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Bilingualism: the two languages of young people in care

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Introduction

Institutions create their own languages, which become embedded in everyday experience (van Dijk, 1995). In order to function successfully, those in the subordinate position in the institution must learn the language of the institution. Residential child care is one such institution. Institutions and institutional language can be understood on the micro scale of a foster home or a group home or on the macro level of societal relations (Smith, 1999). Those in a less powerful position (i.e. young people in residential care) have no choice but to learn the language of the more powerful (Freire, 1985). Those in a position of authority (i.e. staff within the institutions) could choose to learn the language of the young people who occupy a less powerful position; however, they have no need to do so. Many examples of this can be cited, such as those of bilingual French Canadians as compared to unilingual English Canadians, bilingual Palestinians living in Israel as compared to unilingual Israelis, or even children in care as compared to the professionals in the system which cares for them.

This paper explores how young people make use of two genres of language when discussing their reflections on growing up in care. It examines the word and phrase choice made by young people who have experienced Canadian child welfare care. It explores the thematic finding that the young people in the study were fluent in the language of system-speak, in addition to their own youth language. The focus of the paper is the way in which system-speak pervades their speech when they are talking about their care experiences. The paper considers the concept of 'bilingualism' as it relates to power, oppression and voice. An analysis of word choice indicates key linguistic markers that reflect young people's institutional experience of being regulated in care. By identifying youth's bilingual adaptation to the care system, the implications of this for child and youth care practice can be considered.

Bilingualism

Cultures and institutions develop unique languages, which have a profound effect on voice. These languages shape and support or inhibit the expression of voice. The powers-that-be create the language in which the less powerful have to seek fluency. Fluency in institutional language gives oppressed groups an advantage (Freire, 1998). By being expert in their own life situation and by means of exposure to the language of the dominant group, their perspective is broader than those with a limited viewpoint.

Postmodern philosophers such as Foucault (1991) illustrate how language, being a mechanism of exerting power, is particularly significant in both mechanisms of oppression and strategies of liberation. One can ‘dominate’ through the control of language, but equally, one can challenge and resist by means of capturing and making use of the language of the ‘dominator’. Foucault asserts that by being fluent in the language of the oppressor, the subjugated are able to strategically use language to mount resistance. They have the ability to understand the codes of the dominant group and by being fluent in their own language are able to exclude the dominant group from understanding what is being said. This analysis can be applied to the relationship between young people in care and the various care professionals with whom they come into contact.

Professional control over resources impacts on service deployment and operation, as well as the management and practices of the services, and this is reflected in language. Services provided in the context of professional classification call for the designation of a client group. In this case, the client group is young people in care. The worker holds power over the client as an individual by having the power to define eligibility, allocate services and elicit compliance by providing access to, or threatening the loss of, resources (De Montigny, 1998). The ideological power of the institution, enacted through service allocation and operating procedures, defines the clients in the images determined by their categorisation (Hugman, 1991).

In social interactions between young people and practitioners, boundaries are put in place through three dimensions (value judgments, social distance and knowledge). In language, boundaries are made real by a range of lexical strategies, hierarchical orderings, and dividing practices (Foucault, 1978). Riggins (1997) provides some examples:

Expressions that are most revealing of the boundaries separating Self and Other are inclusive and exclusive pronouns and possessives, such as we and they, us and them, and ours and theirs (Riggins, 1997 p.8).

An examination of such usage of language reveals much about how young people in care view themselves in relation to each other and the system which provides their care.

Voice and Rights

The bilingual abilities of the young people in this study are indicative of their emerging voice. Their fluency in system speak appears to be evidence of oppression. They also maintain an ability to speak in their own youth language. Their bilingual abilities are suggestive of a means of resistance against ‘dominating’ forces (Fanon, 1963; Smith, 1990). Their articulate and profound insights about the system attest to the intensity of their striving to find self, and relationships, in

a regulated existence. The dual perspectives of these young people provide a truly expert viewpoint on Canada’s child protection system.

Voice is also very important in upholding children’s rights. By their very nature, rights require that they be asserted, which demands voice (Wringe, 1981). Voice is protective and a significant safeguard for young people in care –permitting greater transparency of the system that governs the lives of the vulnerable – in that children must be able to tell somebody if they are being victimised or harmed.

Methodology

The findings are drawn from an intensive case study that analysed the spoken word of young people in care by means of a model that examined language across dimensions of interpersonal relations, disciplinary practices and institutional relations (Snow, 2006). The study was part of a research project of the National Youth in Care Networks, Canada’s premier youth in care advocacy organisation.

Through the use of critical discourse analysis and making note of specific linguistic markers and by means of frame analysis, the study provided a robust reading of the messages of young people in care. This particular paper considers the word choice and associated lexical markers when young people discuss their experience in care.

There are many linguistic markers that can aid in examining discourse. One can consider the presence or absence of specific lexical forms in a text. For example, the particular choice of words can be considered both through its use and also by examining ways in which the meaning could have been conveyed otherwise. The multiple function and meanings of words can be looked at in a situational context. Repetition and omission can be identified and considered as to use and significance. The choice of words and their meaning within the context in which they are employed are both important.

The research was conducted between 2003 and 2004. The sample consisted of 27 young people (seven male and 20 female) who were in care in nine provinces and one territory in Canada. The sample was a non-randomised convenience sample. Young people were interviewed for the study and ethical approval was granted by the University of Toronto Health Sciences Research Board.

Findings

The language of objects

Young people made liberal use of language that refers to the distribution, management and disposal of objects. This use of language appeared to reflect

their view of themselves as objects.

The following young person uses this language pattern to speak of the need not to be moved around and to work towards permanency. She notes that young people get 'slotted' somewhere like objects ('putting'; 'getting put'). Once 'slotted', they are often moved ('a bunch') and she suggests this should not happen ('aren't moved'). Perhaps it would be better, she suggests, that young people be placed just once.

Well basically, like, putting, getting put into a permanent foster home so they aren't moved from place to place, that is one of the big issues, that I have, another is, ah, I'm not sure, the main big one I can think of is like getting moved to a bunch of foster homes versus being put in one main one.

Language borrowed from commerce was used throughout to express the feeling of being an object in a machine-like system. The language of the young people reflects being caught in the mechanism of an impersonal and automated system. They depict the experience of being an object in an assembly-line process. The object is frequently shuttled about, ('forced to move'; 'moving around'; 'moved from place to place') by workers that deliver them ('ship them') and move them around at will to a series of destinations ('a bunch of foster homes'). The object is a commodity in the market in that its maintenance, storage, and passage fees must be paid ('ship you'; 'a source of income'). Evidently the product even has a delivery date ('everything stops as soon as you turn nineteen').

Another young person comments that youth in care are let go of too quickly. This comment presents a bizarre image of clusters of children being hustled from group home to group home and occasionally just being dropped by their handlers. Encoded in this response is the perceived damage the child incurs from being dropped. Instead of the system trying to grapple with the challenges presented by the young people, it simply moves them on.

...And they let youth in care go too fast, instead of dealing with problems they ship them from group home to group home.

By identifying various linguistic markers in an attempt to more fully hear the multiple messages being presented in the statement a deeper analysis is possible:

(1.) 'And they let youth in care go too fast,'

Here the respondent identifies the concern that youth will be dropped during delivery. This word choice 'letting go' presents an image of an object being dropped, \neg with an unspoken implication of damages caused by the fall.

(2.) 'instead of dealing with problems'

This lexical arrangement represents a recommendation that the system stick

with and struggle through difficulties with the young person. This formulation implies that, rather than facing and working through a youth's challenges, the system gives up on them.

(3.) 'they ship them'

Again using a figure of speech borrowed from commerce, the respondent observes that they are disposed of.

(4.) 'from group home to group home.'

Explaining the destination of the disposal, she vividly illustrates the problem being raised. The repetition of the phrase implies an ongoing process, the action repeated *ad infinitum*.

There is a quality of diaspora to the comments. They speak of being forcibly displaced and make reference to considerable disconnection and disenfranchisement. Another young person expresses concern about the frequency of movement, and makes reference to children being moved against their will.

...I think that the amount of times that kids are forced to move are an issue,...

The transient experience of young people in care is mentioned by this next young person. Using system-speak and with repetition ('transiency'; 'moving') she emphasises that there is a lot more movement than there should be ('too much').

I'd say, transiency, too much moving around,

The language of growing up regulated

The system, whatever it is, has a language of its own. The young people in this study use vague language and struggle to find the words to convey the complexities of the obscure and difficult-to-describe system. They are further frustrated trying to convey the specific way in which they are using the term the system. It can sometimes mean its financial functioning ('recreational funds, extended care and maintenance'); it can mean the regulatory governance of the child's life ('plan of care'; 'paperwork'; 'caseload'); or the unending hierarchy of the bureaucracy ('worker'; 'supervisor'; 'Ministry'). They talk around it, they use vague language, repetition and rephrasing, and still seem unsatisfied with their choice of words. Indeed, the author also has trouble capturing the multiple ways that young people in this study used this term. Vague and tentative language suggests feelings of confusion, fear and alienation in an amorphous existence. Confusion dominates the young people's discourse.

The young people are aware of their governed existence but seem confused and overwhelmed by the panoptic sense of regulated care, lumping together interchangeably the worker, the system and the Ministry. Ruling relations are evident in statements of 'us' versus 'them', with young people being the subordinate group. Frequent references to 'they' suggest an omnipotent ruling force – that of the system. These young people are fluent and articulate in system-specific language. Their utterances mix genres, combining *system-speak* with *youth language*. The intermingling of youth and institutional language reveals a dual attendance to their own perspective and that of the 'ruling class' (Swigonski, 1994).

This young person illustrates the complex and amorphous nature of the system and the need for skills to survive within it. He speaks about the problems young people have in understanding the system. By identifying specific linguistic markers, the great size of the system becomes apparent, as well as the complex skills required by young people to deal with their own regulation. The following segment of speech is broken down into six phrases:

(1.) ...and they're not exactly that articulate and they don't know how the system works, (2.) nobody is teaching them how to do this stuff, (3.) I believe somebody should be there, like a peer support, (4.) mentoring or something or somebody, (5.) to show them how the system works, (6.) how to approach the higher ups and everything.

(1.) 'and they're not exactly that articulate and they don't know how the system works,'

He indicates the obscurity of the system by noting that its functioning requires understanding. He voices doubts that young people can successfully interface with it. The use of the word 'articulate' is interesting, given that the intent clearly encompasses a broader meaning than the narrow definition of the word, to be well-spoken. What is being referred to is that navigating the system requires a degree of competence.

(2.) 'nobody is teaching them how to do this stuff,'

In an example repeated by young people throughout the study, the use of a nebulous epithet like 'stuff' indicates that the speaker does not have the words to explain it. What they are talking about is something beyond words, for its complexity and all-encompassing nature. By being vague, they express their sense of an amorphous and overwhelming phenomenon, that being the system. The word 'nobody' is also highly significant, implying the unknowable nature of what it is that needs to be taught.

(3.) 'I believe somebody should be there, like a peer support,'

He asserts his opinion that there should be some associative supports available to the child. The wording suggests his sense that peers who might understand and know how to teach what must be learned would be the most effective form of support.

(4.) 'mentoring or something or somebody,'

This particular phrasing indicates confusion as to who or what needs to teach whatever it is to be known. It implies that supportive relations of a sort would help solve the problem. The repetitious use of terms that refer vaguely to some person reveals his sense that there is actually nobody there.

(5.) 'to show them how the system works,'

Again, with the vague language referring to a concept that is difficult to describe, he explains that people are needed to explicate it. The system is something that 'works' and young people in care need help understanding how it functions.

(6.) 'how to approach the higher ups and everything,'

As an example of the operations of the system and the skills needed to navigate them, he points to the need for young people in care to learn how to interface with the hierarchy. There is a frustration with the bureaucracy and with the regulatory nature of the system. Young people describe a ruled existence that can be confusing, conflicting and frustrating. The system makes plans, has procedures and is regulated by supervisors and Ministries.

Rules appear contradictory and the bureaucracy gives a Kafkaesque quality to the process (Kafka, 1930/1992). This next young person is left waiting without knowing the outcome of his request.

Sometimes. The case plans with social workers, she would like, lay some options out in front of me and you know I had a choice between it, but we didn't really start from scratch. With my rec fund, and my last case plan, I wanted to get a gym membership, and my social worker was like blah, blah, blah everything, you know, my brother got on his rec fund and he got a bike for like 250 dollars, and all he had to do was go get an invoice, so I did the same thing, went through the same process, went and got an invoice and faxed it, still she never gave a reply and I never got my gym membership and it got frustrating and I was really pissed off at her.

The experience of being trapped in a complex and unknowable system is powerfully echoed by this next young person:

I guess sometimes, because, um, a lot of times, I was stuck in some type of process and I really hated it, and just stuck somewhere waiting for phone calls and that was just brutal, but other times, I mean I was, I had full control

over like any decisions that were made while I was in care, but coming into care was tough and I had a lot of problems with the Ministry in general, just little things.

Powerlessness and frustration are expressed in the description of his regulated experience. The imagery of being 'stuck' conveys an overwhelming sense of hopeless helplessness. The young person sounds like he is enduring a remote, never-ending, Kafkaesque proceeding that is obscure, vague and indescribable.

Frustration is also expressed by the next young person about what seem to be arbitrary rules and decisions. The description of the decision being vetoed by a remote and anonymous 'supervisor' without discussion with the youth is suggestive of panoptic control. Interestingly, the young person declares, retracts, reconsiders and ultimately re-declares in the introduction to this response.

All the time. No...well, yes...Um.. my birthday is soon and I am almost seventeen, but I am not old enough to be approved for overnight babysitting, even though my worker said it would be no problem and she would approve me, because she would like make an exception, because I am not an immature 16 you would say, but everybody else, but her supervisor vetoed it without even talking to me, so it's not happening.

The frustration is palpable in these responses. The Kafkaesque nature of the system is clearly hard to define or even conceptualize, and its effects appear to be alienating.

Implications for Practice

When we look closely at word choice, and at the linguistic markers used in the context of these choices, two unusual linguistic patterns emerge when young people talk about their regulation in care. As we have seen, young people employ objectifying words and phrases in reference to themselves and their experience in care. They struggle to describe and define the entity that actually regulates them, finding it difficult to know how to manage within an institutional hierarchical structure.

System-speak evidenced in the word choice of this group reflects a judicially oriented language of a care system that, ironically, appears to be void of caring. Young people in this study switch between system-speak and youth language when discussing their regulation in care, as opposed to their relations in care. Visible manifestations of the system pointing to cultural dominance are expressed throughout the study.

A strong sense of frustration with the system is voiced. The system is depicted as de-humanising and frustrating. A sense of panoptic regulation is noted as

alienating. Bureaucracy and power relations are evident and take the form of a hierarchy of powers (foster parents, workers, supervisors, ministries). The language takes on a mechanistic form ('a home'; 'placements'; 'a foster home setting') that suggests the experience of being an unattached object in a system.

Young people's bilingual abilities have significant implications for child and youth care practice. Clearly, young people must learn the language of the system, because their own language does not adequately explain it or function within it. The young people in this study are fluent in system-speak, integrating it seamlessly throughout their statements.

Cultures create language, and, just as there is a youth culture, there is an in-care culture. The milieu management orientation of child and youth care, as practiced, focuses on the analysis of day-to-day cultural manifestations. Examining language is simply another way of understanding practice as well as a more comprehensive way in which to listen. Close listening respects the complexity of the reflections of young people and, as with all messages, multiple meanings are present in all communication (Goffman, 1974). Practitioners can learn about young people's experience of the care system by listening carefully, through multiple frames and by examining meanings on various planes of detail. The study indicates that young people require three practice imperatives from their staff:

1. Walk with me and help me navigate

Young people in care require someone to walk with them along their developmental path. They need protective relationships that promote their interest and dignity. They need a buffer between themselves and the system. The system that regulates young people in care is powerful, requiring them to navigate it and be protected from it. Young people need allies to stand by them when interfacing with a powerful, confusing and nebulous system. They need advocates to help them understand the system, protect them from it, figure it out and find out how to obtain what they need from it. They want compassionate workers who genuinely like them and want to understand them.

2. Stick up for me and be my advocate

Workers need courage ('brave') to advocate ('stand up') within the system.

Every child needs an advocate as a safeguard and to ensure the child's provision and protection entitlements. They need caregivers who take their side and are prepared to fight for their interest.

Someone who can speak up for themselves, who ain't scared of their supervisor, someone who is brave enough to step up, and tell their supervisor they believe that ain't right and they advocate for the kid, in that sense.

3. *Listen to me and hear my voice*

Practitioners should try to understand the child's viewpoint of the care system. They also need to become more cognisant of the unintended consequences of their interventions. Workers have a professional obligation to facilitate opportunities for young people to express their voice, and equally a responsibility to listen to and understand the multiple messages young people are presenting when they exercise their voice.

If practitioners recognise that young people struggle with a bureaucratised professionals' culture, this can create a position from which they can support children and buffer them from the more de-humanising aspects of regulation. Encouraging young people to use their own voice and their own youth language demonstrates clear respect for them as human beings.

Conclusion

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989/1999) provides a platform and a common language to speak out in defence of oppressed children. As international law, the UNCRC holds moral and legal authority when seeking redress for children. Young people in care are identified as particularly vulnerable and uniquely oppressed (Snow, 2006a). The adoption of a rights-based and care-oriented approach to service demonstrates concern for children, their dignity and well being. Article 12 of the Convention recognises the need for children to express their opinions in matters that affect them. The young people in this study express their opinions and this paper provides a way for practitioners to listen.

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