



Third Annual International Conference «Early Childhood Care and Education»

Research with Children in Kindergartens

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Abstract

This paper starts from contemporary conceptualizations of childhood as socially constructed and structured, and contemporary conceptualizations of children as active participants in the construction and determination of their own lives, or, as capable of independent action. These considerations imply a shift in childhood and children research approaches, and there is much discussion about the interpretative approach to research, i.e. research with children. This paper provides an example of a research about children's view of decision-making in a kindergarten, exemplifying the possibilities of research with children.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of Russian Psychological Society.

Keywords: childhood; children; interpretative approach to research; research with children; decision-making in kindergarten

1. Introduction

Children growing up in institutional context is one of the main characteristics of contemporary childhood, and this has actualized the question of children's social positioning in that context, or, more specifically, their activity in their own development. There is a contradiction between children's reality, in terms of institutionalization, characterized by adults' regulation of childhood and children, and contemporary theoretical considerations of childhood and children, in terms of their activity, competence and ability.

This is why this paper provides a review of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, the interpretative approach to research and provides an example of a research with children about children's view of participation, exemplified by decision-making in kindergarten.

2. Contemporary conceptualizations of children and childhood

A critical approach towards "traditional academic disciplines" within social sciences [1] encompasses an abandonment of the dominant traditional view of childhood and children as inferior to adulthood and adults and

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advocacy of viewing childhood and children as a conceptual category and social position. In relation to research, this implies an abandonment of the hitherto prevailing marginalized position of childhood and children [2].

Contemporary conceptualizations – “new paradigms” of childhood and children emphasize social construction and structuring of childhood. The reviewed literature advocates an interdisciplinary approach (sociology, psychology, pedagogy, cultural anthropology...) to contemporary children and childhood study in theory and practice.

Social construction of childhood as a theoretical approach, according to its proponents [3, 4, 5] implies viewing the variability of conceptualizations and experiences of childhood. Along with the stated variability of childhood, authors also emphasize continuity of childhood. In relation to social structuring of childhood, according to Qvortrup [6, 7], this means that childhood is a socially structured space, which is permanently present in the structure of societies, whose construction changes in accordance with historical and cultural characteristics of society.

Due to conceptualizing childhood as socially constructed, questions arise about the nature of children – who are children, how are they conceptualized? Prout and James [8] state that children are active participants in the “construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live.” This can also be considered using the term “agency”, in the sense of a child’s personal activity and ability to act independently [9]. While research of social structuring emphasize the common characteristics of childhood and social life, agency emphasizes the diversity of individual childhoods – recognizing children as social participants, their competency etc. [4]. Bayanova [10], in the context of institutional social rules and the “normative” culture emphasizes that children, as subjects of culture, see normative situations differently than adults. Corsaro [11] further supplements contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children with the notion of interpretative reproduction, in the sense of the children’s contribution to society, as active interpreters and participants in the social world, who adjust information from the adult world and use it in a creative and interpretative process. If our starting point is social construction of childhood and if children are considered as capable of making independent decisions, then it is necessary to think of them as “beings and becomings” [12].

In sum, in contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children, children are as social actors with the ability to control the direction of their own lives. These conceptualizations differ from “traditional” conceptualizations of childhood and children, in which childhood is a phase on the way to adulthood and children are immature, vulnerable, incapable beings, who need guidance. Childhood and children are considered in accordance with broader historical-cultural-social changes. From this view of childhood and children, a new view of what it means to research childhoods and children emerged.

In the context of contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children one of the current questions is how to research childhood and children. If we state that we do research in the function of quality of children’s lives, then this implies a shift in the approach to research of the social world. Instead of the dominant view of children as research objects, proponents of children’s agency, using experiences from ethnographic research, advocate for research within the interpretative approach to research.

3. Research with children

Contemporary conceptualizations of childhood and children introduce the interdisciplinary approach to their research methodology as well. The interpretative approach to research is gaining prominence, and it implies “research *with* children, rather than, *on* children” [13]. In research with children, the main purpose is to understand a child’s life from his/her perspective. Therefore, the child is a research subject, or source of information about himself/herself and his/her life. Sommer [14] confirms this when he writes about the importance of researching children’s perspectives about their own lives.

As it is already noted, research with children have a broader framework, which can be placed within the qualitative, “naturalistic”, “phenomenological” or “interpretative” approach to research, which accepts the existence of multiple realities, alternative interpretations and negotiation [15]. These approaches emphasize the importance of the personal perspectives we research and try to understand “from inside-out”. Advocators of the

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