

Culture, Dialogue, and Emerging Educational Challenges: An Introduction

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“I can’t begin anything with this”

I would like to begin this book with the words of a 17-year-old black male student of a *Hauptschule*¹ in Germany. In the context of an interview held three years ago², this student paused and asked me: “May I confide something to you?”. He then narrated for about half an hour, talking without making a single pause which would have allowed me to make any comments. The following extract is taken from this narration:

- 1.A: <Mir ist es, deswegen,> verstehst du, Michalis, deswegen meinte
<for me it is, that’s why> do you understand, Michalis, that’s why
2. ich, mir (ist) es ^egal,
I meant that it doesn’t ^matter to me,
- 3.I: Mm.
- 4.A: wo ich Praktikum mache. Ist überall das Gleiche.
where I do the job-training. (It) is the same everywhere.
- 5.I: Mm.
- 6.A: Wenn ich mache, weiß nicht, **WH**> (...) <**CR** äh, man muss realistisch
If I, I dunno, WH> (...) <CR uh, one has to be realistic,

¹ *Hauptschule* is the lowest type of secondary school in Germany. In most cases, students from marginalized social and cultural milieus are sent to this type of school and are thus separated from all other students, who by going to *Realschule* or *Gymnasium/Gesamtschule* will be entitled to enter higher education.

² This interview was part of a broader research project, see Kontopodis, M. (2007a) Fabrication of times and micro-formation of discourse at a secondary school. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research (Online Journal)*, 8, 1, URL (consulted June, 2008): <http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/1-07/07-1-11-e.htm>(, Kontopodis, M. (2007b) Human development as semiotic-material ordering: Sketching a relational developmental psychology? *Critical Social Studies*, 9(1), 5-20, Kontopodis, M. (2009) Documents’ memories: Enacting pasts and futures at the school for individual learning-in-practice. *Memory Studies*, 2(1), 11-26.

7. gucken, <wenn es, ich würde gerne, wo ich /gerne machen würde,> ist wegen
 <if it, I would gladly, what I would / gladly do, > it's because of drawing

8.I: Mm.

9.A: Zeichnen, ich würde ^gerne in ein Grafikdings gehen **CR**>.

(that) I would ^gladly go to some sort of Graphics (school/job) **CR** >.

10. I:

Mm.

11. A: <**WH** Aber was soll ich da? Ich habe nicht die Noten dafür, ich habe,

< **WH** but what am I supposed to do there? I don't have the grades for it, I

12. <nicht das die,> nicht den Schulabschluss dafür. Verstehst du? (...) Um das
 don't have <that, these,> don't have the school certification for it. Do you

13. später als Beruf zu machen **WH**>.

understand? (...) to later turn it into a profession **WH**>.

14. I:

Mm. [Mm.]

15. A:

[Ich mache] Praktikum da, [alles gut, aber trotzdem]
 [I do] (my) job-training there, [it's all fine, but still]

16. I:

[Mm. Mm.] Mm

17. A: <**P** kann ich nicht, **P**>

<**P** I can't **P**>

18. I:

Mm.

19. A:

kann ich nichts damit anfangen.
 I can't begin anything with this.

20. I: Mm. Das ist auch eine solche schwierige Frage (4 sec break).

Mm. That is also a difficult question (4 sec break).

The black male student (A) begins in a whisper (<WH...WH>) but then speaks louder and louder (crescendo: <CR...CR>), emphasizing particular words (^) or phrases (/) and for a moment speaking very silently (piano: <P...P>). He tells me (I) that he would like to attend a school for graphic

design and later have a job in this field—but: *he cannot*; he cannot because he does not have the grades for it. This is why he is not interested in choosing any job-training among the ones offered at the school he attends now, because actually there is no choice. “It doesn’t “matter” choosing, it “is the same everywhere”, says the student. “I can’t begin anything with this”.

The context of this discourse is not very difficult to imagine: Even if this student is successful at the *Hauptschule*, his certificate will not allow him to enter any kind of university program later in his life. Even if Germany has one of the richest economies in the world, the student to whom we refer here, similarly to many other young people, will probably be a very low-paid precarious worker or even unemployed for the rest of his life—which in some cases might also lead to engaging in illegal activities, being homeless or suffering under psychiatric disorders. The situation of these young people reflects a broader educational and social crisis in Germany (Nolan, 2001) and the entire developed world, a crisis which is manifested by increased failure rates, low social mobility, the failed integration of generations of migrant populations and, last but not least, by school shootings (Pourkos, 2006). One could also recall the infamous case of the Rütli School in Berlin, Germany, where on February 28, 2006, teachers published a letter announcing that due to students’ violence they were unable to undertake any teaching activities³.

In dialogue with the future

At the same time such events are taking place, radically new forms of learning and teaching and of school organization are emerging in various local contexts, mainly non-western ones. The well-known “popular education” in Porto Alegre in Brazil can be seen as an example of such (Abers, 1997, Clovis de Azevedo, 2000, Hezberg, 2001), while a variety of other initiatives are also taking place on micro- and macro-levels in Brazil and other countries, usually associated with broader social movements such as the landless movement (Branford & Rocha, 2002, Ondetti, 2008) or the anti-globalization movement (Alvarez *et al.*, 1998). It is not an accident that in this frame the work of the Soviet revolutionary psychologist Lev Vygotsky (Vygotskij) as well as the so-called “Cultural-Historical Activity Theory” becomes more and more popular and a series of scholars in Brazil as well as all over the world seek to bridge

³ <http://www.ruetli-oberschule.de/dieschule/schuledokumente/index.php> (date of access: 2008-04-

the gap between practice and theory by developing innovative theoretical, and methodological approaches and various interventions on all levels of societal organisation.

An important idea implied by cultural-historical approaches and reflected in concepts such “appropriation” (Stetsenko & Arievitch, in press), the “Zone of Proximal Development” (Benites & Fichtner, 1996, Chaiklin, 2003, Newman & Holzman, 1993), and “motive” (Hedegaard, 2001, Leont'ev, 1978), is *active subjectivity*, i.e. the idea that children and young people as well as scientists and teachers act according to their own intentions and motivations, actively participating in defining how signs and tools are used (Stetsenko, 2005, Stetsenko, 2008). Active subjectivity thus enters “in a dialogue with the future” – as Bernd Fichtner would put it⁴ – and can transform a given social situation so that new practices emerge. Very important here is also the contribution of Paulo Freire, according to whom *being in the world* also means *acting in the world*, thereby *transforming* it (Freire, 1986, Freire, 1993, Freire & Freire, 1994).

Inspired by these approaches, this edited volume is the result of long “movements” of ideas into practice and back as well as of a long “movements” of ideas and practices between Brazil and Germany and, as we will see, also beyond them – to countries like Argentina or to broader spaces such as Latin America or Europe. The volume explicitly seeks alternative solutions to current educational problems and challenges to which we briefly referred above – an endeavor which can be seen as ethic-political in the sense of Spinoza (Spinoza & Curley, 1994). The volume is dialogical in many regards (cf. Bakhtin, 1973) and experiments with different forms of academic writing (theoretical argumentations, empirical research papers, research reports, photo essays, etc.) while bringing together different research methodologies (discourse analysis, case studies, cross-cultural comparison, and action- or practice-research).

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⁴ In 2006, Bernd Fichtner organized the conference “Learning as a Dialogue with the Future” at the University of Siegen, which aimed not only at developing new ideas in educational research but especially at developing new practices that could deal with current educational problems and challenges. The work presented here has been much inspired by this focus on learning and development as a “dialogue with the future”. See also: Fichtner, B. (2000). *Ensenyar i aprendre: un diàleg am el futur. Col·lecció Temes d' infància Vol. 36*. Barcelona: Associació de Mestres Rosa Sensat.

Book contents

The edited volume begins with a methodological reflection by I. Behnken, which can be read in combination to this prologue as an introduction to the book. It is followed by three interrelated sections, the first one focusing on school education, the second on family and community, and the third on new media projects. The edited volume closes with a theoretical chapter by B. Fichtner, which takes the place of an epilogue.

Based on the idea of the historicity of childhoods, the opening chapter “‘New’ Research on Childhood: Methodologies and Objectives” by *I. Behnken* analyzes different paradigms of childhood research in regard to their epistemological prerequisites and their political values. Behnken analyzes how qualitative research methodologies usually reconstruct childrens’ perspectives about themselves and their worlds, although they do not treat children as co-researchers even when they claim to do so. A different methodological direction in childhood research would be grounded in regular and long-term communication between children and adult researchers about the research process itself. Behnken analyzes a series of research examples based on this “new methodological direction” – mainly from the German-speaking academic space – and reveals the difficulties and challenges implied by such an approach. She also views a research project undertaken at the Siegener Centre of Childhood Research from a meta-perspective, examining how the use of diaries written by children may prove to be important to this kind of research methodology. The methodological principles outlined by Behnken are reflected in most of the research projects presented in this volume, especially those of Benites, Wörster and Lopes & Soares, as we will see below.

Part I: Inclusion, Exclusion and Collaborative Intervention at Brazilian Schools

The chapter “Inclusion or Exclusion? An Analysis of the Brazilian Curriculum Discourse of the 1980s and the 1990s” by *M. A. Mascia* could be seen as an introduction to the Brazilian projects presented in this volume. In this chapter, Mascia provides a brief overview of the Brazilian curricula reforms that took place in the decades of the 80s and the 90s, offering a critical analysis of the Brazilian educational discourse during this period. She explores curriculum as a discursive practice of social regulation and as an effect of power-knowledge relations that create the appropriate subjects for contemporary school systems

in Brazil. The author's critical analysis suggests that Brazilian educational reforms were constructed upon dichotomies which at the very same time naturalized exclusion and affirmed inclusion. By destabilizing the dominant reasoning in education, this chapter aims to open up the possibility of change, and it is exactly this possibility that the projects presented in the following chapters have worked on.

Following a different methodology, the next chapter, "Collaborative Culture and Success at a School in Pelotas" by *M. Damiani*, reports on a Brazilian school characterized by high rates of pupil success and a high degree of teacher satisfaction. This case-study examines data collected mainly through observations and interviews which document the 15-year process of creating a collaborative school culture. It mainly refers to a group of committed teachers who started to work together to improve a school in Pelotas, Brazil, which initially had a bad reputation due to its high failure rates, pupils' disruptive behaviour, and run-down premises. Drawing on Engeström's activity-theoretical approach, Damiani argues that the success of the process of school transformation has been the result of an intense and continuous group dialogue whose value is perceived by all of the school's actors. She argues that in order to establish true collaboration, it is important for the group to have a common objective which is perceived as relevant by all of its members (such as changing the reputation of the school). In a further step, the cultural-historical analysis of Damiani reveals other aspects of the collaborative culture: the production of local knowledge, empowerment of the community, and active participation in the trade union in a plea for better salaries. The case Damiani refers to may be seen as an example of "best" educational practice, inspiring reflection about current educational problems and challenges.

Following a similar path but moving from teachers to researchers themselves, the chapter "Researchers Learning by Intervention Research: The "Acting-as-Citizens" Program as a Joint Production between Researchers and Deprived Communities in São Paulo" by *F. Liberali* discusses the learning process of the researchers involved in an extramural program for teacher development in the deprived communities of São Paulo, Brazil. Based on Vygotskian ideas, it considers method as simultaneously a pre-requisite and a product of study and emphasizes the key role of collaboration. The chapter draws on the analysis of recorded transcriptions of school meetings, workshops, and preparatory meetings over a three-year period (2005-2007) and explores how novice researchers moved from peripheral roles to central

ones as they learned ways of questioning the other researchers to prompt more elaborated replies and more critical ways of presenting opposing views. It also shows that when senior researchers provided the novice ones with more responsibilities, they all tended to move beyond their capacities to find ways of creatively participating in the joint construction of the program.

Part II: Making a Difference in Family and Community Constellations

The first chapter of the second part of this book “Supporting the Self-Efficacy of Parents and Children in Early Childhood Education: A case-study in Germany” by *W. Wörster* focuses on pathological child-rearing practices and examines the theoretical and practical significance of play in regard to children’s development in general and to early intervention in particular. Taking the example of the therapeutic treatment of the autistic child of an Iranian family that applied for asylum in Germany, Wörster analyzes the social and societal aspects of the child’s development, e.g. how the discontinuities and ruptures of the parents’ biographies were reflected in the way they related to their son. Wörster presents how the child’s situation changed when, by means of his therapeutic intervention, the relations between the parents and between the parents and the child were redefined. Wörster concludes by emphasizing the creative aspects of sociability, thus extending cultural-historical theory to the fields of family therapy and early intervention.

Moving from the level of family to that of a local community, *M. F. Camerini* reports in the essay “So that the Canoes Don’t Turn Over: An Experience of Inclusion with Community Groups through a Psychological Intervention in Rio de Janeiro” on an innovative intervention project that took place in the Vila Canoas, a small slum of approximately six thousand inhabitants, in the area known as São Conrado in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Based on the active participation of the members of the community, the intervention consisted of a variety of activities for people of different ages and generations, such as English language courses, regular meetings of music, dance and theatre groups, and group discussions in cooperation with psychology students and other specialists. Camerini analyzes a series of practical aspects of the intervention, such as the free distribution of food, and employs a variety of theoretical concepts to explore how being in dialogue with the other in a non-hierarchical participatory context has been an important part of the process of subject constitution for the various participants of the

intervention project. The importance of early community intervention for child rearing is also discussed.

Following the different methodology of comparative case-study, the next article, “Infant Care in South America’s ‘Cono Sur’ and in Germany: Case Studies on Stern’s Concept of the Motherhood Constellation”, by *H. Winkler* presents a cross-cultural analysis of the relationship between mother and firstborn child during the first weeks or months of maternity. Winkler analyzes interviews with four women from different social (working class and middle class) and cultural backgrounds (urban areas in Germany, Uruguay, and Argentina) in order to examine their everyday baby-caring practices and their emotional reactions (fear that a behaviour is abnormal, tiredness, etc.). Winkler’s analysis draws on Daniel Stern’s theory of Motherhood Constellation and re-formulates it from a cultural-psychological point of view. Winkler argues that the second and third issues of this theory (primary relatedness, supporting matrix) are subject to variation due to differences caused by socio-economic, political, and societal reasons as well as by intergenerational conflicts. Cultural and ethnic differences, however, seem to be less important for motherhood constellations in the analyzed contexts. The article of Winkler is the only one that refers to other Latin American places than Brazil and points thus to directions the dialogue, which this book presents, could be further developed.

Part III: Working with New Media and Image Technologies

The third part of the edited volume turns to another major issue of recent educational research: the use of visual and interactive communication technologies in education. New media seem to promise radically new possibilities for children and youngsters in regard to their political participation (Buckingham, 2000, Buckingham, 2003), their educations and the transmission of different forms of knowledge (Gee, 2003, Jewitt, 2008, Jewitt & Kress, 2003, Kanselaar *et al.*, 2000, Kress, 2003), and intercultural communication (de Block & Sefton-Green, 2004, Holzwarth & Maurer, 2003). Children and young people are supposed to increasingly express themselves by means of moving digital pictures, thereby sharing different forms of knowledge than those transmitted by oral or written speech. They have the possibility of playing and communicating with each other in public virtual spaces in ways that build communities, thus transcending institutional, geographical, and cultural boundaries.

This has been the case of the action-research project “Windows to the World” (www.janelasparaomundo.org), which *M. Benites* has coordinated since 2002 and which she studies in the chapter “Narratives in the Time of Internet”. With reference to Vygotsky, Peirce, Deleuze and others, Benites presents an account of the non-linear developments of this project over the years and the new questions which the practice itself led participants and researchers to deal with. By exploring a project which (a) is non-directive and originally participatory, (b) takes place in cities as different as those of Cuiabá, Barra do Bugres, Aracaju, Porto Alegre, Rocinha, Campinas, Jacarei, Santa Maria, Juiz de Fora, Natal, and Sao Paulo as well as in Germany and other places, (c) included at one time more than 85 groups of children, and (d) is still developing to new directions, Benites argues that the internet changes the configuration of time and space as well as the relations between movement and picture. The internet thus generates trans-cultural and transnational worlds that are beyond the imagination of school curricula, educational policies, and adult subjectivities.

The open-ended narration of Benites on the internet and communication is followed by the photo essay “Image Animation: a Study of the Creative Process and the Production of Narratives in the Context of Inclusive Education in Rio de Janeiro” by *A. Lopes & I. Soares*. The authors refer here to a project of social inclusion which they developed together with a group of students with special educational needs in a municipal school of the city of Rio de Janeiro. This study is characterized as an action-research in which authors participated both in their role as art-educators and as researchers of their own pedagogical practice. Based on the approaches of Benjamin, Vygotsky, and Machado, the photo essay investigates different ways of mediating the appropriation of animation techniques as well as the process of the creation and production of narratives by students with mental handicaps. It is argued that through the modelled shapes and the stories created, the students constructed a novel symbolic language in which they could express their views of themselves, of other members of the group, and of their broader living conditions in a playful and creative way. Of particular interest is that the images that were being produced by the students brought the group closer to themes and issues that were not always verbalized in their daily verbal interactions. By making use of photos in reporting about this project, the chapter itself also aims to bring the readers closer to themes and issues that are not always verbalized in academic writing.

Outlook: Children as “unstable signifiers”

By way of an epilogue, *B. Fichtner* treats children as “unstable signifiers”. In “a Dialogue with Agamben and Vygotsky”, Fichtner analyzes the shortcomings of various modern approaches to children and childhood and analyzes infancy as a philosophical category. Following Agamben, he claims that infancy is something in-between, where infancy is the origin of language and language is the origin of infancy, and attempts to explore this paradox with recourse to the childlike experience of the boundary between voice and language. According to Agamben, it is due to the distinction between the semiotic and the semantic, between language and voice, that there is history, that man is historical by nature. Childhood the setting in which the child transforms the semiotic into the semantic, pure language into speech and human discourse. On the grounds of this approach, Fichtner criticizes modern educational science and psychology and suggests a different epistemology of the study of children and childhood that “sees children and reality from the standpoint of the new”.

The edited volume is devoted to the study of innovative theoretical approaches and childhood-related practices that question present power relations and open up new ways of dealing with emerging phenomena in the fields of school and after-school education and educational policy as well as in home-rearing, therapeutic, and community practices. A series of critical case-studies and examples of radically innovative educational and therapeutic practices and community-based interventions are presented, all of which demonstrate the transformative powers of collective subjectivities in the making of the history of childhood and youth and of society in general – thus moving beyond the deadends of the current educational situation as depicted in the narrative of the student presented at the beginning of the introduction. The studies presented in this volume also illustrate the role cultural-historical and qualitative research may play in this “making of history”. Following Vygotsky, one could say that cultural-historical and qualitative research should not just lead to a better understanding of existing human practices, but also to the development of new ones (Vygotsky, 1927/1997, cf. Stetsenko, 2008).

Dedication to Bernd Fichtner and Acknowledgements

The year 2009 marks the 15-year anniversary of Prof. Bernd Fichtner’s cooperation with colleagues from universities all over Brazil as a guest scholar

and contributor to various research and social-pedagogical projects. 2009 is also the last year Bernd Fichtner will work as a full professor at the University of Siegen. On this special occasion, I feel honored to be the editor of this book, dedicating it to Bernd Fichtner on behalf of all the authors, colleagues, and friends who have worked with him these past years.

I will never forget how Prof. Bernd Fichtner opened the International Symposium “Place and Identity during Learning and Developmental Processes”, which was organized by the University of Siegen in cooperation with the Federal University of Juiz de Fora, Brazil, in Siegen, Germany in November 2003. What was important for him as the director of the International Education Doctorate INEDD of the Department of Educational Science and Psychology at the University of Siegen was not to bring the long-established German educational scientific knowledge to Brazil but the other way round, to bring innovative knowledge about children-related practices from Brazil (back) to Germany. It is exactly in this sense that this book has been written and edited, and it is for his long and sensitive contribution to the dialogue between Brazil and Germany in the fields of cultural-historical theory and qualitative childhood and youth research that this book is warmly devoted to Bernd Fichtner. After two German anthologies edited by Fichtner and colleagues⁵ and a number of publications in Portuguese⁶, this edited volume is addressed to the English-speaking international audience and seeks to put forward what Bernd Fichtner has been working on for all these years: not only an international scientific exchange but “a dialogue with the future” (see above).

The work presented here has its origins at two international conferences funded by the German Research Foundation which I organized with Martin Hildebrand-Nilshon, Bernd Fichtner, and Maria Benites at the Free University

⁵ *Kinder und Jugendliche im Blick qualitativer Forschung: Kulturhistorische Schule, Phänomenologie und Ethnografie in Brasilien und Deutschland* (2003, coedited with Maria Freitas and Roberto Monteiro) and *Vom Umgang mit Differenz: Globalisierung und Regionalisierung im interkulturellen Diskurs* (2006, coedited with Maria Benites) – both books published in the Series *Kulturen des Lernens* with Athena (Oberhausen).

⁶ To mention only a few: *Contra a corrente. O Paradigma Vygotskij: Novas Perspetivas em Arte, Sociedade e Educação*. Porto Alegre/Brasil (in print); *Espaços e Identidades em Processos de Aprendizado*. Juiz de Fora: FEME Edições (2005, coedited with Maria Freitas and Roberto Monteiro) and *A Escola Histórico-Cultural e a Teoria da Atividade: sua importancia na pedagogia moderna*. *Cadernos de Pesquisa*, 1995, 5, 4-21.

Berlin (2006) and at the University of Siegen (2007), as well as at a symposium I chaired at the Conference of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) in San Diego (2008).

We would like to thank the German Research Foundation, the Department of Psychology at the Free University Berlin, the Department of Educational Science and Psychology at the University of Siegen, the Department of European Ethnology at the Humboldt University Berlin, and especially the International Education Doctorate INEDD at the University of Siegen for making this long international scientific exchange possible, as well as for funding the translation and proof-reading of the chapters of this book. Special thanks is due to Diana Aurisch, Thomas La Presti, Alice Delorme and especially to Kareth Schaffer for their patience in dealing with all the challenges of translation and proof-reading, and for the excellence of their work. I am also very grateful to Nora Walther who undertook the difficult work of typesetting and formatting the manuscripts. Last but not least I would like to thank the ICHS Series's editors, Georg Rückriem and Hartmut Giest, and Lehmanns Media for their kind cooperation in publishing this book.

Berlin - Germany, July 2009

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