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German School-Related Child and Youth Research – A Report on the State of the Art

Anja Kraus, Ludwigsburg

1 Introduction

Child research, youth research and school-related child and youth research represent a heterogeneous field. Present-day research in this field is characterised by the fact that there is a common origin and a common endeavour in the different disciplines, but finding common ground for research is a problem. My paper relates to this problem.

I identify the common origin and endeavour in the hypothesis that children and adolescents learn to understand the world (the “reality”) and their role in this world by co-interpreting and actively participating in its constitution. School-related child and youth research then investigates how schools determine their part in this constructive process. In this article I unfold the perspective of childhood research on the development of competence. In doing so, I pay special attention to unanswered methodological questions in fieldwork and empirical research. I assume that a “performative inquiry” in a phenomenology-based approach can be helpful. I emphasise the corporality of experience and, due to that, of all learning processes. With a few exceptions, I restrict myself to research and constructive work in German-speaking countries.

2 Childhood Research

In the 1980s, sociologically-oriented German child and youth research accepted that childhood had changed dramatically since the end of World War II. Researchers spoke of a paradigmatic change which was identified as “Veränderte Kindheit” (*changed childhood*). This changed childhood was due to external factors such as prosperity, the mass media, an increasing variety of family models and diverse phenomena of habitat fragmentation. But obviously there were internal factors as well. Contrasting the mainstream childhood of earlier times, e.g. leisure time, came to be seen as progressively well-managed by the parents of young people and successively by themselves (Zeiher & Zeiher 1998).

In the 1990s, most German childhood researchers accepted the concept of a changed childhood, thereby producing a paradigmatic shift in child and youth research. At the same time, there was a turn away from the concept of socialisation, whereas today there is a tendency in German childhood research to accept that children have the sovereign capacity, already at an early age, to construct their reality, their world views and their self concepts. Today, childhood is understood as a construct produced by various social forces and by children themselves (Rolff & Zimmermann 1997, p. 151ff), and the self-regulated competencies of children and adolescents and their capacity for emancipation from adult structures are taken to be of central interest. In the frame of cognitivistic approaches these competences are even regarded in the mode of strategic abilities.

In a methodological perspective, the paradigmatic shift from socialisation to individual self-regulation leads to research *with* children and not *on* them (Heinzel 2000, p. 17, Christensen & James 2008).

Research with children

Doing research *with* children produces a seemingly natural restriction on questions of everyday life, but this is only a first step, and it is not the last one. If we have to accept that children and adolescents are able to pose existential questions¹, why not accept them as experts concerning their own development and their learning? This should make sense to everybody. The same holds for research on socio-cultural factors such as conventional inter-generational hierarchies and orders, defined by rules, practices and language games (Fuhs 2005, p. 172 ff.). We have to acknowledge the fact that children themselves can interpret their child-being. This leads to the conclusion that they should be empowered to do so (cp. democratic education, the progressive education movement etc.). Making these positions visible and paving the way for minors to express themselves poses a great challenge for child and youth research.

However, it should not come as a surprise that *methodological deficits* are emerging in mainstream childhood research. It is noticeable that the “quality” of data is very important. It is stated, for example, that it may be difficult for an adult researcher to gain the confidence of children or adolescents. The chances of understanding them are seen as depending on their age and on their individuality. Besides that, mainstream researchers complain that children and even adolescents do not articulate themselves honestly and consistently in every situation. Researchers assume that younger children mix up facts and fantasy, past and present, persons and places (cp. Hülst 2000, p. 38).

However, presenting a catalogue of hindrances and of children’s deficits and at the same time regarding them as sovereign protagonists involves a contradiction. Therefore, from my point of view, a methodological change has to come about that is parallel to the change of focus. The positive sides of research *with* children have to be seen, and a methodology appropriate for childhood research *with* and not only *on* children has to be developed.

Let me be more explicit concerning this question. Following Virginia Morrow & Martin Richards (1996), the social sciences on the whole presuppose an idealised adult communicator and this excludes several possible forms of expression from research, among them those of children and adolescents. Morrow and Richards point out that strong symbolic violence goes along with these rules for field work and subsequent data analysis. Naturally, this violence becomes more dangerous in the field of childhood research in comparison to research in other fields. Helga Kelle & Georg Breidenstein (1999, p. 108 ff.) point out that a methodology earnestly coping with this challenge and reducing the symbolic pressure on children as subjects of research has to be developed. Further, Barbara Frieberthäuser & Annedore Prengel (2003, p. 1) underline the need to find a methodology that reflects the individuality of each research subject.

Let me add that the assumption of an autonomous subject also produces problems for childhood research. The conception of a sovereign epistemic subject has been questioned in Western philosophy for a long time and in post-structuralist theory it has been completely deconstructed. Only in childhood research, autonomy and epistemic sovereignty seem to be restored in the shape of an under-aged person. I conclude that the idea of a sovereign epistemic subject cannot be helpful in childhood research. We shall take a closer look at the differences between adults and children.

¹ This is well documented by the movement of philosophy for children.

Differences

As Jens Lipski (2000) points out, *difference* should be a first methodological principle for childhood research. Differences between adults and children can be found – this is the first step – in liveliness and in drives, in social relations, in interests, in motives and, last but not least, in living conditions etc. In the second step, we have to accept differences between diverse children and between the various circumstances of their activities, and this includes their narrative competence. We should help children express themselves and we should allow them to explicate their life-worlds, but we should be careful and make sure that the actors, i.e. children and adolescents, stay as independent and free from external manipulation as possible. This means that, in order to improve our methodology of research with children, we should at first hand analyse how social and societal circumstances influence an individual child and – in reverse – how the individual child manipulates them.

Age and discourses

I concentrate on the everyday communication of children and adults. Differences resulting from age are to be bridged every day. Contact between an adult and a child in everyday life will only succeed if the adult is willing and able to put himself in the position of the child. Thomas Fuhs (1998) identifies the willingness to enter a discussion with a child as a basic ethical duty. Following Fuhs, everyday contact between researchers and children or adolescents should be ruled by the ambition to examine the other side.

The concrete contact between adults and children can thus serve as the starting point for further methodological decisions in child research. This means that listening to a child in order to find out what goes on inside him or her should be the starting point of childhood research. On the other side, the quest for a principal rethinking of various common terms and discourses on childhood arises here. Differences between grown-ups and children are part of the discourses about childhood and being-a-child in communicative media, in advertising campaigns, in health care systems, in organisational units in schools (like the class council, student council) etc. Hence, discourse analysis should provide an adequate methodology for child research. For example, we have to accept that children speak a language that is different from the language of grown-ups. The search for translation rules becomes important.

3 The ethnomethodological approach and the approach of bodily phenomenology in childhood research

The *ethnomethodological* approach seems to be best suited to take the principle of difference into account while analysing social phenomena. From my point of view, to be included are *bodily phenomena* as dealt with in phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bernhard Waldenfels, Käte Meyer-Drawe et al., cp. Kraus 2007b).

Ethnomethodology is a research discipline that aims to describe the everyday world of people, wherever they may live, by focusing on what they really do, on their “practices”, and that is why Jürgen Zinnecker (1995) characterises the ethnomethodological approach in childhood research as “praxeological”, i.e. oriented to practice research. He defines it as follows:

“It is an alienating view at what is taken for granted in the activities and in the knowledge of pedagogues as well as in that of children. By this their practices become open for reflection” (Zinnecker 1995, p. 21, transl. by the author).

Following Zinnecker, praxeological research must focus on the activities and knowledge of children, adolescents and – in contrast – of grown-ups. However, the subject matter, the activities and the knowledge of children and adolescents are to be examined in such a way that the expectations and demands of adult researchers do not dominate the research process, thus giving meaning to research as an alienating procedure and as a change of perspective in the phenomenological sense (“epoché”) (cp. Kraus 2006).

By means of praxeology the “hidden” knowledge of practices can be explicated by focusing on the implicit practical knowledge of the participants as can be found in their language games. In other words, knowledge that is shared by participants as social beings can become apparent, a “conjunctive knowledge” as Karl Mannheim (1936) called it.

The procedure depends on a methodological transformation of observed phenomena and observed language games into speech acts and their analysis. Here I depend on the distinction between locutionary acts (i.e. what is said) and illocutionary acts (what is meant/intended) in speech act theory. Illocutionary acts can be used for many purposes. They may refer to gestures as they are manifested in mimics, through to intonation etc.

This allows one to focus not only on cognitive assumptions and the opinions of children and adolescents, i.e. their declarative knowledge. In addition, the hidden meaning of practice, the “conjunctive meaning” as Mannheim calls it, can be laid open in praxeological research, and the same holds for the *form* in which children operate, think, judge and structure their world – it holds for their forms of expression, their cultures and their competencies concerning the establishment of social relationships.

Let me add that by putting the focus on praxeology, individual habits and inclinations come into sight. Examples for that may be an emotional or an ironic approach to societal norms.

To sum up, one may say that out of the generic, process-oriented perspective of ethnomethodology, the *how* of adolescent self-expressions, the *forms* of communication and interaction of children and adolescents with each other and with adults can be explored.

4 Praxeological research

What is of interest from a praxeological point of view is *how* young people bring order into their thoughts and *which* functional order they use, i.e. which time frame, which socio-structural settings etc; also of interest is *which* persons and groups they refer to, *how* they express these relationships, *which* facts or things they appeal to and *how* they comment them, *how* they present themselves and *which* significance or orientation and *which* operational knowledge they have at their disposal etc. Praxeological research is oriented towards their expectations and wishes for the future, their individual learning processes and the way they experience their world. It is oriented towards the differences between children and adults regarding their ways of acting and communicating as well as towards their *modes* of orientation. Praxeological research shows that children and adolescents tend to adapt to already existing cultural patterns of behaviour and interpretation. At the same time, they create alternative world models which means that it is often difficult to decide how creativity goes hand in hand with take-overs.

Praxeological research can be devised using a sequence of three steps. The first involves looking for the phenomena and their genesis as they exist for an adult researcher. This then has to be contrasted with the phenomena as children or adolescents perceive them, which demands an alienating attitude in research. In the third step one may then scaffold the diverse life-worlds of children and adolescents.

School is a location at which children and adolescents spend a significant amount of their time. It therefore makes sense to look at schools as their habitats. Seen as a cultural affair,

social processes in schools are subject to the principle of difference which first of all means that the school consists of several distinct life-worlds. The life-worlds should be regarded and analysed as modes of *doing difference*: There are lessons in very many different subjects, with several teachers, diverse classes and instruction on one hand and breaks of diverse kinds on the other hand etc.

In the following chapter, before coming back to the differences, I will introduce the phenomenological concept of constitutive corporality.

5 Constitutive corporality

Any description of praxeology would be incomplete without a description of the corporal quality of action. The activities of children and adolescents, understood as *doing difference* (Fuhs 2006) and as *doing age*, are supposed to be *corporally* mediated.

Before infants learn to speak, they already acquire broad knowledge of their life-world. This is coming more and more into the sights of psychologically framed and physiologically based research.

Infants get used to diverse aspects of their daily life by imitating the persons in their environment in a *corporal* way. They explore various primary forms of communication and check their situational appropriateness. They express emotional intimacy or convey their distance. Even small children practice social in- and ex-clusions, they mark out territories by using their many-faceted “bodily knowledge” (Dornes 1993). They send complex messages with the help of their bodies and may even give a hint as to how to decipher these messages. In addition to imitation, bodily knowledge is also acquired, developed and modified by acting, operating and behaving in a manner that fits into actual situations.

Infants acquire and practice various competencies by bodily means. They demonstrate their capacity for understanding and situational interpretation by their mimicry and their actions. It thus may become clear that they act and even “argue” in an astonishing way, when they e.g. show something they want you, the grown up, to play with. However, the bodily messages of children very often differ in form from those of adults, even though they can be understood by them, depending on their, the grown-ups, bodily sensitivity.

There is, however, a marked difference between infants, children and adolescents on one side and grown-ups on the other. Though children very seldom verbalise the *how* of their operations and their experiential knowledge, they are obviously very engaged in unfolding this knowledge. Thus, the bodily transmitted *how* of communication may form the centre of the attention of teenagers. A certain consciousness of bodily expression and body language seems to come up at this age. Through habits, gestures, signals, intonations, inflections and by following current fashions youngsters underline their social affiliations in a sometimes highly effective, accentuated way. Their modes of nonverbal understanding are often exclusive, restricted to a small group mostly of the same age. As Jürgen Zinnecker (1990) points out, they do not (yet) possess “funds” in societal regards so that the *how* of (non-verbal) communication is their main “capital”. Corporal means and distinctions on the whole mould their *doing difference*.

At the same time, not a few adolescents allow a reference to their own person and future only through the medium of corporality (cp. the significance of sporting activities in preventing drug abuse), and this means that a great deal of their messages is not verbalised. Corporality thus opens up a *tacit dimension* of communication. From the point of view of grown-ups, children and adolescents send tacit messages. The means of corporality thus shapes diverse activities in different contexts. It forms the basis for adapting oneself to a variety of circumstances.

The *tacit dimensions* of life seem to lose significance as children become older. However, what is true for children and adolescents is in a way true for grown-ups as well. For grown-ups, gestures, mimics, motions, signals etc. are not an everyday concern, even though they too are subject to relatively strict social control functioning on an implicit, subluminal level, as Pierre Bourdieu (1980) has shown in his studies. Cognitions and conscious arrangements, intended actions, stable self- and world-representations, general project plans, diverse forms of leadership, fixed structures, various strategies etc. rule adult thinking and acting, but they are not easily deciphered. (Let me add that sounding out bodily dimensions is restricted to professional groups such as artists, actors or human resource managers).

Reflection and experiential knowledge

We take it for granted that reflection as an important dimension of teaching and learning at school is a process producing a specific kind of “consciousness”, which implies that our experiences can be grasped on a cognitive level. Yet from a phenomenological perspective this is not acceptable. Reflection is a “secondary experience”. It is ciphered out from a pre-reflexive multiplicity of experiences. And among these experiences, there is a broad spectrum of aspects of life that cannot be completely analysed and enlightened (cp. once again Merleau-Ponty and Meyer-Dräwe as quoted above).

When finding ourselves in a concrete situation, we tend to complete our actual experiences by reconstructing the invisible sides of the situation, by realising the unsaid as it is revealed by the explicit, by focusing on the issues *read between the lines*. In doing so, we recur to a corporally conveyed experiential knowledge and we come back to that whenever we want to decide whether or how something makes sense to us.

Experiential knowledge is multi-faceted: A person is to be considered in his/her otherness; history needs to be figured out to gain access to present phenomena; not yet present consequences of happenings at hand must be anticipated in order to deal with them adequately. Diverse modes of distance (to oneself, to the other, to one's thoughts, to an object etc.) come into sight. A reconstruction of these profiles, facets or dimensions seems to be a key for figuring out the course of a conversation, the modes of adolescent self-expression, the special interests and motives of adolescents to do something, their ordering the world as *doing difference* and *doing age*.

In the next section I become more explicit concerning the question of what kind of competence is needed in order to cope with the tacit dimensions of acting and reflection as they can be described by phenomenological praxeology.

6 Modelling the competencies of children and adolescents and active learning

The current German debate about competence presupposes that someone's operational and experiential knowledge decides their success at school and thereby determines their future in society, especially their professional career. The debate is based on psychometric methodology and a cognitivist-constructivist approach. Competencies are modelled in a standardised, text-based and output-oriented way. However, in this way researchers underestimate the pre-reflexive conditions of learning processes, especially their bodily dimensions as explained above. And they exclude the aesthetic/artistic dimensions of learning.

From the perspective of bodily phenomenology, learning is understood as being based on an incorporation of structures. Over the years subject matter takes on other meanings

through the reorganisation of body patterns and by habit formation. Bernhard Waldenfels offers an example. Learning, he writes:

“depends on qualitative differences. The child uses language and interprets its perceptions more contextually than an adult, so that for example an engine that moves backwards (a *backward-engine*) is not the same as a *forward-engine* that in fact drives forward” (Waldenfels 2000, p. 178, translated by the author).

In its differentiation between *backward-engine* and *forward-engine* the child expresses a complexity that does not exist in grown-ups’ everyday discourses. It perceives the capacities of an engine in a corporal way. The *backward-engine* and *forward-engine* distinction thus shows a type of rationality that holds vital relevance for the child. Following Waldenfels, we have to accept that adults have simply forgotten (“unlearned”) the childlike views on phenomena.

The aim of modelling competencies in a generic, process-oriented way refers to the didactical concept of “open instruction” (cf. Peschel 2003). Peschel fosters “active learning” and emphasises freedom of action as can be found in daily life outside school. This freedom of action and learning includes theoretical and practical learning in a process-oriented way. Students are expected to help themselves. The content of learning is individualised and differentiated. “Lifelong learning” is an important objective. Artistic creativity is supposed to be a model for all processes of learning. The instructor should accept that he/she has to make him- or herself unnecessary. One way of achieving this is pre-structured learning environments. They are developed within the context of constructivist learning theory.²

7 Performative Play

I now spell out the concept of “active learning” and define it as “performative play”, marking it out with the concepts of performativity³, simulation, intermediate area and rule.

Performativity

Clifford Geertz (1973) introduces the concept of “cultural performance” as a “performance of community” coming about by applying key symbols as significant verbal notes or as a means of corporal expressivity. In performative processes well-planned actions are interwoven with emergence. An example of this is *while exercising the movements of swimming a non-swimmer suddenly may arrive at the point of being able to swim*. Certain constellations and processes unfold significance. In playing, symbols gain a sensual presence (Gebauer & Wulf 1998). *A piece of wood may become an apple*.

Simulation

In a play the transformation of the realised structures according to the wishes, interests and action patterns of the players may take place. One means for this are simulations (cp. Adamowski 2000). By fictionalising the objects at hand, “new orders of associations and

² Action-oriented instructional methods referring to instructional principles such as “pupil orientation”, the integrative approach on learning, independent and “self-active learning” and the maxim of action learning may appear in a new light.

³ See Forum Qualitative Social Research. Vol. 9, No. 2 (2008). “Performative Social Science”. Edited by Kip Jones [http://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/issue/view/10]; Research Center on Performing Cultures – Performative turns in the Middle Ages and in early and late modern times [http://www2.hu-berlin.de/performativ/seiten/frame_gesa.html] et al.

relations” can be produced. (cf. Sutton-Smith 2001) “*Shopping*” suddenly becomes “constructing”, when the former apples are used as models of houses and put in an order.

Intermediate area

According to Donald W. Winnicott (1971), the intermediate area of transition objects originally objectifies the connection between the interests of a person and that of another (*a teddy replaces the mother*). Here, Winnicott says a development of the symbolical order takes place. This order is the origin of arts, culture, and science.⁴ Even if in a play differences such as today and tomorrow, seriousness and non-seriousness, convention and innovation, meaning and absurdity etc., seem to be suspended, they acquire a new validity by forming the structure of the play (cf. Bateson 1972).

Rules

Acting as playing is not subject to moral or ethical limits. Agreements structure the environment and allocate practices. According to Richard Sennett (1974), a rule-structure can be set up in playing practices. When playing, children signify the impossible and at the same time decide on what is to be regarded as possible and what not. They open up varying concepts of role-taking, of life-styles, and present models of corporality (cf. Moor 1971). The rules can therefore be understood as protecting individual “leeways”.⁵ Social core competencies can be nurtured in playing, such as the ability to take over the perspective of somebody else (Flavell 1975), the capacities “to act in between identities” (Schechner 1990), to deal with “projections of an I on a Non-I” and to cope with one’s “experiences of the ‘extraneous’” (cf. Waldenfels 1990).

In order to place the constituting corporality into the centre of didactic considerations, I set up the performative play as a teaching concept. Learning is to be seen as the acquisition of knowledge. In the classroom the learning contents are handled like a stage setting or scenery, and the lecture functions as choreography structuring the room in order to make it easy to find a common topic. The basic idea then of performative didactics is that the classroom offers a leeway for self-testing and can be transformed into a space for movement.

Instruction starts with only roughly defined topics. Working with diverse materials such as newspapers, books, interviews, picture or video search and creating, research in the classroom, collecting sounds and so on allows students to create their topics in multi-perspective ways. Working with the knowledge they acquire in active learning, the students can outline the different facets and features of the topic.

Depending on the variety of learning contents, students and teachers have to decide whether the learnt contents are best represented e.g. within the frame of a newscast or in that of a play, a scientific lecture, a demonstration experiment, a power point presentation, a quiz programme, a discussion forum, a freeze image etc. Similarly, it has to be decided whether the subject matter is best treated by means of a lecture, a journal, an audit trail, a homepage, a guided discussion, a film sequence, the setting of tasks or something else. All types of activity are forms of representation in which a relatively hermetic experience area is expressed that follows certain rules or codes.

The criterion applied for evaluation is the degree to which the particular form of representation (the *how*) reflects the presented knowledge (*what* has been learnt) and whether

⁴ Cf. Wittgenstein’s play term. As for the relationship between reality and play (cf. Gebauer & Wulf 1998).

⁵ From the perspective of Jean Piaget (1962), the rules of play take their beginning in rites and they emerge as rules of self-delimitation and self-determination.

it is represented in an adequate way. Thus, it is not the acquisition of specialised knowledge that counts. The script that provides the base from which this knowledge is enacted in front of the class is more important. In the process of working out the most coherent form of presenting a certain topic, the individual representations of it (see above) acquire their own weight and the body becomes the primary medium of learning. Thus, the students rehearse and practice professional competencies that are indispensable in the particular mimed occupational field.

The setting of such teaching units, understood as a performative play, is supposed to serve as a basis for studies in the framework of school-related child and youth research as characterised above.

7 Outlook

I have developed a multimodal learning setting that allows different approaches to empirical research on the contents described above (see Kraus 2007 a and b, Kraus & Bauch 2008, Kraus & Østern 2008). A model of performative teacher education will be published in 2011.

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