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The competent child

An outline of the chances of early childhood education

I will start by explaining why I use the phrase “early childhood education” instead of “early childhood development”.

The first answer is more or less in a line with Norbert Elias, Jerome Bruner, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Paul Watzlawick, Clifford Geertz and some German educational scientists.

I think that education is a cultural phenomena.

That has many aspects. I will try to explain a few of them.

I think that the ability to teach and to educate has been developed in the history of mankind.

What has developed is the ability to separate between act and meaning. The same act may have different meanings. The cultural richness in our presence is based on the variety of possible meanings.

If you ask if children are able to teach and to educate other children I would answer, they are able to teach but not able to educate. To educate a child is different from just living together with the child. To educate a child means that what you are doing with the child in his and your present situation is also meant as important for the future of the child. The educator has a certain responsibility for the future of the child. The moral aspect of it is that we teach children that the motive of an act is at least as important than the act itself.

Also teaching has been cultural developed as a certain attitude an individual is able to live or to perform in dealing with other humans. We are the only species that teaches in any significant way. If you teach a child to milk a cow you are concerned about the learning process of the child and not how much milk you have gained. To teach a child means that a grown up gives his actions an other meaning as the usual one. To teach and to educate can be discriminated from other attitudes like working, relishing, researching and so on. A child is able to teach an other child when it is able to form this attitude, that is to separate between what it is doing and the meaning of the action. A seven year old who was asked how he would teach an other child to nail answered typically: I would hold his hand with the nail and the hammer. He would just reproduce the act he is able to do. He fails, what may be called “metacognition”.

A cultural view of education considers education and learning in their situated, cultural context.

It presupposes that human mental activity is neither solo nor conducted unassisted, even when it goes “inside the head”. For the evolution of the hominid mind is linked to the development of a way of life where “reality” is represented by a symbolism shared by members of a cultural community. This symbolic mode is not only shared by a community, but conserved, elaborated, and passed on to succeeding generations, who, by virtue of this transmission, continue to maintain the culture’s identity and way of life. Bruner regards “culture” as “superorganic”. I prefer Clifford Geertz definition of culture as a context:

“As interworked systems of construable signs (what, ignoring provincial usage’s, I would call symbols), culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is context.” But I agree with Bruner when he writes: Culture shapes the minds of individuals. It’s individual expression inheres in meaning making, assigning meanings to things in different settings on particular occasions. Although

meanings are in the mind, they have their origins and their significance in the culture in which they are created. It is culture that provides the tools for organising and understanding our worlds in communicable ways.

The practical result of this viewpoint for educational research and educational intervention has several aspects.

Education is not an island, but part of culture. Education is a major embodiment of a culture's way of life, not just a preparation for it. For research this means that to understand the educational system of a given culture you will have to visit the field and describe the making of educational meaning within the educational process. This is what Geertz means when he speaks about "thick description". You can ask what function education serves in the culture and what role it plays in the life of those who operate within it and you can also ask how this placement reflects the distribution of power, status and other benefits. And you can ask about enabling resources made available to people to cope, and what portion of those resources is made available through education. I suppose this the task for a university.

Culturalism does not rule out "reality" in any ontological sense. It argues (on epistemological grounds) that "external" or "objective" reality can only be known by the properties of mind and the symbol systems on which mind relies.

For aims to develop an educational system that means that it is necessary to analyse the culture as a system of values, rights, exchanges, obligations, opportunities and power and to examine how the demands of a cultural system affect those who must operate within it. In the latter spirit, it concentrates on how individual human beings construct realities and meanings that adapt them to the system, at what personal cost, with what expected outcomes.. It takes such constraints for granted and considers how they are managed by the culture and it's instituted educational system.

Culture is not a power or a body something to which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed. To define it as a context also means that culture is produced on the basis of an existing product. Culture changes due to the interaction of those who live within the culture.

The function of education also is not only to transmit an existing culture. As I will explain more precisely later on, our ability to educate and to teach plays a key role in helping the child to construct and maintain a concept of Self. Teaching and Learning are different processes. Learning is an active process which can not totally be controlled by the teacher. The concept that teaching is fitted into a mould in which a single, presumably omniscient teacher explicitly tells or shows presumably unknowing learners something they presumably know nothing about is not very helpful. For only a very small part of learning takes place on such a one-way-street – and it is probably one of the least successful parts. In most matters of achieving mastery we want learners to gain good judgement, to become self-reliant, to work well with each other. And such competencies do not flourish under a one-way transmission regimen. A classroom could be reconceived as just a subcommunity of mutual learners, with the teacher orchestrating the proceedings. One reason for a greater success of this type of teaching and learning is the fact that the learner already knows something and that he tries to understand what the teachers says or does with the concept he already has established. When children start school they have already learned a lot and they do learn a lot during their life outside school. If we want that children understand what it means what they are learning we have to give them a chance to integrate the knew with the old concepts.

Schools and other educational institutions on the one hand tend to continue and perpetuate the culture they are situated in. On the other hand schools and pre-school institutions and I also believe families can establish a subculture which is different to the culture they are situated in. Because education has to do with the future of children and that opens the possibility not of a counter-culture but of one which is able to empower children to change not only their life but also to change the culture. A schools curriculum is not only about subjects. It is a culture itself. What it teaches, what modes of thought and what “speech registers” it actually cultivates in it’s pupils, cannot be isolated from how the school is situated in the lives and cultures of its students.

This takes to me to other phrase in the headline of this speech: competent.

The brain scientist Wolfgang Singer says about consciousness that it is a cultural construct, closely related to our concept of the self and the individual. The individual child learns it through the dialogue between the child and an adult. But what the child needs is the capability to learn it. The research which was undertaken during the last century about perception, memory, attention, imitation, action of babies has revealed that small children are much smarter, more cognitively proactive rather than reactive, more attentive to the immediate social world around them, than had been previously suspected. They emphatically do not inhabit a world of buzzing blooming confusion, they seem to be in search of predictive stability from the very start. I give a few examples:

- New born babies follow a moving object with their eyes.
- New born babies can discriminate between colours.
- With the age of three months they can discriminate between facial expressions like anger, joy or surprise. They know if it is the face of the mother or an other person.
- New born babies know the difference between a natural voice and a synthetic voice. They know the voice of their mother.
- Babies who see a thing assume that it is possible to touch it.
- Babies with 3,5 months have some insight in the permanence of hidden objects.
- 14 days old infants become nervous when they can see her mother speaking but hear a voice of a strange person.
- 6 day old infants imitate the mimic of grown ups.

What this studies reveal is

- a) agency. Children are able to initiate and carry out activities on their own. What they do in their search is far more systematic and means-ends oriented than had been suspected.
- b) The importance of two-way human interaction because none of these capabilities of children would develop if there were not grown ups to enable it.

Research on interaction of mother and child reveals:

- the ability of the mother to make sense of what the child does
- that she tunes her action to the abilities of the child
- more precisely that the mother acts according to her concept of the next zone of development of her child (Wygotski)

The difference between the old and the new conception of childhood can be expressed in two abbreviations:

From OPIA to CAMP

OPIA stands for
ontologically given
passively

idyllic
apolitical

CAMP means
discursively constructed
actively acting
modernised
politically contested

The idea is that children are social actors, with a part to play in their own representation. This includes the idea that understanding children's active participation in social life is at least as important as mapping the variables that shapes their lives. Or that children's own meaning-making activities, with and alongside adults and other children, is a key to understanding how they respond to their social circumstances. Or that there is merit in understanding children's lives because their present matters as much as their future becoming as the next generation of adults.

I will try to explain what I mean by quoting from a study about mental models of the shape of the earth. You can identify five mental models which are held by children: The rectangular earth, the disc earth, the dual earth, the hollow sphere, the flattened sphere. Very few children use the cultural accepted model of the earth as a sphere. The study of Vosniadou and Brewer shows:

- The great majority of the children are consistent in their use of a well-defined mental model.
- Although the adult culture provides massive exposure to the idea that the earth is a sphere, many children believe that the earth is flat and shaped like a rectangle, or like a disc, or that the earth is a sphere but that people live deep inside it. It seems obvious that these models are predominantly child generated.
- This means that children generate their own concepts.
- These concepts are based on already learned concepts which are helpful to understand the world and oneself. The authors of the study call them "presuppositions". One of these presuppositions is that the ground is flat. But "flat" is not naive but already a kind of a theory. I quote a larger part of the study to explain what I mean by "theory": "While the subjects of this study lived on the flat plains of the Midwestern United States, where the earth appears to be literally flat, other children, including the children in our cross-cultural study in Greece, Samoa, and India, lived in environments, which included high mountains and oceans and showed similar presuppositions. What we mean by 'flat' is not the absence of mountains but rather the expectation that the ground extends along the same plane, as opposed to something that forms a sphere. This is not, obviously, the product of a simple phenomenal perception of 'flatness', but represents, as do the other presuppositions, the complex interpretation of everyday experience by a constructivist mind. The presupposition is, that unsupported things fall.
- Children are active theory builders
- They try to synthesise the information they receive from adults and from their everyday experience into coherent mental models which they use in a consistent fashion.

For teaching and learning this means from my point of view

* That learning involves dealing with the theories of the children, reconstructing them, giving the children a chance to verbalise them and find tasks which enable the children to learn to prove or change their theories.

In Germany you can buy cheese which has a lot of holes due to the chemical process. If you ask children about the origin of these holes, most of them say, that mice have eaten the cheese and made the holes or that someone has drilled the hole with a drilling machine. In a little experiment you can ask them to drill a hole with a drilling machine and to compare the holes or to watch a mouse eating cheese. This means to confront the children with their theories or concepts.

- That it is necessary for the learning process that children have the opportunity to learn from each other.
- That it is necessary to be aware of the concepts of the children if you want to change them.
- That the mistakes children make are not regarded as mistakes that only have to be overruled. Teacher begin to ask what is the concept behind the mistake. In other words: What is the right way of thinking which resulted in the mistake.
- That it is important that children learn to say what they are doing or thinking.

You can apply that to many situations. Children need other children to understand what moral behaviour means. The especially need friends. One study in Germany taken in several kindergarten with video-cameras showed that in many cases children are able to settle their conflicts on their own. Of course, there are some, that makes it necessary for a grown up to intervene. Children form a peer-culture, at school as well as at the kindergarten or on the street which seems to very important for their development.

Seeing children as thinkers means to recognize the child's perspective in the process of learning. Children, like adults, are seen as constructing a model of the world to aid them in constructing their experience. Pedagogy is to help the child understand better, more powerfully, less one-sidedly. Understanding is fostered through discussion and collaboration, with the child encouraged to express her own views better to achieve some meeting of minds with others who may have other views.

This takes me to my third chapter: chances

Concerning the age between pregnancy and beginning of school there are a lot of educational possibilities.

I will first name a few of them.

In most western countries there is a wide range of educational programs to influence young couple who are going to become parents. You will find a very large range of books, TV-shows and seminars about parenthood. They are not organised by the government. The attendance of seminars, the reading of books and so on is all voluntarily. But you will find – for instance in Germany – a kind of subculture where the young couples meet and exchange their ideas. I will not say that all of them are good, some of the books are ridiculous, but the effect is, that the young people are getting aware of their future responsibility as parents. I will also not deny that this has something to do with the fact that the birth-rate in Germany is very low. Each child – to be a bit ironic – is a kind of investment which is thoughtfully planned and carried out.

Parents get a certain amount of money for each child and there is a discussion if this enough or not. The tendency is to raise it.

Working parents can decide to reduce their working hours for as long as three years. Either the mother or the father can use this opportunity. They get a compensatory payment during that time. Families with children are also privileged to buy a house.

The main philosophy in Germany is now that children up to the age of three years should stay at home. This means also that one of his parents can not work. For those who want to work

there are two institutions at hand. The one is a kind of kindergarten for children under the age of three and the other is the institution of an other woman who is paid for caring the child.

According to German law each child has the right to attend a kindergarten. These institutions are run by the local authorities. As far as I know about 80 Percent of the children attend a kindergarten.

You will also find a wide range of TV-shows, books, audio-cassettes, games and so on for children between three and six years of age.

I think I can say that children in Germany live in a relative rich and diverse educational environment. There exists for instance special magazine for children of this age and other special magazine for their parents.

I will now try to explain one main question taking the kindergarten as example.

There exists three concepts about the function of the kindergarten.

The first is only historic. That was the concept that the function of the kindergarten was only to feed the children, to keep a warm room and to prevent them from hurting each other. This type of kindergarten was based on the wrong idea that pre-school children are not able to learn anything, that development for children means the same as for apples: to get ripe to the right time.

The second concept regards the kindergarten as a pre-school institution. Soo-Hyang-Choi from the UNESCO states. "Linking early childhood care and education to primary education has been a strategy to increase the political viability of the appeals for more investment in early childhood care and education." And she regards this as counter-effective to which I do agree.

School curriculum can only represent a small section of what children have to learn as a start for a life-long-learning.

In Germany we had the concept of kindergarten as a pre-school institution. The children had to learn programs which tried to teach them dealing with signs and symbols. This concept has failed and as far as I know is no longer in use.

The concept of most of the institutions now can be described as "dealing with the everyday situation of children". It follows the Head-Start-Programme:

"According to this framework, a quality childhood education increases the social competence of children, which is defined as the child's everyday effectiveness in dealing with his or her present environment. Here, school readiness is defined as a multi-faceted phenomenon comprising of five developmental domains – physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional development."

The core of this concept is, that pre-school education in or outside a kindergarten has an educational value and aim in itself.

I quote from Soo-Hyang Choi:

"Ensuring the child's general wellbeing, not only in the cognitive and linguistic dimensions but also in the health and nutritional dimensions, is an equally, if not more, important purpose of early child care and education. Early child care and education influences the child's later school learning not through allowing him or her to acquire specific learning skills, which is often the objective of a pre-primary class; but through equipping him or her with the necessary developmental base for his or her subsequent acquisition of learning skills in school. In most countries Early child care and education classes do not introduce writing until the last year of pre-primary class, but they provide ample opportunities for the children to

acquire emergent literacy. Children are read from early years to understand a decontextualized text, but not taught how to read until they reach the pre-primary age. Children are encouraged to make stories and express their feelings and thoughts through drawing and playing from early years, but not invited to learn how to write until they reach the pre-primary age. When children are stimulated sufficiently for emergent literacy, in which they develop the understanding of the symbolic function of communication, which is key to literacy, acquiring literacy later in school is a matter of switching the means of communication. So, when one mentions about the facilitative effect of Early child care and education on literacy learning, it must be reminded that the core of this effect does not exist of an advance acquisition of reading and writing skills but of the preparation of the precursory developmental base to literacy skills.”