



Book reviews

Childhood

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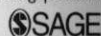
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Julia Gillen and Catherine Ann Cameron (eds) (2010), *International Perspectives on Early Childhood Research: A Day in the Life*, Palgrave Macmillan: Basingstoke. (xii + 202 pp) ISBN 9780230232495.

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The title of this book is confusing, because it does not deal with diverse approaches to do research into early childhood. It rather reports on an international research project about the diverse meanings and practices of young children thriving in seven European, North and South American and South-East Asian countries. It aimed at exploring how parents support their children's well-being and how children actively construct their competencies. Following Goodnow (2002) and Rogoff (2003), the authors of the study understand the routines of everyday life in cultural communities, e.g. families, as practical realizations of implicit value orientations, the idea of a thriving child, for instance. Therefore the everyday interactions between young children and their parents are at the heart of the empirical research endeavour.

This approach makes the study important in two respects. First, with regard to childhood studies the study helps to conceptualize the idea of the competent child empirically. Early childhood forces the social studies of childhood to take the fact of human development into account. Second, the study is relevant with regard to educational and social policies, because it draws attention to the complexity of informal learning. In discussions about learning at school informal learning is rather tacitly assumed and only gets selective attention in terms of fostering employability in the future.

The study draws on a very small and extremely heterogeneous sample. Groups of local researchers video-recorded one whole day in the life of seven two-and-a-half-year-old girls from Canada, Italy, Peru, Thailand, Turkey, the UK and the USA. (The reasons why only girls have been selected for the study are not explained to the readers.) These video-recordings were accompanied by a period of participant observation and ethnographic interviews; a selection of the recorded material was shown to the parents for commentary and feedback. Following Tobin and Davidson (1990) the authors call their methodology a *polyvocal ethnography* (p. 16).

One of the main goals of the book is to introduce and to substantiate this methodology. About one-third of it – extensive parts of Chapter 1 and some passages of every chapter on the results of the study – are devoted to this subject. Chapter 2 is completely devoted to using video technology in the context of an ethnographic research design. The book presents the results of the study in five chapters. Each of them is structured in a similar way: an introduction explains the relevance of the prevailing issue, followed by

the conceptual framework of the research. The main part of these chapters comments on selected video material. Concluding remarks summarize the results.

The first of these chapters, on *musicality*, draws the readers' attention to the acoustic dimension of the children's everyday experiences. Observation techniques are often limited to the visual dimension of everyday life and underestimate its acoustic dimension. But the transitions between the melody of language and its correct articulation are essential for understanding how children actively acquire their linguistic competencies. By structuring parenting practices musicality is furthermore an essential element of social and emotional relations between children and their parents. The second chapter on the results of the study is devoted to *emotional security*. At first, the authors remind the readers of the fact that modern attachment theories have shifted their focus from psychopathology to resilience. Following this shift the study observes swinging and rocking, gentle pats and strokes, etc. in everyday life building up emotional security and encouraging exploratory activities. *Eating* is the main issue of the third chapter on the study's results. It is an essential area of highly sophisticated processes of informal learning; nevertheless they have not been studied a lot. Eating events are a microcosm of caregiving, where not only play and nutrition intersect, but socialization and the negotiation of relationships. A further chapter focuses on *notational systems*, i.e. the emergence of literacy. Drawing and reading are media of informal learning, embedded in social relationships. The authors demonstrate that these activities of self-instruction are much more complex than just decoding a text. The material presented in this chapter is able to illustrate this in many ways. The last chapter on the study's results deals with children's *humour*. This subject is possibly the most surprising but also the most convincing contribution of this book. Children's humour is a good indicator of the 'strong child', the concept which is at stake in this study. Humour is based on a cognitive and socio-emotional experience of incongruent ideas, situations or events. The authors differentiate various kinds of humour and demonstrate children's humour as a kind of play that is indicative of cognitive development as well as self-confidence. As an example, children display humour as play with rules, generating incongruity including provocatively testing normative borders.

The goal of this study was to analyse the cultural practices of young children thriving. Has it been accomplished? The study assumed that although the ideal of a thriving child is universal, the practices of cultural communities are diverse. But the chapters do not manage to demonstrate how values are generated practically in interaction processes. Accordingly the recursive process of constructing and reconstructing a strong child by negotiating an adult-child relationship has not been demonstrated materially by using the empirical data. Rather the five chapters on the study's results use the video material in a way that only gives various examples illustrating a general concept. The gender dimension of the study is not taken into account. In the end therefore the main message of this book is a trans-cultural anthropology of the thriving child in his or her family.

Nevertheless the study has many merits. One of them is that it helps the social studies of childhood to overcome a teleological concept of human development, because this study portrays development *in situ*. This makes it possible to overcome the opposition of *being vs becoming*. The study *A Day in the Life* shows young children as social actors who are interrelated with their personal and social ecology and who need this ecology to experience themselves as competent persons.

