The dominance of the English language as a challenge for the field of Early Childhood Education and Care

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Language plays a pivotal role in shaping children's cognitive, social, and cultural development. In early childhood education and care (ECEC), language is far more than a means for communication—it is the primary medium through which children come to understand the world and their place within it. Through language, children acquire not only knowledge and literacy but also the foundational elements of identity: their sense of self, belonging, community, and worldview. Through the language they hear and use in stories and songs, but also everyday language, values, norms, and culture are explored and developed. Language, in this way, is both a mirror of culture and a vehicle for its transmission.

However, language does not only form the landscape in which children acquire culture and identity. It is also central to the culture and identity of professionals and researchers in the ECEC field. It forms concepts, understandings, and modes of practice on which the actions and deliberations of ECEC practitioners and researchers are formed.

In increasingly globalized and multilingual societies, though, a persistent challenge emerges: What happens when one language—most often English—becomes dominant in educational spaces, particularly at the expense of children's home languages and local linguistic traditions? The dominance of English in early education, often motivated by aspirations for academic success and global competitiveness, can inadvertently marginalize other languages, silencing the linguistic and cultural identities of children from diverse backgrounds. This phenomenon is not merely a pedagogical concern; it is a matter of educational equity, cultural preservation, professional deliberations, and children's rights.

In our call for this special issue, we pointed to the idea of considering language as a specific form of cultural capital – namely linguistic capital (Swann, 2001). What does that mean, not only for children, but also and maybe even more for ECEC research and policy? Wondering about the importance of a supercentral language (Swann, 2001), has led us to a whole range of questions, i.e., how do languages (and cultures) shape the way we think and talk about children and ECEC? How are such assumptions modified when forced to participate in transnational discourses and English as the supercentral language? And how can we find meaning in transnational discourses if our understandings of key terms (for example, 'play,' 'assessment,' and 'kindergarten') vary in the local context?

The articles featured in this issue collectively explore the cultural and educational implications of linguistic dominance in three diverse contexts: Iran, the United States, and Nigeria. Together, they raise critical questions about the intersection of language, childhood,

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and educational equity. How do we define school readiness in multilingual communities? Can early childhood settings be truly inclusive if they prioritize one language over others? What responsibilities do educators, policymakers, and communities bear in protecting linguistic diversity while preparing children for participation in a globalized world? And how do language and different ideas of childhood shape our thinking about ECEC?

Seyed Mohammad Hosseini and Ebrahim Talaee discuss in their article titled "A Corpus-based Study of the Conceptualizations of Childhood in the Iranian Culture and their Implications for Early Childhood Education" the cultural conceptualizations of childhood in Iranian society through a linguistic analysis of three Persian terms for 'child': *bache*, *kudak*, and *tefl*. Combining cultural linguistics with ethnographic insight, the authors demonstrate that Iranian understandings of childhood are heterogeneous, shaped by a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity, and frequently diverge from Western age-based definitions. In their article, Hosseini and Talee draw on a rich corpus of Persian novels and autobiographies and thereby identify a spectrum of conceptualizations, portraying children as joyful, innocent, energetic beings, yet also naïve, dependent, subordinate, and at times, a nuisance or even cursed. Notably, the Western "evil child" archetype is absent. Instead, the authors argue that the Persian cultural lens views children as inherently innocent and morally untainted until puberty, emphasizing their need for protection and moral guidance.

However, what does that mean for ECEC in Iran? As the authors point out, the field is currently shaped by a complex negotiation between tradition and modernity, with the idea of a "becoming" (children as adults-in-training) and a "being" (children as competent agents) in co-existence, which can lead to tensions within Iranian ECE policy and practice. As a nation in transition, these tensions need to be negotiated carefully.

In her article "Juntos Effort to Preserve Children's Bilingualism in an English-Dominated Language Landscape," Kiyomi Umezawa describes the ethnographic study that explores a collaborative "Juntos" initiative between a Head Start lead teacher and an educational researcher in a semi-rural Pennsylvania town that has rapidly transformed into a New Immigrant Settlement (NIS) with a majority Spanish-speaking population. Despite the demographic shift, so Umezawa explains, English remains the de facto language of instruction in most Early Childhood Education and Care programs, marginalizing home languages and undervaluing bilingualism. Drawing on translanguaging theory and Critical Participatory Action Research (CPAR), the study embraced a non-hierarchical partnership to co-develop culturally responsive strategies to support bilingual children's linguistic rights and development.

The article describes the teacher's intentional language modifications—balancing Spanish and English use in formal and informal settings— with the goal of meeting individual children's linguistic needs. As the study shows, children could navigate between languages seamlessly, using both English and Spanish fluidly, depending on context and interlocutor. These translanguaging practices cultivated not only language skills but also a sense of belonging and self-worth among children—outcomes often undermined in English-only environments.

In addition, Umezawa uses comparative data from three other Head Start classrooms in similar NIS communities to demonstrate that

bilingual practices were rare unless formally mandated. However, and the article shows that, preserving children's bilingualism is both possible and impactful, even in under-resourced, English-dominant settings. As Umezawa demonstrates, bilingualism should be seen as an asset rather than a barrier, and her article challenges the prevailing idea that equates school readiness with English proficiency. Children must have the right to speak their mother tongue. Thereby, the article challenges the reader to rethink what inclusive, linguistically responsive ECEC indeed looks like in today's multilingual society.

In her article titled "Perceptions of Preschool Stakeholders on the Impacts of English as the Dominant Language in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers in Yoruba-Speaking States, Nigeria," Oluyemisi Idowu Majebi discusses the widespread dominance of the English language in early childhood education (ECE) settings across Nigeria has sparked an ongoing discourse about its implications, especially in Yoruba-speaking states. She analyzes this issue by focusing on the perspectives of 617 key stakeholders—teachers, school owners/heads, parents, and community members – and how they perceive the use of English as the primary medium of instruction in Early Childhood Education and Care Centers.

While Nigeria's National Policy on Education strongly advocates for using the mother tongue or the "language of the immediate environment" in preschool instruction, the reality on the ground is, as Majebi describes, different. The English language, revered for its global relevance and economic utility, has emerged as the de facto medium of instruction, even in Early Childhood Education and care. As she points out, the majority of parents and community members perceive English as essential for children's future academic performance and global competitiveness; a sentiment that school heads and owners largely echo. However, as Majebi emphasizes, all stakeholders voice concerns about the dominance of English in the classroom. Many fear that early exposure to English alone may erode children's connection to their native languages, identity, and community, and that the dominance might marginalize indigenous culture and violate children's rights to culturally appropriate education. Thus, Majebi's articles give insight into the pressing question of how early education can achieve a balance between global relevance and cultural integrity.

As briefly summarized above, all three articles concern specific issues connected to the dominance of a central language in different educational practices. What we would like to add are a few remarks on the existence of a *hypercentral* language and its implications for ECEC research and policy.

Like within almost all other disciplines, the transnational discourse about Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is thoroughly dominated by the English language. While, of course, national discourses and supranational languages such as Arabic, Spanish, Chinese, or Hindi exist and are essential, only English functions as what Swaan terms the only "hypercentral" language (Swaan, 2001). In many ways, this is positive. In an increasingly globalized research community, the fact that everyone participating speaks English works as a common good, unifying and allowing collective discussions and knowledge sharing. The different language and cultural background of the editors and authors combined in this volume speaks to it. And working and thinking in a language other than your first language might even offer possibilities for rethinking one's assumptions.

The dominance of English does, however, present problems and dilemmas. Depending on your place in the world language system (Swann, 2001), language is a specific form of cultural capital. Those who do not have English as their first language are disadvantaged, and those who feel impeded because they lack proficiency may even be excluded. Fluency in English gives a symbolic advantage to those who have English as their native language – and conversely disadvantages those who have English as their second or even third language.

Furthermore, and this is an aspect that is often ignored, the dominance of the English language automatically predetermines the tone and content of discourses as it relies on a particular way of thinking and speaking about ECEC. Specific cultural and conceptual meanings dominate and thus define the "truths" (Foucault, 1987) of our field. These "truths" are often taken for granted instead of being critically examined and justified (MacNaughton, 2006), and thereby dominate the discourses about ECEC worldwide. Important educational concepts from other languages and cultures need to be translated into the hypercentral language and are thus in danger of being leveled and losing their genuine significance.

At the same time, though, such linguistic differences present enormous potential. While language and culture shape our perceptions of children and ECEC, these differences can lead to a place of questioning, uncertainty, and conflict, and challenge Western hegemonic thinking about early childhood education. Such questioning helps us to think critically about what it means for us to describe, analyze, and speak about the phenomena called ECEC. This is also important because ECEC as a profession and discipline until today seems to struggle to 'think and speak for itself'" (Urban, 2018, p. 314). Such international discourses, even if they have to take place in the form of *hypercentral* language that unifies but also simplifies, can help to find a genuine 'language of ECEC'; a stronger voice that emphasizes what ECEC stands for without marginalizing local contexts and traditions.

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