Autonomous Children, Privileging Negotiation, and New Limits to Freedom

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Introduction

Recently, scholars have introduced what has been called a 'new paradigm,' pleading to view children as competent social actors (e.g., James & Prout, 1997; James, Jenks & Prout, 1998; Wyness, 2000). They reconsider social research from this 'new sociology of childhood' perspective and have (e.g., Christensen & Prout, 2002; Mayall, 2002) inspired political action through the children's rights movement, action research and policy research in the field of education, as well as pedagogical action and even parental advice in Belgium and internationally (Verhellen, 1994). In many respects, this paradigm shift can be viewed as a 'step forward', giving voices and visibility to a group in society that for centuries has been silenced, only on the basis of age as a discriminatory classification. The new paradigm must, however, be examined critically.

A Historical Perspective

Let us first consider briefly (so incompletely) two examples of how we can look at this discussion historically. In nineteenth century Belgium for instance, children were predominantly perceived as fragile and in need

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of protection, in a context of industrialization and urbanization, poverty, child mortality, and the abolition of child labor. The construction of the Fragile Child (the child at risk) was closely interconnected with the construction of the Responsible Mother with a dual responsibility: towards her child, as well as towards society. While the mother was idealized, labor class mothers where subject of a declining confidence by the bourgeois philanthropic institutions, as well as by the state. In official reports, child mortality in early twentieth century Belgium was never explained using social context or precarious living conditions, but rather attributed to the neglect and the ignorance of labor class mothers. First a social phenomenon (i.e., child mortality) is depicted as a social 'problem', in the economic context of industrialization that enhances the value of physical health (Foucault, 1975). Subsequently, the social problem is transformed into an educational problem and thus individualized. The parent (i.e., the mother) is constructed as inadequate and finally this constructs the child as an object of intervention. A comprehensive 'machine' (Deleuze, 1986) for the civilization of the family (infant consultations and child care centers) is thus brought about.

A second example is illustrated in the defining of social problems (i.e. the failure of labor class children in school) as spoken into educational problems that reinforce the monomatric model of the family and enact a re-culpabilization of the mother (McGurck et al., 1993; Singer, 1993). The discussion in the 1970s on the failing results of compensation programs in the late 1960s (such as the various Head Start programs) followed a similar path. Another illustration of a social issue spoken as education problem is the modernistic belief in (vulgarized) science as core to the salvation of children. Examples in the Belgian case are the introduction of developmental observation instruments in childcare leading to a construction of the preschool teacher as a technician; the large scale in-service training and consequent transformation of infant consultation staff in order to enable them to 'educate' the labor class mothers with the new insights on developmental stages; or the subsequent labeling of new arriving ethnic minority parents as responsible for the 'mental retardation' of their children (Vandenbroeck, 2004).

As many scholars have pointed out, the discursive regimes described, have silenced children in research as well as in policy. These discursive regimes have also silenced specific groups of *adults* as parents. Constructions of childhood are always interconnected with constructions of parenthood, but not in a simple antagonistic way. One should be extremely careful when opposing children and parents from a power relations point of view on the macro-level. Historical research shows that power relations are much more diffuse and 'diagonal' as Foucault (1990)

and Deleuze (1986) claimed. Antagonistic power relations between children and parents are, after all, also part of a specific discursive regime with similar decontextualizing and naturalizing aspects. This antagonism was precisely constructed in the early twentieth century, and functioned to legitimate state take over of parental responsibilities (and rights) for the sake of the child (Vandenbroeck, 2003). Parents. as well as children, are marginalized along the lines of class and gender, and power is constructed over them by expert knowledge in a variety of fields like psychology, sociology, and education. Let us now turn to the present day.

Late Modernity and the Autonomous Child

The turn of the century is marked by profound societal changes, labeled as globalization (Beck, 1997a), the post-traditional society (Giddens, 1994), or late modernity (Beck, 1994; Lash, 1994). Globalization opens nation-states and societies to many influences that originate beyond their borders and consequently nation sates are believed to have less impact on their national economies. As a result of this perceived loss of control, economic perspectives tend to dominate all other aspects of policy, including the social agenda. A tendency towards a neoliberal policy has been documented in the educational field in different countries. I refer to the work of Marianne Bloch on the U.S as well as Central European countries and Senegal, the work of Gunilla Dahlberg on the historic Folkhemmet in Sweden, and Peter Moss's work in the U.K. Neoliberal policy has emphasized educational outcomes such as autonomy rather than interdependence (Moss, 2003) and contributed to a 'pedagogicalisation' of parents (Popkewitz, 2003). Mimi Bloch (2003) and others have demonstrated that there is no uniform 'effect' of globalisation since the effects may be a very local 'hybridization' according to the specific historical, social, cultural and economical context. However, neoliberal policy regarding children and families, often includes aspects of privatisation, deregulation/responsabilisation and decentralisation. In the case of Flanders (Belgium), globalization was contingent with a far-reaching privatisation of childcare services and with significant changes in the quality discourse favoring self-assessment of social services and managerial concepts like customer satisfaction (Vandenbroeck, in press).

Many scholars have documented the shift towards negotiation as the dominant culture within the family (Du Bois-Raymond, 1992, 2001; Beck & Beck, 1995, 1997c; Bouverne-De Bie, 1997). Negotiation has become the norm for relationships among partners as well as between parents and children. Since biographies are removed from the traditional precepts and certainties, from external control and general moral laws, they

become more open and dependent on decision-making and are assigned as a task for each individual (Beck & Beck, 1995). This negotiation culture also alters the relations between adults and children, creating a condition in which children are less likely to be differentiated from adults. Some scholars in the education field have attempted to replace this image of the weak child with a new one, as in the work of Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999) who describe the influential Loris Malaguzzi's image of the child that is rich in potential, strong, powerful, competent and, most of all, connected to adults and other children.

A shallow reading of this vein of work may lead to the statement that a page in history is turned, that postmodernism has forged a breach, eventually making place for the right of self-determination of children (e.g., Van den Bergh, 2003), for the 'liberation of childhood' (Hengst, 2001, quoted in Jans, 2004), or the often quoted and misquoted 'disappearance of childhood' (Postman, 1982). This could indeed lead to a most modernistic lecture of (postmodern) history.

The Autonomous Child and the child as Competent Social Actor can be viewed as just other historical constructions of childhood, inextricably tied with new emerging constructions of parenthood, as well as with the specific economical, socio-cultural and political context. Let us therefore look more closely at possible relations between the more global structures and this 'agency'. Such a perspective enables us to look at changes as well as continuities, for instance the continuity in the way children and parents are decontextualized and power relations in the field of education are operating.

The Autonomous Child and the Entrepreneurial Parent

Poststructuralist researchers such as Tobin (1995) and Cannella (1997) have claimed that the pedagogical focus on the autonomous child and its attention to self-expression are typically linked to the liberal, free market oriented society in need for autonomous, entrepreneurial individuals. Self-expression and individuality ranking higher on the educational agenda than solidarity is rather a social and historical construction than a universal, given hierarchy (Tobin, Wu & Davidson, 1989).

The history of modernity can not simply be written in terms of growing autonomy for children, or for any individual. One could, quite the contrary, investigate whether the 'autonomous, entrepreneurial individual' may be the answer that is construed in reaction to the weakened nation states in the era of globalisation and therefore rather a change in how a specific mode of thought and governing creates a specific form of freedom, rather than creating more freedom for the child or the adult.

The relationship between the state and the individual is evolving towards a partnership built on mutuality and reciprocity, with a common sense feeling of 'no rights without responsibilities'. Social services (e.g., allowances) in this context are no longer simple entitlements, but entail personal responsibility and self-sufficiency on the part of the individual. The individual is supposed to commit him/herself to lifelong learning; and he or she is in this (Third) way partly responsible for the—individualized—risk of unemployment. The reverse side of the new freedom that is supposed to be created, is the obligation to inform oneself of different possibilities, to balance them in a cost-effect analysis and to make the rational decisions about the best possible investment (in children, in education, etc.) for the future. In this sense, the discourse on autonomy of adults and children constructs a responsible citizen, including individual responsibility over his or her lifelong learning course, his or her own employment, and social integration. In short: the construction of the autonomous child-adult may be another example of how a social problem (unemployment) is spoken into an educational problem and subsequently individualized.

Active citizenship can be seen as an empowering concept, giving a voice to children, but must also be considered as a technique that assures coercion. The strategy can govern at a distance through the art of self-examination. It can, finally, be seen as an example of an inclusive policy that excludes (Popkewitz & Block, 2001).

Negotiation as the Functioning Norm

On actual society Cunningham notes:

> Adults portray the world external to the home as full of danger, and seek correspondingly to protect their children by denying them autonomy. At the same time, their confidence in their own authority has been weakened by a variety of factors—commercial, legal, psychological—which make it difficult to carry out that protection as they would wish to. The result is that, to a much greater extent than in previous centuries, child-rearing has become a matter of negotiation between parents and child, with the state and other agencies monitoring and inspecting the process. In this process, ideas about childhood exist in the public domain acting as a framework, within which adults and children work out ways of living. (1995, p. 190)

As a matter of fact, research commissioned by governments closely monitors negotiation within families in The Netherlands (Du Bois-Reymond et al., 1992), in the Scandinavian countries (Langsted & Haavind, 1993) and in Belgium. In 1999, the Flemish (Belgian) governmental organization responsible for children and families produced a

large survey of families on this topic, concluding that negotiation is generally accepted as the norm for education. The vast majority of children live in families where the parents say that they favor the child's autonomy and that decisions are primarily taken in consultation with them (Kind en Gezin, 2002). It is not so much our interest here to know whether the majority of Flemish families indeed *do* negotiate with their children, but to note that they perceive negotiation as the educational norm for them as parents. Recently, the Flemish Children's Rights Commissioner ordered a large-scale study on negotiation within the family, interviewing children as well as their parents. In the popular dissemination of this research, the Commissioner clearly depicts negotiation within the family as the desirable norm that needs to be stimulated, as it is embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Vandekerkhove, 2003). The research findings seem to show that parents more often report to negotiate with their children (on subjects such as holidays, television, clothing, leisure time, etc.), than their children do. The researchers assume that the difference in opinion is due to an overestimation by the parents and not by an underestimation on the part of the children (De Rijcke, 2003), although no field observations have been carried out to sustain this assumption. They conclude that parents have certain problems and hesitations about their education in the family and that they are in need of parent support programs (De Rijcke, 2003).

In many of the publications around this issue, negotiation is depicted as the ultimate 'good.' Often this is explicit by the use of typologies of parenting, using labels such as authoritarian (that bears clearly negative connotations) and the more positive sounding 'authoritative' label for negotiating parents (Du Bois-Reymond, 1992). The normative aspect is also made explicit by linking negotiation to the child's development (Du Bois-Reymond, 1992; De Rijcke, 2003) and even to explicit developmental outcomes in adulthood such as well-being and autonomy (De Rijcke, 2003). Negotiation is desirable for the experts and this is the case, regardless of the social, cultural, economic and other context of the family. Negotiation as an educational norm, however, places children in a normative system favoring individuality, as well as verbal competences to manifest this individuality. Cross-cultural research has shown that other forms of interaction, can be more accurate and functional in specific socio-cultural contexts (Tobin, 1995). This and other research (Göncü & Canella, 1996) indicates that dominant ideas about negotiation as the educational norm are cultural constructions. We should be aware of the fact that the focus on negotiation, self-expression and verbalization of the self are white, western, gendered, middle class norms, values found in some middle class educational settings that are more familiar and

attractive to some children than to others (Delpit, 1995; Tobin, 1995). A particular set of values and norms are decontextualized and naturalized, and consequently perceived to be universally 'good for children.'

"The identification of childhood as an area for state policy was accompanied and to some extent caused by a declining confidence in the family." Cunningham (1995, p. 152) wrote this sentence when discussing policy in the nineteenth century. Yet, when looking at how negotiations in families are closely monitored and how present-day adults are suspected to yield on behalf of the respect for the child's autonomy, we can only but observe a remarkable similarity. We could view the plea for negotiation in education as a reinscription of a much older paradigm, namely "governing development and the normal children and families" (Bloch, 2003, p. 225). Some believe that necessary characteristics for good negotiators are openness and honesty (Beck & Beck; 1975); and therefore self-analysis will be our destiny. However, this self-examination of the lay person (parent) calls for a dialogue with the expert, similar to a public confession, construing a specific (pastoral) power relation between parents and children marked by reciprocity in their mutual dependency.

Conclusion

The construction of the participating child seems to be embedded in complex economic and cultural changes in late modern societies. Many scholars agree with the need for emancipatory pedagogy where children's voices are taken seriously. However, some evolutions in discourse and practice show that this vein of research and of research-related practice may also be silencing specific groups. In much of this research (including the Flemish research quoted) children are constructed as a separate but homogeneous category, masking age, gender, ethnic or cultural dimensions or inequalities, and assuming all children would benefit from the 'authoritative' approach, which still remains to be proven.

The most fruitful path for research would be to study constructions of childhood while also looking at their reflections: constructions of parenthood. Further, analyses of micro-interactions in connection to the social, economic and political embeddings are necessary. In doing so, we can become aware of the risks of decontextualization, marginalizing specific groups of children and parents, reducing them to objects of intervention, rather than seeing them as meaning-makers in the educational debate. Indeed, adult-child negotiation as a practice is not problematic at all, but as a decontextualized norm, it may become just another civilizing process. It may in that case just add a new verse to the old song, saying "If they became more like us, that would be better for them and

for us." Re-contextualizing children's agency may include looking at inequalities in the conditions for negotiation.

Studying the Autonomous Child, not as a breach in history or as a page turned, but as another historical construction and a dominant discursive regime that both expands and narrows the repertoire of the possible, would seem wise. This reflexivity is crucial since 'the best interest of the child' is too important a matter to be dominated by taken for granted assumptions.

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