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

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A new research-training paradigm: social representations and memories of childhood as an educational device in teaching the sociology of childhood

As teachers in Higher Education concerned with the training courses for education students in the subjects of 'Introdução às Ciências Sociais' (Introduction to Social Sciences) and 'Sociologia da Educação' (Sociology of Education), we have selected childhood as a subject to review and as a training controversy. Our choice was also due to a lack of research in the area of childhood sociology, and lack of a public debate on the relationships between adults and children in Portugal.

We did not want to add a further review controversy but to make others aware that its inclusion imposes a critical exercise:

- in the scientific field, about sociology itself ;
- in the educational field about the concept of participation, which is also inseparable from
- the political field, likely to question the recognised citizenship status of children.

In this context, it would be possible to articulate epistemological, methodological, educational and political concerns.

The assumption that children are social actors opens a new sociological view of childhood, which recognises their epistemological citizenship as one that sociology has allocated to adults in the social and political field (Qvortrup 1993, 1994), and one that entails the acknowledgement of citizenship rights. It is not by chance that Children's Rights - which may be classified as Protection, Provision and Participation Rights, (the 3 Ps) - tend traditionally to be emphasised as only Protection rights and Provision rights. Rights of Participation have been given much less attention, both from the point of view of political and social practices. However, if the interdependence of these three different rights is a condition to the achievement of rights overall, it is also true that the rights related to participation are also those which bring about major controversy.

Social representations and childhood memories as an educational device

Following the concerns of Waskler (1996), the training context in this work is within a tributary sociological paradigm of phenomenology, which emphasises the subjective component of people's behaviour. It tries to penetrate the subjects' conceptual world (Geertz, 1973, Bodgan, 1994) - and symbolic interactionism - in asserting that the ascription of meaning, as well as the process of interpretation, constitute the human experience, and that this is constructed through interactions in which meaning is subject to negotiation.

Considering that 'the adult only retains as a reference the knowledge which is connected to his or her identity' (Dominicé, 1990, Nóvoa, 1992) and what we knew from previous knowledge, we wondered whether our students would be aware of their own knowledge

and re-appropriate this critically. In this sense, the collection of their representations and memories of childhood, and their critical analysis, become constituted as a training device which is capable of articulating research within training. Indeed, the social memories and representations (which allow the range of experiences, abilities and attributes valued by the subjects, and of their relationships with the contexts in which they were to be reflected on) acquired the status of extensive personal and social knowledge which was available to be mobilised in the research and training processes.

Being aware that in these multiple 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 simultaneously training objects, subjects and agents. The recollections allowed the subjects to appeal to reflections, combinations of ideas, definitions, but also to uncertainties, ambiguities and contradictions. We looked for the collection of particular types of information, as much as possible first hand experience that would help:

- identify the properties, 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 reading and interpretations of reality; and
- identify and understand what are the driven 'memory recoverers' related to their childhood - to identify which of the significant lived experiences are seen as positive, negative or problematic, and their details.

In short, we were looking for what caused the emergence of established knowledge, and at what created the 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 of the child and of childhood, using such questions as: *What is a child? What is childhood?* Then we sought the representations of their own experiences about being a child, from questions such as: *What memories do you have about your childhood? How do you recall your childhood?*

The analysis of the information collected enabled us to identify two great dimensions which structure knowledge about children and childhood. One of these had a more structural character, which was underpinned by the ruling representations of child and childhood which shaped the representations expressed by the students, and the other, which had an experimental character, was that which was supported by the memories of their childhood.

From the knowledge of 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 and which singularises them - is in a narrow symbiosis with the *concept of childhood*. These nourish the social imagery and an ideology of child and childhood as being a 'golden age', part of the myth of modernity. Child and childhood thus tend to be represented in a symbolic

and material way, as being one same reality in which, through biology and psychology, the period stands out as the classifying structuring and distinctive element of the different stages of life, setting the limits which determine different generations and establish their reciprocal social status.

Before further considering this evidence, which reaffirms and reproduces the ruling representations about childhood, it was important, in the critical analysis context of training versus research, to send the students back to inquire into their own experiences.

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

It is in this stage of the training-research process that we mobilised the childhood memories of the students themselves. In the reviewing 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, playing with the peer group* was asserted as being the most relevant social action. Its importance, in the process of socialising of and between children, allows the deduction of 'a steady set of activities or routines, artefacts, values and 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 achieve an autonomy which enables them to become subjects 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/daughter and the art of being a brother/sister* stand out, and their relationship with adults was elicited as the most problematic, due to its more disciplining and normative aspects. Physical sanctions and reproaches stand out. 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 student¹ (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 a monopoly of rationality and emotion, if we update the Cartesian perspective of child-fault. In view of some of the problems mentioned in that relationship, it was identified both as 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 there emerges a plurality of familiar educational and leisure:

1. contexts
2. times (leisure time and working or duties time)

¹ From the french 'métier d'élève'

3. other significant people (peers and adults, parents, other relatives and teachers),
4. rationalities, feelings, strategies; in short: social abilities in the performance of their 'professions'.

It is this complexity which enables an approach to childhood which is non-reducible to the selection 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 re-reading of the places where it happens, and the consideration of the 'concealed' dynamics developed in their interaction with their peers.

From the confrontation between knowledge present in the representations and memories

Albeit that there is a perceived qualitative shift, from the analysis of the dichotomous representations of the social representations to one of the more complex and heterogeneous memories of childhood, the latter does not escape from what traditionally establishes the main roles of childhood - the *art of playing*, the *art of being a son/daughter* and the *art of being a student*.

However, a critical analysis of the sense ascribed by the students to their representations and memories does not imply that it is confined only to the consciousness of the actors (cf. Giddens, 1984). On the contrary, it requires the subjective entities of their childhood to confront the entities ascribed to childhood by social representation, and hence the theoretical approach and the analysis of the training process becomes complex. This confrontation makes apparent the arrangements for the re-conceptualisation or re-awareness of children and childhood, attempted in order to make a critical practice of the profession.

In this sense, the confrontation 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 returning to some situations interpreted as problematic, allowed once again a formative intervention which tried to deconstruct and analyse the ruling notions of children and childhood perpetuated as the products of history (Bourdieu, 1973).

An obstacle joining obstacles: adult-centrism

During the training-research process that we have been describing, adult-centrism was the greatest obstacle to either recall or to inquiry into representations of the child and childhood and memories.

Adult-centrism - rehabilitating in the adult person the naturalistic, individualist and ethnocentric obstacles, rather than enabling a child anthropology - is made up in anthropodoxy² which, although sustained by scientific knowledge, remains largely imbued with beliefs and opinions, making the social condition of adults and children derive from the biological evidence of their difference. This prevents questioning the mobilised mental categories on the social conditions that were the basis of their production.

² Anthropol+logy (knowledge), against anthropol+doxy (from the Greek, opinion)

To take further the work of deconstructing child and childhood - naturalisation and idealisation – implies questioning the child's relationship with adults, enrolling it in the wider political order constraining her or his life. Indeed, envisaging such relationships as intrinsically human makes the social (in-)competence of children combine with 'their nature', hiding the social character of the representation that is set up and the social nature of the relationship between adults and children. Therefore, it makes human agency invisible.

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

This process of the social construction of the child has been so far a conception of socialisation seeking to act on nature, whilst a cultural action (overemphasising the role and the model of the adult and of his world as a starting point) would repeat the classic Durkheimian 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 which, in the sociological field, finds a paradigm of social reproduction which assumes the child to be an object, and has developed a sociology of education that is focused on the schooling processes and traditional socialisation practices, inferring 'children' from the attitudes of teachers and families rather than from their actions.

The reversal of this paradigm requires shifting from the 'art of playing' and the 'art of being a student' to the 'art of being a child' (Sirota, 1998). It compels the recognition of children as actors with a daily life. The analysis of this is not restricted to the analysis of established tables where children produce with their peer 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 child societies.

This re-discovery of child/children compels the re-composition of the sociological field, both in theoretical and in methodological terms. It requires that childhood sociology may be a socialisation sociology rather than a schooling and family sociology, that is focused on the analysis of the daily lives and the active socialisation processes in which 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 world construction and capture, as inter-significant and, therefore inter-subjective social reality making the individuals exist from one to another - adult-child, adults-children and child-child - in which everybody is constituted as subjects, actors and social agents. The boundary between talking about socialising and socialised becomes nonsense.

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

More challenging than adopting the prescribed conception of socialisation and of peer groups' performance will be the consideration of the construction of the sociability network, trying to stress the individuals as social actors capably using their roles, rather than the roles in themselves and the way they invest the individuals. The relationship

needs to be understood as more dependent on the context and place occupied in the personal relationships grid, and on the social links or categorical relationships between individuals, than strictly regulated by rules (structural relationships). We should give greater value to the relationships which play with, overpass or infringe the institutional boundaries than we do to those which submit themselves to them; and we should discern social structure from social organisation (cf. Cardeira da Silva, 1999: 47-48). We suggest that to take a socialisation perspective is to consider it as 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 also one in which one fights for and exerts powers, generates hierarchies, inequalities, and differentiations and reproduces aspects of the social structure. By this 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, that are inherent to the group and to the child culture (Corsaro, 1997).

Such aspects contribute to the discussion of the social status of children, and of the conditions for a new citizenship practice, namely concerning children's right to participate. Indeed, the current citizenship concept presupposes the citizen as a rational being responsible for his or her actions, capable of making decisions about their and others' destiny, and who not only select but also sets conditions to the practice of this right to children. To rethink the right of children to participate - the right to social participation, and to share decisions in their life - supposes putting it in perspective in daily life. This means that recognising that giving children the status of social actors only makes sense if their voice is given attention and their capability of allocating sense either to their actions or to the contexts of their life is given value.

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