Changing professional practice: A sociology of childhood for the right of children to participate

Evolution de la pratique professionnelle : une sociologie de l'enfance pour le droit de l'enfant à participer

Wandel der beruflichen Praxis: Eine Soziologie der Kindheit, die für das Recht von Kindern auf Teilnahme plädiert

Manuela Ferreira, Crstina Rocha, Oporto University (Portugal)
Maria Emília Vilarinho, University of Minho (Portugal)

Abstract

For epistemological and pedagogic reasons our courses (in the subject of 'Introdução à Sociologia' - Introduction to Sociology - in the Degree of 'Ciências da Educação' - Education Sciences of the University of Oporto, and in the subject of 'Sociologia da Educação - Sociology of Education - in the Degree of Education and in the baccalaureate of Childhood Education offered by the University of Minho) assume the child to be an agent and a social actor: but we have found that this has been met with great resistance by our students. Because of this we have systematically collected students' accounts of representations and memories about children and childhood (between 1995-1999). This paper is based on an analysis of these accounts, and aims to identify the structural and structuring characteristics our students use to construct their concept of the child and of childhood, as well as the different underlying notions which shape a particular notion of citizenship. Discussing the basis of the arguments and justifications for these conceptions enables us to identify their epistemological limitations, especially those of a naturalistic and ethnocentristic type that are determined by reference to the adult world. The paper also argues that, at the level of training for the childhood teaching profession, the introduction of sociological reflection which makes use of students' representations and memories, linked to the recognition of children as social agents and actors, leads towards the basis of a new paradigm in education in which the right of children to participate will be assumed as a right of children within their practice of active citizenship.

Extrait

Pour des raisons épistémologiques et pédagogiques, nos cours (dans la matière 'Introdução à Sociologia' - Introduction à la sociologie – du diplôme 'Ciências da Educação' - Sciences de l'éducation de l'Université d'Oporto, et la matière 'Sociologia da Educação - Sociologie de l'éducation - du diplôme d'éducation et du baccalauréat Education des enfants offerts par l'université de Minho) partent du principe que l'enfant est un agent et un acteur social, mais nous avons remarqué que nos étudiants y opposent une vive résistance. C'est pourquoi nous avons fait la collecte systématique de leurs compte-rendus de représentations et souvenirs concernant les enfants et l'enfance (entre 1995 et 1999). Cet essai repose sur une analyse de ces compte-rendus et a pour but d'identifier les caractéristiques structurelles et structurantes qu'utilisent nos étudiants pour construire leur concept de l'enfant et de l'enfance ainsi que les diverses idées latentes qui forment une notion particulière de citoyenneté. Le débat sur le fondement des arguments et les justifications de ces conceptions nous permet d'identifier leurs limitations épistémologiques, particulièrement celles de type naturalistique et ethnocentrique déterminées par référence au monde adulte. En outre, cet essai avance que, au niveau de la formation des enseignants, l'introduction d'une réflexion sociologique utilisant les représentations et les souvenirs des étudiants, liés à la reconnaissance des enfants comme agents et acteurs sociaux, conduit à la base d'un nouveau paradigme en matière d'éducation selon lequel le droit des enfants à participer sera garanti dans le cadre de la pratique de la citoyenneté active.

Zussammenfassung

Aus epistemologischen und pädagogischen Gründen wird in unseren Kursen (zum Studienfach 'Introdução à Sociologia' – Einführung in die Soziologie – im Kurs 'Ciências da Educação' - Erziehungswissenschaften an der Universität Oporto, und im Studienfach 'Sociologia da Educação - Soziologie der Erziehung - im Erziehungskurs und im Diplomkurs über Kindeserziehung, der an der Universität Minho angeboten wird) davon ausgegangen, dass das Kind ein agierendes Wesen ist und

soziale Aktivitäten entwickelt: doch es hat sich herausgestellt, dass unsere Studenten dem sehr skeptisch gegenüberstehen. Aus diesem Grund haben wir systematisch Berichte der Studenten über Vorstellungen über und Erinnerungen an Kinder und Kindheit gesammelt (von 1995 bis 1999). Dieses Referat beruht auf einer Analyse dieser Berichte und zielt darauf ab, strukturelle und strukturierende Maßnahmen aufzudecken, der sich unsere Studenten beim Schaffen ihrer Vorstellungen über Kinder und Kindheit bedienen, und die unterschiedlichen impliziten Ansichten herauszufinden, aus denen eine spezifische Vorstellung von Staatsbürgerschaft resultiert. Durch Gespräche über die Grundlagen dieser Argumente und Rechtfertigungen hinsichtlich dieser Vorstellungen können wir ihre epistemologischen Grenzen, vor allem bei naturalistisch und ethnozentristischen Formen, die durch Bezugnahme auf die Erwachsenenwelt bestimmt sind, aufzeigen In diesem Referat wird auch die Ansicht vertreten, dass auf der Stufe der Ausbildung für mit Kindern arbeitende Unterrichtende die Einführung einer soziologischen Reflexion, die sich der Vorstellungen und Erinnerungen der Studenten bedient, und mit der die Erkenntnis verbunden ist, dass Kinder sozial agierende und handelnde Wesen sind, den Grundstein für en neues Paradigma in der Erziehung legt. Demzufolge wird das Recht von Kindern auf Teilnahme als Recht von Kindern verstanden werden, innerhalb ihres Handlungsbereichs als aktive Staatsbürger zu agieren.

For a new research-training paradigm - of the social representations and childhood memories as an educational training device to the sociology of childhood.

Epistemological and methodological, educational and political aims

as teachers of the public high education in the training courses of educational agents in the subjects of "Introdução às Ciências Sociais" (Introduction to Social Sciences) e "Sociologia da Educação" (Sociology of Education), we have elected childhood as a review and training controversy. This choice is also due to a lack of research in the childhood sociology area and of a public debate on the relationships between adults and children in Portugal.

We did not want the addition of a further review controversy but to make aware that its inclusion imposes the critical exercise i) in the scientific field, about sociology itself ii) in the educational field about the concept of participation, which as being inseparable iii) from the political field, are likely to question the recognised citizenship statute of children. In this context, it would be possible to articulate epistemological and methodological, educational and political concerns.

If, in the scientific field, the assumption of children as social actors opens a new sociological look at childhood, recognising their epistemological citizenship that sociology has allocated to the adults (Qvortrup 1993, 1994) in the social and political field, that entails the acknowledgement of its citizenship rights. Thus, it is not by chance that, from the point of view of the substance of the Children's Rights - when we consider that they may be classified in Protection, Provision and Planning Rights, the 3 Ps — those who traditionally tend to be emphasised are the protection rights and the Provision rights, whereas those of Participation have deserved much less attention, both from the point of view of politics and social practices. If the interdependence of the different rights is the condition to its achievement, it is also true that the rights related to the participation, are also those which bring about a major controversy.

From the social representations and the childhood memories as a training educational device

Sharing the concerns of Waskler (1996), the training context comprising this work is enrolled in a tributary sociological paradigm of phenomenology — emphasising the subjective component of people behaviour, trying to penetrate the subjects' conceptual world (Geertz, 1973, in Bodgan, 1994:54) – and of the symbolic interactionism — in the assertion that the meaning ascription as well as the interpretation process constitute the human experience, those being constructed through interactions where the meaning is subject to negotiations.

Considering that "the adult only retains as a reference knowledge what is connected to his/her identity (Dominicé, 1990, in Nóvoa, 1992:17) and that we know against a previous knowledge, we minded whether the students would be aware of their own acknowledgements and re-appropriate them

critically. In this sense, the collection of their representations and memories on childhood and their critical analysis are constituted in a training device capable of articulating research with training. . Indeed, the social memories and representations, enabling the returning of the range of experiences, abilities and attributes valued by the subjects, and of their relationships with the contexts in which they were produced, acquire the statute of heaps of personal and social knowledge, available to be mobilised in research and training processes.

Even being aware that in the multiple evacuating processes, the representations and memories are (re) constructed – "the discourse made about the past is not the discourse of the past but the discourse of the present searching for the re-interpretation of the past to understand the present and invest in the future" (Cf. Correia & Matos, 1994); we tried to give voice to the students, considering them as training object, subjects and agents.

Once the recollections give rise in the subjects to the appeal to reflections, combination of ideas, definitions, but also uncertainties, ambiguities, contradictions... one looked for the collection of a particular type of information, as much as possible in "first hand"

- To identify the proprieties, attributes and metaphors present in their representations, to understand the reason and the extent to which they were rooted in their mind and informed their reads and interpretations of reality.

- To identify and understand which are the driven "memory recoverors" related to their childhood – which are the significant experiences lived as positive, negative or problematic ones, and their details –

In short, causing the emerging of establishing knowledge, one aimed at creating conditions for their reflexive analysis.

The research-training process or the training device in action

In this research work we started by asking the students to explain their representations on child and childhood, from the questions: *What is a child? What is childhood?* And after, the representations of their own experiences about being a child, from the questions: *What memories do you have about your childhood? How do you recall your childhood?*

The analysis of the collected information enabled us to stress two great dimensions structuring knowledge about children and childhood. One of them, owning a more structural character, underpinned by the ruling representations of child and childhood which shape the representations expressed by the students, and the other, owning an experimental character, supported by the memories of their childhood.

From the knowledge on children and childhood present in the students' representations

In the structural dimension, *the concept of child* – which abstracts from the bio-psycho-social diversity of children and over emphasises the common features, singularising them in that concept – in a narrow symbiosis with the *concept of childhood* – during the child's lifetime – nourish the social imagery and an ideology of child and childhood as "golden age" appearing as a myth of modernity. Child and childhood, thus tend to be represented in a symbolic and material way, as being one same reality in which, by means of biology and psychology, the ages stand out as the classifying structuring and distinctive elements of the different stages of life, establishing the limits which produce different generations and their reciprocal social statute.

Before these evidences which after all reaffirm and reproduce the ruling representations about childhood it was important, in the critical analysis context of training versus research, to resend them to inquire the subjects.

From the knowledge about children and childhood present in the students' memories

It is from this stage of the training-research process that we have mobilised the childhood memories of the students themselves.

In the review of these memories, social and cultural, heterogeneous and unequal worlds of children emerge, crossed by cultural relations structured by age, gender and social background.

From the experience of having been a child, in *the context of leisure, the playing with the peer group* is asserted, as being the most relevant social action. Its importance in the socialising process of/between children allows the deduction of "a steady set of activities or routines, artefacts, values, concerns, which [children] produce and share in interaction with their peers" (Corsaro, 1997) whose public and collective aspects are representative of their intense participation in the social life. Thus, the child cultures get an autonomy enabling them to become subject to study in themselves and to re-conceptualise the socialising process, neither as a mere imitation or direct appropriation children make of the adult world, nor as a simple pattern or manipulation they impose to them.

In the *familiar context* the *art of being a son and the art of being a brother* stand out, being their *relationship* with *adults* elicited as the most problematic one, due to its more disciplining and normative aspects. Physical sanctions and reproaches stand out, to which the gender relations and the place in the phratry are familiar. This pattern of relationship with the adults is reproduced in the *educational context*, shifting towards the teacher. The previously quoted relations between peers appear imputed to the colleges and the playground, contributing to the construction of the art of being a student[2] (Perrenoud, 1994).

It was also possible to identify in the subjective expression about the child-adult relations, a number of *emotions and feelings*, which help us to deconstruct the idea that children "don't feel because they don't think". This idea bestows on the adult the rationality and emotion monopoly, if we re-update the Descartean perspective of child-fault. In view of some of the problems mentioned in that relationship, it was identified both the limits of its condition and the strategies developed by children to deal with them, where disobedience, infringement, personal resources maximising and dissimulation stand out.

Thus, in this experimental dimension, emerges a plurality of –familiar, educational, and leisure– i) contexts, ii) times – leisure time and working/duties time, iii) other significant ones – peers and adults, parents, other relatives and teachers, iv) rationalities, feelings, strategies; in short: social abilities in the performance of their "professions".

It is this complexity which enables an approach of childhood non-reducible to the election of an art that synthesises its action both in the reproduction, and in the production of the social and cultural worlds of childhood. It is the valuation of these abilities, emphasised from the memories of childhood, which allows the re-conceptualisation of the children's participation through the rereading of the places where it happens, and the consideration of the "concealed" dynamics developed in their interaction with the peers.

From the confrontation between knowledge present in the representations and memories

Albeit the perceived qualitative shift from the analysis of the dichotomous representations of the social representations to that one of the more complex and heterogeneous memories of childhood, the latter don't escape from what traditionally establishes the main roles of childhood – the *art of playing*, the *art of being a son* and *the art of being a student*

However, a critical analysis of the sense ascribed by the students to their representations and memories, implies not to confine it positively to the conscious the actors have on it (cf. Giddens, 1984). On the contrary, it requires the subjective entities of their childhood to confront with the entities ascribed to childhood by the social representations and hence, the theoretical approach and the

---

[2] From the french "métier d'élève"

analysis of the training process to become complex. This confront brings up the arrangements for the re-conceptualisation/awareness of children and childhood in order to make a critical practice of the profession.

In this sense, the confront between different experiences of having been a child, the explicitness of the criteria informing conceptions of childhood which are supposed to be shared, as well as the returning of some situations interpreted as problematic, allowed once more a formative intervention which tried to deconstruct, through its analysis, the ruling notions of children and childhood perpetuating in nature, what is nothing but products of history (Bourdieu, 1973)

An obstacle joining obstacles: the adultcentrism

During the training-research process that we have been describing, the larger obstacle to either recall or inquiry of the child and childhood representations and memories, the adultcentrism was emphasised.

The latter, rehabilitating in the adult person the naturalistic, individualist and ethnocentristic obstacles, rather than enabling a child anthropology, is made up in anthropodoxy[3] which, although sustained by scientific knowledge remains largely imbued with believes and "opinions", making the social condition of adult and children derive from the biological evidence of their difference. That prevents the questioning of the mobilised mental categories and the social conditions that were in the basis of their production.

To take further the deconstructing work of child and childhood – naturalisation and idealisation – implies to question her/his relationship with adults, enrolling it in the wider political order constraining her/his lives. Indeed, such relationship when being envisaged as intrinsically human makes the social ("in") competence of children combine with "their nature", hiding the social character of the set up representation and the social nature of the relationship between adults and children. Therefore, it makes its human agency invisible.

For a sociology of childhood at the service of a participative citizenship of children

Deriving from this social construction process of child, it has remained so far, a conception of socialisation seeking to act over "nature", whilst a cultural action, overemphasising the role and the model of the adult and of his world as a starting point, repeating the durkheimian classic postulate on education conceived as the "action exerted by the adult generations over those which are not yet matured for the social life (Durkheim, S.d.: 17). It is this postulate that, in the sociological field, founds a paradigm of social reproduction which, assuming the child as an object, has developed an education sociology focused on the schooling processes and the familiar socialisation manners, inferring children rather from the attitudes of teachers and families than from their actions.

The reversal of this paradigm requires the shifting from the "art of playing" and the "art of being a student" to the "art of being a child" (Sirotta, 1998). It means that it compels to the recognising of children as actors with a daily life whose analysis is not restricted to the analysis of the established tables where they produce with the peers group – the "new" *other* significant ones – cultural behaviours, values, languages, plays, whose creative, rather collective, ability may be extended creating ways of management suitable for the child societies.

This re-discovery of child/children compels to re-composition of the sociological field, both in theoretical and in methodological terms, requiring that the childhood sociology may be a socialisation sociology rather than a schooling and family sociology, focused on the analysis of the daily-lives and the active socialisation processes in which the adults and other children participate, keeping in perspective the two categories – nature/child and culture/adult which really exist in continuous interaction – as being mutually and simultaneously acted. In this sense, socialisation becomes reflected as a multiple sense process, as a collective work of the world construction and capture, as

---

[3] Anthropo+logy (knowledge), against anthropo+daxy (from the Greek, opinion)

inter-significant and, therefore inter-subjective social reality making the individuals exist from one to another – adult-child, adults-children and child-child – wherein everyone are constituted as subjects, actors and social agents. In the boundary, talking about socialising and socialised becomes nonsense.

From the methodological point of view, this moving of sociology back to the actor takes seriously the social actor that is the child and expresses the conscientiousness of his/her right to speech and his/her recognising as sense producer. It appeals to the socio-anthropologic approaches in which it is necessary to listen rather than to look to watch in order to understand what children tell us.

More challenging than adopting the prescribed conception of socialisation and of the peers groups' performing will be then, to consider the one of the construction of the sociability network, trying to stress more the individuals as social actors using capably their roles, than the roles in themselves and the way they invest the individuals; to understand the relationship as more dependent on the context and place they occupy in the personal relationships grate (personal relationships) and on the social links between individuals (categorical relationships) than strictly regulated by rules (structural relationships); to valuate more the relationships for the practices which play with, overpass or infringe the institutional boundaries than those who submit themselves to them; to discern social structure from social organisation (cf. Cardeira da Silva, 1999; 47-48). Thus, we suggest to take a socialisation perspective considering it a complex and dynamic process of appropriation, reinvention and production in which children, participating actively, interpret reality, share and create social worlds with other children and with adults, but where one also fights for and exerts powers, generates hierarchies, inequalities, and differentiations, reproducing aspects of the social structure. Hereby, we suggest that children may be perceived as active participants of their child worlds, by elaborating rationality and visions of the world which are socially and culturally constructed, based on values and criteria they forge of knowing-how, inherent to the group and the child culture (Corsaro, 1997).

Such are the aspects that contribute for the discussion of the social statute of children and their conditions for a new citizenship practice, namely concerning the rights to participate. Indeed, the citizenship concept in force, when presupposing the citizens as rational beings responsible for their acts, capable of making decisions about their and others' destiny, not only select but also conditions the practice of this right to children. To rethink a right of children to participate – the right to social participation, ant to share decisions in their life worlds – supposes putting it in perspective in its daily lifetime – children versus children, children versus adults – assuming that this one is constructed in those interactions. That means that recognising to children the statute of social actors only makes sense if their voice is paid attention and their capability of allocating sense either to their actions or to their contexts of life, though expressed with specific characteristics according to their development, is valued.

References

Bodgan, R (1994), Investigação qualitativa em educação, uma introdução à teoria e aos métodos, Porto, Porto Ed.

Bourdieu (1973), Le metier de sociologue, Ecole Pratique des Hautes Études et Mouton.

Cardeira da Silva, M. (1999), Um Islão Prático, Oeiras, Celta Ed.

Correia, JA (s/d), Dispositivos e disposições na formação de adultos: a dinâmica da formatividade, doc. Policopiado.

Correia, JA & Matos, M. (1994), Contributos para a produção de uma epistemologia das práticas formativas: análise de uma intervenção no domínio da saúde comunitária, in Actas das Jornadas sobre Educação de Adultos, pp: 333-346

Corsaro, W. (1997) Sociology of Childhood, London, Pine Forge Press

Durkheim, E. (s/d), Sociedade, Educação e Moral, Porto, Rés Ed.

Giddens, A. (1984), A constituição da sociedade, São Paulo, Martins Fontes Ed. Lda (1989)

Nóvoa, A. (1992), Vidas de professores, Porto, Porto editora.

Perrenoud, Ph. (1994), Ofício de aluno e sentido do trabalho escolar, Porto, Porto Editora (1995)

Qvortrup. J (1993) Childhood as a Social Phenomenon: lessons from an international project, Vienna, Austria, European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research

Qvortrup, J (1994)(org), Childhood matters, social theory, practice and politics, European Centre Vienna

Sirotta, R. (1998), L'emergence d'une sociologie de l'enfance: évolution de l'object, évolution du regard, Education et Sociétés, revue internationale de sociologie de l'education, n° 2, Bruxelles, De Boeck & Larcier, pp: 9-34 .

Waksler, Frances C. (1996) The Little Trials of Childhood and Children's Strategies for Dealing with Them, London, Falmer Press