B and Hughes M (2003) *Young Children Learning (Understanding Children's Worlds)* (2nd ed)
  - Chesworth L (2016) 'A funds of knowledge approach to examining play interests: listening to children's and parents' perspectives', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 24 (3) 294-308
  - Lahman MKE and Park S (2004) 'Understanding children from diverse cultures: bridging perspectives of parents and teachers', *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 12 (2) 131-142
  - O'Sullivan J (2019) **What is Cultural Capital?**, [www.leyf.org.uk/what-is-cultural-capital](http://www.leyf.org.uk/what-is-cultural-capital)
- motivation and thinking (the CoEL) be part of this?
- How do we introduce children to as many different and rich experiences as possible, valuing the communities and cultures of which early years settings and schools are part?
  - Do we want everyone to be middle-class – is that the mission of education or do we want to make settings and schools more inclusive?
  - To be inclusive, should we be much more explicit about the differences and richness that children bring rather than casting some of them as disadvantaged?
  - How does austerity impact children and families? How many families are being told by Government that they are not doing a good enough job – for example, reading to their children, when Government cuts have closed so many Children's Centres and libraries?
- All these questions need to be debated if we are to have a rich and vibrant early years curriculum, not a narrow one based on the NC.
- Some educators are very clear about what they mean by cultural capital – among them June O'Sullivan, chief executive of London Early Years Foundation (LEYF). She takes a pragmatic approach to ensuring that children have the tools they need for success and relates a discussion with practitioners who agreed 'that cultural capital was not a list of cultural activities that we ticked off which would neither deepen children's understanding [nor] strengthen their language and possibly alienate their parents.'

### A wider debate

There is also a need for a wider debate. Cultural capital is part of a proposed EIF package which fails to highlight the principles of the EYFS, ignores the CoEL and is selective in the pedagogy that it promotes – thus risking the loss of some important practices. And there is an irony too. The underlying message in the framework, handbooks, research review and accompanying videos and slideshows is that engaging in formal learning earlier and earlier will somehow make young children better learners, rather than disenfranchise and disconnect them from ideas, creativity and cultures. ■