Child-centred approaches, racialization and researcher positioning

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Migrant Children in child-centred perspective: Theoretical and empirical considerations

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Outline of presentation

- Challenges in doing child-centred research with migrant children

- Main findings from fieldwork

- Reflections on power structures, for example regarding racialization and whiteness, but intersectionally related to age (adultness), gender, class, ‚teacherness‘, etc.

- Methodological considerations:

    - How to prevent that the understanding of children as active and competent leads to problematizing of child informants who do not come across as 'active participants' in the research project regarding willingness and ability to communicate, etc.

    - Whether and how to prevent that children's narratives become means in 'happy stories of diversity' (Ahmed, 2007) when we do research on ‚good practices in integration‘

    - How may such considerations contribute to qualifying a child-centred perspective in research with migrant children?

Child-centred approach and critical reflexivity

Acknowledging children's agency: the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power (Merriam-Webster); they are not powerless, but interact within power structures

„an approach which places children centrally and attempts to understand their perspectives, or more properly their standpoint(s), on well-being. Attempting to understand children's well-being from where they stand, starts from engaging with children as social actors and is driven by their experiences and opinions."(Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2006, p. 6)

„focusing on well-being in the present is sensitive to children's quality of life now and is respectful of them as reflective and feeling human beings who can interpret their lives to others in the present." (Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2006, p. 13)

„there is nothing natural nor inevitable about the ways in which race, gender and childhood manifest themselves in young children's lives. All three of these social dimensions can be said to be socially constructed in that the particular nature and forms that each takes is context-specific and the product of particular times and places"(Connolly, 2008, p. 1)

„researchers [must] develop a much more critical appreciation of the power relations inherent within the research process; not only between the adult researcher and the children but also between the children themselves." (Connolly, 2008, p. 20)

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Epistemic reflexivity

- Following "the imperative of epistemic reflexivity" (Wacquant, 2011, p. 81) means that during the whole research process, in all stages, it is crucial that the researchers are aware of the concepts and theoretical prerequisites informing their work in all types of tasks in the research process:

- It targets the totality of the most routine research operations, from the selection of the site and the recruitment of informants to the choice of questions to pose or to avoid, as well as the engagement of theoretic schema, methodological tools and display techniques, at the moment when they are implemented. (Wacquant, 2011, p. 89)

- With Wacquant: the "anthropologist or sociologist who relies on fieldwork must double the dose of reflexivity" (2011, p. 89). This may become even more important to the extent that researchers have the same aim and goal as the professional, adult research participants (teachers, school principals, etc.), that is to promote integration, learning, well-being etc. of migrant children.

- In such a case, as in the MiCREATE project, the imperative of epistemic reflexivity reminds us that collecting descriptions of good practices and approaches observed in schools is not sufficient if the aim is to produce a significant research contribution, and secondly, a meaningful contribution to the practice field as well.

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Project/data

- Six fieldwork schools

- Participant observation: 10-14 days per school

- Art based approaches: Mapping, photo elicitation, language portraits, etc.

- Focus groups (10)

- Individual interviews (77)

- Reflexive methodology

- The MiCREATE project does research on migrant children's integration according to the funders' call for research on integration regarding equal life chances, involving indicators such as skills and well-being

- Aim: at contributing to 'closing the gap' of unequal possibilities between migrant children and local children.

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is taken as a starting point, emphasizing children's right and capacity to express their own views.

- Hence, the MiCREATE project researches integration in education at both practice and policy levels using a child-centred perspective in all possible aspects.

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Themes in reflexive methodology

- Obtaining consent as an ongoing process rather than a single event (Warin, 2011): remaining in a passive observation role for longer than expected; adapting and shortening interviews, is this child centred or not?

- Rapport in observation phase is not = rapport in interviews and vice versa -> ongoing reflections on power relations and positioning

- Sentiments of ‚failed‘ interviews and rapport attempts versus acknowledging own blind spots (Warin, 2011)

- School context and cooperative children not confronting power relations (in actions and/or interview content)

- COVID-19 complications (less space for thorough and explicit reflexivity)

- Summing up: ambivalence between an intended constructionist approach and ‚positivist pitfalls‘: we need good data! (Lengthy and detailed transcripts)

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Reflections and dilemmas; data analysis

In the child-centred approach, children's *perspectives, perceptions and opinions* are important

- Data collection: valuing verbal data (positivist pitfall in search for authenticity: this is what they *really* mean!)

- The research context/situation: Multifaceted expressions of agency and responses to power relations

- Risk of decontextualization when analyzing huge amounts of interview data

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Reflections and dilemmas: positioning and valuing of research participants

- The ‚failed' (short, quiet) interview

- Shy children, insufficient rapport, language barriers...

- The understanding of children as ‚active and competent' must not lead to problematizing children who do not come across as 'active participants' in the research project regarding willingness and ability to communicate, etc.

- In the search for data, we risk overlooking our own adultcentrism

Happy stories of diversity and desires for good practice

A desire for happy stories of diversity is also found in academic work

And besides from ‚good interviews' we also aim at ‚good practices' in the MiCREATE project!

→ Be attentive to desires for good practices and go critically into the work of identifying and developing those

→ With Ahmed's concept of "happy stories of diversity" in a racialized context of ambiguous integration policies, researchers are reminded to be suspicious when experiencing affects of happiness and curious when experiencing discomfort

This desire takes the form of an expectation that publicly funded research on race, diversity and equality should be useful, and should provide techniques for achieving equality and challenging institutional racism. In actual terms, this involves a desire to hear 'happy stories of diversity' rather than unhappy stories of racism. We write a report about how good practice and anti-racist tool kits are being used as technologies of concealment, displacing racism from public view. Anti-racism even becomes a new form of organizational pride. The response to our final report: too much focus on racism, we need more evidence of good practice. The response to your work is symptomatic of what you critique. They don't even notice the irony. You have been funded to 'show' their commitment to diversity and are expected to return their investment by giving evidence of its worth.

(Ahmed, 2007, p. 164)

Thanks for listening!

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