

International Journal of Pedagogy Innovation and New Technologies

journal homepage: <http://www.ijpint.com>

ISSN: 2392-0092, Vol. 4, No. 2, 2017



The agency of children as learners – writing as a socio-political act

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Keywords:

early education, generational order, events of writing, discursive practice

Abstract:

Girls and boys express their contribution to the learning community in their own ways. These contributions pose a challenge for pedagogues interested in the evolution of democracy as inconclusive dynamics of intergenerational exchange. Children's claims as subjects of rights are linked to a concept of positioning in the social structure. Works by Janusz Korczak, Célestine Freinet and Paulo Freire explain this connection between pedagogy and social practices of expression. Reggio and Swedish pedagogues document children's learning as well. This article examines the pride girls and boys display regarding their learning procedures and standpoints in community.

1. Introduction

Learning to read and write is fundamental to children's success. An optimal life trajectory, regardless of their background, socio-economic status or opportunities should be accomplished by skills and capabilities which are usually acquired by learning in kindergarten, preschools and schools. However, there is a way of learning which usually does not create a consciousness of a position in the social structure that would allow children to understand what their background and socio-economic status would mean to them personally and structurally.

The political agendas which correspond more or less with the curricula that are created in order to standardize children's learning, as well as their thinking and status in the classrooms, would be a timeless order, only changeable according to the agendas of parties and politicians. However, there is a form of pedagogy which constantly asks questions, especially questions concerning its own impact on children's learning and the significance of the awareness of girls and boys of their own positioning and pride in their learning procedures in the actual moment in the classrooms. These questions are transferred via a science of education that methodologically opens its concepts for the contributions of girls and boys, expressing in their own ways their claims as subjects of rights, to the kindergartens and classrooms.

Political agendas of governments regarding the organization of the education of the generation of the children on the one hand and the classroom as a political space created by the expression of the claims of girls' and boys' rights as their agency on the other hand, are linked together in certain correspondence, as structural analysis and pedagogical reflection are revealing.

In keeping with these initial pedagogical-philosophical thoughts, I would like to explain this connection according to the approach of applied Childhood Studies, especially "generational ordering" as a reference point of an analysis. My focus will be on affirmatively exploring the meaning a socio-political act could have in these processes of learning to write for girls and boys themselves, referring to two documentations of Reggio



and a documentation by Swedish pedagogues, artists and scientists. Regarding this focus, I will furthermore discuss concepts of reading and writing activity as an agency that links pedagogy and political consciousness of one's way of life. I will refer to Janusz Korczak, Célestine Freinet and Paulo Freire. Concerning the social political agency of children, I will not talk about ideologies or programs of political parties, but rather about the positioning and the rights of the child in the dynamics of dialectical reflection and expression in a diagrammatic evolution of societies (see Foucault 2014, Maier-Höfer 2016). The position of children in these evolution processes is yet to be described as a pedagogical and methodological challenge for applied Childhood Studies.

2. Childhood Studies and the generational order

Childhood Studies was created as a multidisciplinary approach that enhances an attitude of critical analysis and a knowledge that is methodologically open for the expressions of children.

Cultural, political and ethical dimensions need to be anchored in processes of historical reflection and not as *universalia*, standing above the social practices that people establish with one another in equality and fairness in the respective social situations. It is therefore necessary to question naturalistic positions referencing ethnicity, nation and blood in their claim to universality. This claim of being able to identify a seemingly suprarordinated knowledge and superordinated truth and reality is associated with the strive to achieve a hegemonial position of dominance within a society (Agamben 1998; Gramsci 1998) and with it the sovereignty of interpretation and right to define truth and reality. The challenge for a society regarding interaction of people within the society and beyond is therefore always linked to a dynamism that calls for dialectic thought and questions the claims to the power of definition and power of formative action.

This dynamic is evident in the work of Michel Foucault and his analysis practice. Civil society and social movements are part of the process of governing and assign citizens responsibility, together with the government, for dealing with problems. The activity of civil society is a key element of the development of societies and the positive establishment of processes that address challenges. These activities are therefore the source of expression of social life.

Foucault is able to integrate subjects being interwoven into the fabric of a society. Thus he does not have to assume exclusively of „them being suppressed” by the interaction of knowledge and power, what would not have been possible modifying the diagrams. Foucault refers to a “regime of truth” which is linked to ways of expression and to contents that could be created by means of social practices and agency. The “regime of truth” thus is

“a set of verbal or non-verbal procedures by which one brings to light... something that is asserted or laid down as true, whether in contrast, of course, with something false that has been eliminated, disputed, refuted or by dragging it out from the hidden, by dispelling what has been forgotten, by warding off the unforeseeable.” (Foucault 2014, p. 6)

If citizens are to be enabled to identify new content that identifies their lifestyle and subjectively-perceived challenges to the organization of their lives, which was beforehand hidden, eliminated, forgotten etc., they need to develop ways in which to render this new content comprehensible and tangible. Mutual contemplation and formulation of the interrelationships of their lives necessitates complex and creative thinking in the educational and socialization processes in which they are involved, both as adults and as children. It is necessary to comprehend in the pedagogy of early childhood that the acquisition of these skills is associated with the experience that this complexity and creativity of thinking is required and finds an echo.

Education in childhood and early childhood is therefore already training in democratic, socio-political action. What does this mean for pedagogy?

Janusz Korczak described in his own way as a most talented author the intergenerational dynamics linking pedagogy to the claims of hegemonial positioning of adults in society, pedagogy and I would add science:

“The market value of the child is small. Only before God and the Law is the apple blossom worth as much as the apple, green shoots as much as a ripe corn-field.

We nurse, shield, feed, and educate. The child gets what he needs without any worrying; what would he be without us to whom he owes everything? Absolutely everything, without exception – only we.



We know the way to success; we give directions, advice. We develop virtues, stamp out faults. We guide, correct, train. The child – nothing. We – everything.” (Korczak 1992, p. 172)

The adult deems himself/herself to be the center of the process of education. The adults’ skills, capacities, plans, didactics, methods, curricula, political programs, research strategies, ethical values etc. is everything, what children are communicating is not heard, seen, forgotten, oppressed, deemed unworthy of answering and as an answer for what children are expressing (cf. Maier-Höfer 2016).

With the help of the concept of “regime of truth” of Michel Foucault subjectivity as *assujettissement* and as group of actors can be examined; on the one hand by the subjects stabilizing the diagrams, on the other hand by questioning and modifying the diagrams by their way of living and expressing their lives. Foucault describes

“... regimes of truth, that is to say, the types of relations that link together manifestations of truth with their procedures and the subjects who are their operators, witnesses, or possibly objects.” (Foucault 2014, p. 100)

According to the analysis of the positioning of adults and children in the learning process, Childhood Studies explored the concept of “generational order”. This order reflects patterns of assemblages of subjectivity and enunciation that correspond to a diagram and a corresponding “regime”. The diagram is a structure that allows the description of a society as a net that is woven by social practices that link all people together according to the contents and expressions that are on the one hand understandable by everyone as a truth and on the other hand can be reproduced by any kind of institution within a society, because what is expressed is organized in structures, such as laws, qualification systems, daily interactions of men and women, children and adults and in school books and magazines – even in the research programs. Obviously, the diagram as a fixed status of society excludes many lives, subjectivities, new words to say and new content of being together to explore than that which is already said.

What the concept of “generational order” transports within the contexts of social and political sciences and of pedagogy as a science and practice is the invitation or the request of the younger generation to explore what is said by them but not yet heard and recognized. This also belongs to the method of questioning the positioning of the children in the social structures: Is it worth listening to what children are expressing, especially if it is not expressed in the “right” way and especially if it questions the “we everything” – “they nothing” social practices and does not contribute to the expected and planned content of delimited pedagogical contexts that systematically (produced and diagrammatically reproduced by political, methodological, ethical and habitual internalized dynamics of hegemony as the claim of knowing and executing one sole truth) exclude the agency of children?

Korczak has pointed out the core issue here: The positioning of the generation of children in the social structure in societies as a network of hegemony practices. It is not an isolated question for pedagogues in places like kindergarten, school, orphanages etc. that would be deemed to be cut off by political dimensions of existence, which Korczak explores in many ways in his life and his writing. His reflections, entering dialogical and dialectical togetherness with the children, struggling for freeing their expression, open up spaces for the exploration of how to claim a subjectivity of rights in situations that are both prepared but also unprepared by pedagogues, lead him perhaps to the sarcastic and undetermined figurative and literal approach he has created in his many texts.

How is it possible to touch adults in their adulthood in a way that stabilizes them in a complementary system of defining entities according to the system of knowledge and truth of modernity? Challenging adults to explore their adulthood towards children creatively is a gift Korczak gave to us. He was far advanced in his pedagogical thoughts, because, I would say, he proclaimed the link between pedagogy and hegemonial dynamics that is replicated in the processes of education by adults and eventually imitated by children when structuring their social practices and togetherness. The reference to positioning as subject of right is an enormous contribution to the emancipation of children and freeing their expression as a contribution to the evolution of societies.

Concluding this first chapter, I would like to refer to Childhood Studies. The hypothesis that the agency of children is connected with generational ordering is reflected against the backdrop of standpoints (cf. Nancy Hartsock 1998). Standpoints reveal statuses of dominance and minority in societies. What Childhood Studies explored is the idea that standpoints are also stable in societies according to paradigms and research questions. The dominance of reflection processes that are constructed as excluding and complementary differences, as

adulthood and childhood, but also as the self and the other, the stable and the chaotic, the healthy and the handicapped etc. are not only reference points for the “market value” as Korczak described the positioning of the child. The oppositions are also reference points for dominance in social practices and positioning, including power and access to rights and to the right to express and be heard and acknowledged. Reflection in oppositions and constructing knowledge in this way is a heritage of the Enlightenment, which was once very important as a means of freeing people from oppression by irrational fears and the fanaticism of cruel leaders. This knowledge created access to a truth that is “thinkable”. The new fact that any truth is dialectical would be a reason to explore discourses. Truth and a knowledge of reality develops with the reflection processes and the consciousness of humankind exploring their lives and their social practices and responsibility, e.g. for the bringing up of children. Adulthood and childhood are still constructed and structurally reproduced in an opposition. This affects research, politics and social practices. The concept of “generational ordering” and the aims of Childhood Studies’ attitude of critical analysis are referring also to these processes of constructing “entities” in order to describe certain realities.

Lena Alaanen, who prepared the concept for analyzing discourses and practices that link children and adults, describes this dynamic as follows:

“Their interdependence means that they stand in a relation of mutual constitution – they reciprocally presume each other. For social practice the implication is that childhood and adulthood are produced and reproduced in the interactions taking place between the members of existing generational categories – in other words, in intergenerational practices. Through such practices a particular social structure also recurrently emerges. And as this structure is a particular organization of social relations, in this case relations between generational categories, it is fitting to call it a *generational order*.” (Alaanen 2011, p. 161)

Opening up the reflection in pedagogy and even more disciplines for the hypotheses that the generational order is no natural and universal order that has to be believed in as universal facts that stabilize society makes it valuable to explore the practices as well as the expressions of children. Standardized programs for learning are referring to a kind of truth, actually a regime of truth, that turns active learning children into “objects” of this truth and links them to the corresponding dynamics of learning in lessons, teachers have provided for them in order to stabilize their hegemony in coercion and persuasion. The question which could be asked here is how states use cultural institutions in order to maintain power on the one hand. On the other hand it is to be asked how a civil society consists of persons of right turns in a population that is governed by biopower (cf. Foucault 2001). The very interesting dimension Foucault is referring to unexpected in comparison to Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Gramsci is the dynamics of power that takes place everywhere and not only in relation to political power. Dahlberg talks about the sensitivity of children and their ways of representing them to themselves:

“... that milieu is made up of substances, powers and events, and, in a milieu like a preschool, materials such as drawings, documentation, play tools, furniture and noises in the shape of children’s talking, singing, walking and drama are all pathways that merge not only with the subjectivity of the child, but with that of the milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it. In this respect, other children and pedagogues are a milieu through which children travel; they pass through its qualities and powers and make a map out of them.” (Dahlberg 2011, p. 235)

3. The cultures and structures of learning

What would a socio-political act mean for children themselves? Referring to the ways children learn to read and write, the social status children could achieve in the learning processes is very important.

According to the hypothesis of Childhood Studies, research methodologies, theories and practices in kindergartens and schools are oriented towards a complementary opposition of adulthood and childhood.

The pedagogical approach that was created in Reggio/Emilia, which I will explore in the following chapter, inherently transports this question of how children are involved in the development of societies. Their involvement, especially in the development of their own place where they are growing up and acquiring their cultural skills of reading, writing and calculation that might be linked to their skills as active citizens, has to be conceptualized in the discourses. But what kind of truth and knowledge would be afforded?



Carla Rinaldi, a pedagogue and scientist of Reggio, describes it thus:

“In this context, we will see ourselves not as ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ of the new, but as children in our own right who are generated by the new, provided we are able to seek out that which unites, and unites us, rather than that which divides us. And thus, designing a school means, first and foremost, creating a space of life and of the future. This requires the shared research of pedagogy, architecture, sociology, and anthropology, disciplines and fields of knowledge that are called upon to state their own epistemologies and to compare their languages and symbolic systems, in a new freedom born of the desire to dialogue and exchange ideas. This kind of research is open to the contributions of the most advanced experimentation in the spheres of music, choreography, design, performance, and fashion.” (Rinaldi 2003, p. 114)

The theories developed in the course of the modern era are associated with the position of the adult as “ideal” person, on the one hand superior in worth to the children, on the other hand with power to help the children acquire a status as adults by corresponding to the ideal of adulthood and being guided there by the adults. This is the way in which the stage-development-theories were established. They are based upon the premise that children initially have both a cognitive and a moral “deficit” compared to adults. Taking this premise as starting point, social practices are derived which place the knowledge and moral power of judgment of adults above those of children, regarding the knowledge and social actions of children not only as incomplete and provisional, but also “wrong”. The pedagogical actions of the adults are therefore not only intended to guide and correct, to ensure that the children achieve the right results, which the adults regard as proof of their ability to guide children towards “correct” thinking and the “correct” rules of social cohabitation. The pedagogical actions of the adults are correspondingly aligned towards presenting adulthood as superior to childhood.

The dependency of children on the praise of adults, their inferiority towards the grownups, continuously reproduced in practice and combined with the subjugation of the children to the adults is accompanied by the administering of praise and rebuke by the adults to the children, i.e. depreciation and appreciation. The generation of the children becomes dependent on people that judge and appraise them. This problem was addressed by Lilian Katz in the US (cf. 1993, narcissism versus self-esteem). It is possible to ask almost anything of children if they are dependent on the adults to stabilize their narcissism through praise and being singled out through the authority of an adult person from other children in the group. According to Katz, it is completely different if the pedagogues recognize the dispositions that help the children learn specific cultural practices in a specific moment and are attentive to what children ask at this moment and require in the way of support. The dynamism of generational order aside, the children see themselves as following the opportunities that are there for them at that moment. Imparted via these opportunities and their realization in kindergarten and within the group with the other children, they experience joy and pride, with the feeling of being of value. This, says Katz, makes a difference when it comes to people being capable of developing and contributing to the community with enjoyment and commitment, not just working for themselves and their own profit.

If vocational qualification and professional approach are based unconditionally on this oppositional categorization of adulthood and childhood, and the pedagogical constellation of making children dependent on the praise of adults, the result is social practices that throw up barriers in the context of societal development that add the production and reproduction of structures commensurate with the suppression of the generation of the children in the pedagogical processes.

The Reggio pedagogical approach and the further development of this by pedagogues, artists and researchers in Sweden are tangible in their specificity against this background. I would like to examine this further in the scope of two projects.

However, I would firstly like to address the significance that it has within the context of the “documentation” of enabling the development of knowledge of the learning processes of the girls and boys in the kindergartens (cf. Maier-Höfer 2012).

3.1. Documentation as pedagogical practice and as research

If the thinking of the children is assessed as deficient, why would it be necessary to document what the children are doing at that time?



In my opinion, the documentation was the starting point of the Reggio pedagogical process as a new approach extending beyond the paradigm of the modern era. What is documented, and misunderstood in many cases, is not the status of the development of a child, nor the learning progress it achieves. The point of reference of the documentation was to understand what the children are currently thinking about and how they deal with the issues that concern them and that are important to them. The fact that the children display significant tact when working together and do not conflict with their ideas to the extent that they feel the ideas they are currently pursuing are detached from the numerous other ideas was regarded as a particularly important finding by Malaguzzi, who systematized the experiences of Reggio. In this manner, the documentations that, in the form of audio and video recordings and transcriptions, became the point of reference for the pedagogical discussions of the pedagogues, represented clues for determining what logical forms the children were developing and how it can be possible, through comprehension, understanding and learning on the part of the adults, that they should not intervene in the trains of thought of the children and interrupt these when they wish to impose their “superior knowledge” on the unanswered questions of the children. The intuition that they are adults who are required to help and explain things to the children, because they know better, was revealed as a structural position of superiority that not only takes away the right of the children to develop their own thinking and logic, but also their right and entitlement to join with the adults in developing knowledge of their learning and the manner in which they approach the autonomy of the world, in the manner in which they desire to be understood and not judged, evaluated or corrected. Children do not create alternative universes. They develop their own ways of comprehending the world and share their thoughts and position regarding their understanding of the world.

Loris Malaguzzi helped develop the pedagogy of the communal kindergartens in Reggio/Emilia after WW II, following a particular hypothesis. According to this hypothesis, fascism is only possible in structures where the population and children are systematically humiliated.

Pride can only be experienced in people when they formulate their worth in relation to political programs that they subject themselves to (or are forced to subject themselves to due to poverty). They are correspondingly dependent on being appreciated in value relative to an enemy within or outside of the society which, with the construction of an opposition, assumes all negative characteristics corresponding to the depreciation of being human, of not being aligned to the ideal.

The fact that this dynamic had already worked in kindergarten led Malaguzzi to consider systematically examining and amending pedagogy in kindergartens. As already illustrated, the documentation represents access to a knowledge that works “dialectically” and does not create knowledge that the adults could simply apply to the children in order to impart upon the children, with or against their own will or disposition, which the children would reproduce as knowledge at a specific time point.

“If adults have thought of 1,000 hypotheses, then it is easy to accept the fact that there can be 1,001 or 2,000 hypotheses. The unknown is easier to accept and adults are more open to new ideas when they have generated many potentialities themselves. The problem comes from having only one hypothesis which then draws all the attention of the adult.” (Rinaldi 1998, p. 218)

This quote illustrates the core of this pedagogy. The adults not only record and write down what the children do. They think clearly and resolutely about what could happen next in a project and what support could be important for the girls and boys if something falters in the children’s process. The “Scarpa et metro” (1997) documentation is a document that is of enormous importance for understanding the complexity of the knowledge, the reflection and perception that the respective personnel must have in order to be involved in the project, to understand it and to form a framework for the respective lines of thinking of the children, signifying a far-reaching examination of the learning processes of the children in order to avoid reproducing themselves and their “knowing better” in what the children do, thereby reflecting themselves narcissistically as “good pedagogue”.

“By means of documenting, the thinking – or the interpretation – of the documenter thus becomes material, that is, tangible and capable of being interpreted. The notes, the recordings, the slides and photographs represent fragments of a memory that seems thereby to become ‘objective.’ While each fragment is imbued with the subjectivity of the documenter, it is offered to the interpretive subjectivity of others in order to be known or re-known, created and recreated, also as a collective knowledge-building event. The result is knowledge that is



bountiful and enriched by the contributions of many. In these fragments (images, words, signs, and drawings) there is the past, that which took place, but there is also the future (or rather what else can happen if...)... We are looking here at a new concept of didactics: participatory didactics, didactics as procedures and processes that can be communicated and shared. Visibility, legibility, and shareability become supporting nuclei because they are the basis of communicative effectiveness and didactic effectiveness. Didactics thus becomes more similar to the science of communication than to traditional pedagogical disciplines.” (Rinaldi 2007, p. 34)

In reference to Paulo Freire, I would like to point out that the quote of Carla Rinaldi, a pedagogue of Reggio, is full of the dynamics that Freire describes in his *Pedagogy for Liberation* (1987) as a consciousness towards being a teacher for children that is explored not in books but in the processes adults share in order to understand and grow in their own rights and not as executives of standardizing curricula and governmental oversight. The quality of pedagogy evolves in a milieu of communication and community pedagogues can create as resources of the construction of a reality of teaching that is meaningful to them, too. This growing consciousness includes the reflection of the positioning in the social structures. It is not about ideology and power, but about the creative practices and the social and professional value of dialogue. John Dewey supported democratic dynamics of learning as exchange processes students are sharing while being involved in a project. As a scientist he contests that democracy is only able to develop via “learning by doing” (cf. Dewey 1938).

3.2. Documentation from Reggio: “Love letters and protest letters – Armando devises his writing”

What is the political dimension of the encounter between adults and children in the contexts of learning and education? According to the UN-Convention of the Rights of the Child, girls and boys are *subjects* of rights. This would mean that their dignity as human beings is not questionable by any social and political act which would be practiced by adults that are responsible for well-being, access to education, fulfillment of daily needs and protection against any kinds of harm. Beyond this there is another social and political dimension of the encounter between children and adults that I would like to explore here. The UN Convention of the Rights of the Child is based on the assumption that children on the one hand have to be protected and, on the other, have to be oriented towards the rules and standards of a nation and a world nation as a whole. Structurally the adults are in charge of the fulfillment of the dimensions of rights, especially on the level of parliamentary actions.

I would suggest that the rights girls and boys refer to in their daily life are structurally linked less to their position as weak victims or according to an incompetent and even rebellious behavior in the face of rules and programs adults refer to in order to stabilize their own positions towards and above immature children. Could that ultimately mean telling the children how to be and behave and, in particular, how to feel and please?

The question of maturity of children is very much at stake in the realization of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child and of that which is expected by pedagogues as a dialogue in equality between children and them. Are children in kindergarten and schools because they are immature and should grow into adulthood? Or are the girls and boys in kindergartens and schools in order to learn and understand?

Something which could not be planned and foreseen by adults alone, but which is constructed by contribution and cooperation of all, is the reference points of being involved in democracy. Indeed, children are learning to write, albeit in their own way, and will use the words and the letters in their intention to contribute to cooperative social life. They learn the latter in exactly the same moments and procedures as they learn numbers, letters, grammar and logic. The capability they acquire has nothing to do with the longing for supremacy or hegemonial power. This force is fueled by dignity as a whole personality with aspiration, hopes, sorrows, pleasure and the whole scale of sensitivity towards the ambivalent scenarios of group life that call for dialogical reasoning and the emotional evaluation of fairness.

I would like to present a documentation from Reggio concerning a complex writing project illustrating the link between the achievement of culture techniques and democratic force (cf. Project Zero und Reggio Children 2001, p. 174 et seq). It describes how the boy Armando invents his writing in a context of writing love-letters and protesting letters.

Armando asked his friend Michele to help him write a love letter to Caterina his friend. However, he does not know all the letters. Michele already knows how to write using all letters. He helps Armando to write down



the words he would like to send to Catarina with a computer. Michele shows the letters to Armando on the computer board, moving Armando's head like a video camera, directing it towards the letters on the board.

He writes to Catarina:

CATI, ICH LOVE YOU BECAUSE YOU ARE PRETTY AND BEAUTIFUL
 ARMI GANAPINI

Catarina, who is sitting next to Armando and Michele, hears the message already and immediately replies to Armando's letter, writing her words down on paper. She is already able to write some words on her own.

She writes:

ARMANDO TOMORROW I WILL DRAW A PICTURE FOR YOU
 I AM HAPPY THAT YOU ARE PLAYING WITH ME
 CATERINA

The process continues:

Armando writes the same letters which are on the computer again on a piece of paper. The pedagogue asks him why he would write this a second time. Armando replies that the computer wrote these words and that he would now like to write his own words. He explains to the teachers: "HE (pointing to the computer) wrote this and I am writing that".

In the following month Armando started to become an expert in writing. As a consequence, he helped other children to explore their skills. Children can be good teachers, too!

One day, when working groups were active in the corridor outside the group-rooms, Armando's group had finished its work. He and his friends were all exited and in a state of triumph, but they were actually too loud to allow other working groups to continue, so the pedagogue asked them to calm down. After asking again the pedagogue finally sent them all back to the group room. She ordered them to leave the corridor, go inside the group room and shut the door.

After a while, the door was opened and a child from Armando's group stepped outside in order to stick a small piece of paper on the door. Then the child went back into the room and shut the door behind him/her. This gesture was repeated twice. The pedagogue at first did not notice what was going on here. Then she read the texts on the paper.

First letter:

PROTESTING LETTERS TO THE TEACHERS

Second letter:

WE WILL NOT COME TO SCHOOL AGAIN

Third letter:

ALL TEACHERS IN THE WORLD DO NOT HAVE ALL THE RIGHTS.

The pedagogues recognized these actions as something very important according to their understanding of education processes in Reggio. Reggio is also often called the kindergarten for children with their heads held high. That does not mean that children are arrogant or have an elite-like attitude. However, they are proud. Their pride in being girls and boys is not taken away from them by suppressing learning conditions. Nevertheless, they have to negotiate their positions and are active in doing so.

Armando felt humiliated in this moment when the teacher complained about the behavior of him and his friend. They were at the top of feeling proud about what they had achieved together. The success they had achieved could not be measured rationally. Instead, it was an affectively deep moment of togetherness and triumph, which they celebrated with laughter and shouts. Unfortunately, the laughter and the shouts were too loud and they were asked to leave. A certain moment was keeping Armando in touch with both moments: the celebration and the blame. As the following process reveals, Armando feels humiliated but he does not feel inferior. He deems himself equal and starts a dialogue. His way of searching for dialogue demands that pedagogues respect him as in the same way he respects the pedagogues. It is a mutual relationship that needs standpoints and agency.

The capability to write could be a catalyst for developing one's own consciousness and agency. Learning to speak and write and the dominant grammar is important for contribution in a socio-political dimension. However, Paulo Freire would add, the children should be assured that their ways of speaking, writing and expressing are beautiful, even if they do not coincide with the dominant ways.



In Reggio kindergartens children are assured that their expressions in aesthetical, ethical and cognitive ways, especially the logic of their thinking, are recognized as equal and as beautiful as the concepts adults are working with in their ways of understanding the social and physical dynamics in the world.

The analysis of the contemporarily dominant discourse in Early Childhood Education and Care, which is represented by PISA studies in particular, reveals the paradigms and the structure of reality and truth many scientists refer to. Dahlberg, Moss and Pence describe the dominant discourse as follows:

“It has been assumed that both indicators and outcomes are universal and objective, identifiable through the application of expert knowledge and reducible to accurate measurement given the right techniques.” (Dahlberg, Moss & Pence 2007, p. 5)

In the processes of documentation, of which I offered an example here, the expressions of the children are connected via documentation to the discourses experts lead in many disciplines. This dimension of truth and reality questions the dominance of the leading paradigm and offers more ways of conducting science in these fields. Educational, political, economic and social sciences as well as arts and health care are interconnected in their search for understanding the complexity of societies on the level of trust and equality.

Accordingly, it is not about the aesthetical dimension of Reggio pedagogy I would refer to here and now. In so many discourses the creativity of “Reggio children” in arts are merely acknowledged. The socio-political dimension is astonishing here. How is it possible that this young boy Armando, about 5 or 6 years old, is able to refer to a mutual, dialogical relationship with adults and to the logic of rights? Armando simply likes teachers, I would presume. He usually takes pleasure in being together with them. They help him to grow and to learn. They guarantee a stable and just environment where he can meet his friends and find out more about his feelings and wishes in social life. I would add, challenging the traditional ideas about childhood education, he would even like to find out more about his feelings and wishes in political life, longing for a stable and just environment where people can meet whilst trusting in equality, dialogue and fairness.

It is documented that on the last day in kindergarten Armando and his friends wrote this letter to their teachers:

FOR LAURA AND SARA
WE LOVE YOU
THANK YOU FOR ALL YOU HAVE DONE FOR US.

3.3. Writing and the freedom of expression

In a writing project supported and documented by pedagogues, artists and researchers from Sweden the dimension of generational order is as clearly apparent as in the writing situations that arose around Armando. (cf. Olsson 2012, p. 88-107). I would only like to address this briefly in order to highlight the dimension of the writing and self-writing and the unforeseen element that can arise with regard to content in a writing event.

The pedagogue notes that the first letters and words that the children in this preschool group (in Sweden this is the time in which children are in a stage of learning and personal development between kindergarten and school) put to paper were their names or provisional signatures, which appeared on pictures they had painted. When pedagogues began using a picture with the name of a child in the group on in and using this as inspiration for the discussion of writing, a writing event developed. The pedagogues prepared various kinds of papers and pens, enabling the girls and boys to try out their writing whenever they wanted. One boy wrote his name on black paper with a white pen. His writing could be described as spidery. He described it as being very cold. The writing looked like frozen icicles and was executed as if the hand was shivering with cold. As a result, the children drew “ice pictures”. There were letters that were so frozen, ice hockey could be played upon them. The writing event incorporated many ideas and feelings of the individual children, as well as the feelings that arose within the community of the children. For example, one girl firstly wrote her name in white, describing it as cold, before writing her name again in red, describing it as anger that she felt. One girl developed letter images, linking her name to painted experiences that were important to her. Albert painted a picture with “old man letters”. He drew the “E” with a large number of horizontal lines. Laughing, he said that the E was very old and had forgotten how many lines it had. Albert was clearly not exactly sure and had not paid attention to the number. However, an evaluating assessment by a pedagogue and linguists would have missed the truth behind this writing. Albert had drawn “old man letters”. One letter had glasses and a moustache. Another letter was



sat in a wheelchair, waving, and the final letter, the “T”, was riding a skateboard as, according to Albert, old people wanted to enjoy themselves, too. Reading that which has been written, a narrative experience in this writing event, brought the children together in mutual listening and shared enjoyment. Apart from understanding that objective knowledge of the universality of the letters is not the basis for reading and writing, in this project it was also important for the adults that the children nevertheless learned to write, even though they were not taught in the classic sense via frontal teaching.

The fact that this appropriation of the cultural techniques of reading and writing is not only enjoyable but also binds the children together in their narrative interactions is just one finding here. Further research into reading and writing confirms the hypothesis that the manner in which children learn to read and write determines how they develop with regard to reading and writing, as well as connecting actively with the world (cf. Brooks et al. 1997, Wiltz & Klein 2012).

Alongside of a pedagogical responsibility that strives for understanding research and discourses, an ethico-political responsibility of professionals could be named:

„Learning to listen, see, observe and interpret the children’s actions, thoughts, and logic of investigation and construction helps us to learn the art of being and talking to them, to understand better the processes and procedures they choose for developing personal relationship and acquiring knowledge. The educators’ responsibility is thus to design and construct contexts that sustain these processes and foster relationships, loans of competencies, expectations, imitations, and ‘contagion.’” (Gardner 2001: Preface)

4. Writing and political consciousness that creates new thoughts

Céléstine Freinet (1968) discovered writing in primary school as a form of writing that is connected to the lives of the children. Using the printing machine, the children were able to reproduce the experiences that they presented in stories, poems and pictures, as well as drafting texts. One particular aspect here was that no school books were required in order to learn reading and writing, depicting a world imposed upon the children as “normality”, particularly where these do not reflect the life situations of the children and their own experiences. Learning to read and write from school books gives rise to a reality that imposes itself as a book reality and images of the world that the children do not relate to and cannot contribute to or change via mutual discussion.

Janusz Korczak also had a particular idea of the expression of the girls and boys of the orphanage in mind when he developed the idea of them creating a newspaper. Korczak enclosed the newspapers that they created to the general newspaper as a supplement. The aim was not to create a newspaper for children in the sense of games and entertainment for other children. Instead, it was to be a newspaper in which children could report on events from their perspective, events that they considered important and that they thought about. The content was determined by the children themselves. The fact that the children write “properly” is based on their desire to write correctly, not in their fear of examination of their orthographical skills.

Korczak also had the idea of bringing the girls and boys of the orphanage together through their writing. He mooted the idea for a newspaper in a pamphlet, “On the school newspaper”, which he drafted in chapters. This reads as a train of thought to the notion of what a newspaper can be and mean. It was the train of thought of Korczak. In the last and 20th chapter Korczak writes in a manner that suggests he wishes to hand it over to the children, by encouraging them to seize the opportunity of words and thoughts for themselves, accepting or rejecting these. However, how could they have done the latter, after Korczak had shown them so much respect and assigning them responsibility for their activity!

“Some will be surprised that I conclude this pamphlet with this final advice.

After reading my views you are free to say.

‘We are not going to pay attention to all of these tales. The old bore thinks that children and young people have no perseverance, can’t do anything.

We’ll do as we please. Let’s get going quickly and with enthusiasm. What is there to be afraid of? It must work. God helps those who help themselves – audaces deus juvat!’ (Korczak 1967, p. 525)

Research into the children’s newspaper project describes that Korczak appears to have expressed and made ambivalent feelings and remarks about the text the children created. However, it is difficult for all of us



to find words to express a truth that is so proximate and energizing and which, in contrast to the prevailing system, shines a spotlight on the thoughts, hopes, desires and concerns of children. Our own words and writing were always filled with the memories and repetitions of preconceived thoughts!

But where do the new thoughts and writing come from, as well as the new thinking on the agency of the children for the stabilization and development of society?

Korczak himself was adept at dealing with the words and writing. He was also able to interact with the children very well. For a time at least, he provided an environment that the children could fill with their questions regarding cohabitation and the things of value that they shared as a community.

The critical analysis and pedagogical reflection of applied Childhood Studies links the professionals in the fields of child education dialectically with the generation of the children (cf. Maier-Höfer 2016a). The responsibility of the adults does not therefore lie in educating children for a future as foreseen by the adults for the generation that follows them. Instead, responsibility lies in linking children to their own future, namely the manner in which, as a new generation oriented towards the values of democracy and equality, they face the challenges as a community and are capable of free rational thought and dialectic debate. The opportunities given to children to develop in this manner, feeling comfortable, appreciated and recognized in democratic processes, can be imparted by the pedagogues in the form of decisions taken, as Liselott Mariett Olsson describes:

“Teachers and researchers also need to make decisions and choices. What is important and why should they work with this content of knowledge with the children? These choices must be made in relation not only to ontological but also to political and ethical features. What kind of learning and knowledge do we want to produce together with the children in this project? How does this project relate to ongoing political and ethical features in society? How do we as adults want to contribute to the children’s encounters with these features, which have either already taken place or will inevitably do so sooner or later?” (Olsson 2009, p. 84)

5. Conclusion: Raising the awareness of the generational barriers of education

A pattern of politics as an ideological dynamic imposed on curricula and a pattern of adulthood imposing “success” and “narcissism” on children which would fulfill the expectancies and power relations of a hegemonial regime would be an excellent reference point for a suppressing and subordinating pedagogy. Making subjects following the opinions and thoughts, words and categories that are acknowledged as the truth adults would refer to in order to justify their actions that guarantee their superiority would produce and reproduce barriers of development, in particular, of an epoch-adequate learning and education. An eternal knowledge that does not need to be developed, because every part of the world is already named and categorized is a barrier to progression of a society and to a science that explores the many interconnections of the world.

The idea of reading and writing occupying a position within the social weave is a fundamental premise of the “pedagogy for liberation” of Paulo Freire (cf. Shor & Freire 1987) that deals with those barriers. According to Freire’s approach, an awareness of the world, the structural, political, economic and cultural dynamics, can only be achieved by comprehending it in relation to one’s own life (cf. Maier-Höfer 2012a). In association with this conscious awareness of oneself in society, a dialectic approach can be used to process one’s own hopes, desires, concerns, fears and contributions to the development of the society. Reflection, discussion, seeking information, comparing opinions and forming one’s own opinion are skills associated with a democracy. Between tradition and change occurs that which an evolving democratic society can deliver in a constant process of renewal, education and prosperity for all, without creating subsequent situations that force people, through poverty, into dependency, muteness and ideological nationalism.

The fact that barriers to construction of societies occur with regard to democratic development cannot be overlooked, as historical analyses show. The coexistence of different societies in particular is a major challenge at this time.

In their reflections, Gunilla Dahlberg, Peter Moss and Alan Pence (2007) explored the dynamics of historical context in the fields and discourses of Early Childhood Education and Care. They assume that the standards and methods that work well in one society, or which are seen as good gauges of quality, will not work equally well in all historical and geopolitical contexts. What does this mean for the disciplines, their paradigms, methodologies and their interconnectedness, especially in international cooperation?



Discovering the worth of coexistence and the worth of oneself is a fundamental pedagogical premise, represented in current discourse by the Reggio pedagogy in particular. This not only concerns the attitude of the pedagogues, regarding themselves in the mirror as “good pedagogues”, particularly when they are “in dialogue with the children” (Maier-Höfer 2015). The moments when girls and boys apply their worth and dignity to language contrary to those in which they experience in the relationships and situations that they associate with adults are unforeseeable, as the position of Armando illustrates (see the documentation “Love letters and protest letters”). However, to formulate this statement, as Armando and his friends have, and insist on dignity, it is first necessary to acknowledge that one is valuable, and that one is valuable as a child, in particular. This cannot be based upon “market value”, as this is not very high, as Korczak has already pointed out. This is not the case in all societies, however. It is also not a law of nature, and therefore not a universal law that places adulthood and childhood in a dominance-subordination relationship to one another. The discursiveness of history, especially of childhood (cf. Ariès 1962) and the social dynamic should be considered with regard to the analytical methodology of Michel Foucault.

The awareness of the high value societies place on children is enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, this convention is clearly not only intended for states that add intergenerational dynamism to their political agenda. Freedom of expression and the expansion of forms and content of political and pedagogical discourse, creating awareness of oneself as girls and boys in society, for oneself and fellow citizens, is tied to a subjective legal status stipulated by the value of each human life. In this respect, the rights of children are truly not *universalia*. Instead, they are social practices, in particular creative social practices, that children create in their desire not to be praised and narcissistically appreciated, but instead to develop their own pride and bearing from the knowledge that they are valuable to society, due in part to the fact that they have their own standpoints, prepare statements and ask questions.

Unfortunately, educational science has yet to question the importance children place on feeling that they are of worth and on making their lives and interactions valuable to the stabilization and development of democratic societies. The dialogues that need to be investigated regarding this would not only need to take place in parliaments, but also in kindergartens, children’s homes and schools, as well as in the places where pedagogues are trained and between pedagogues and scientists in equal measure.

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