

The sacralization of childhood in a secularized world: another paradox in the history of education?

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We assume that the long list of questions issued by the organizers of the conference is, primarily, heuristic. Rather than giving “opinions” and “answers” from the perspective of the educational sciences – with which we are institutionally affiliated but which is not necessarily our perspective as we profile ourselves simply as “historians of education” – we have selected one of the themes that is related to the history of childhood as it has been shaped over the years. Indeed, the question of the extent to which the “discovery” of the child – or better the “educationalizing” of the child, as an artifact of general modernization, which included the general secularization of education from the 18th century onwards – has led to the “sacralization” of childhood is an intriguing one in the history of education (within which we have been trying to unravel the inherent pedagogical paradoxes). To be sure, the child-centeredness of educational reform (in German reform pedagogy as well as in American progressive education as has been demonstrated in the work of Meike S. Baader and others) went hand in hand with the sacralization of childhood, youth, youth movements, and even the educational tasks themselves within the schools and beyond. In our opinion, however, it is still very much a question whether the image of the “holy” child (as Ellen Key described the child at the beginning of the 20th century) is more than merely a rhetorical figure at the discursive levels of reform pedagogy. In other words, did it really affect everyday educational practices and the associated mentalities? On the basis of case studies – the history of primary schools in Belgium as well as the history of open-air schools (which were conceived as “progressive” schools) – we will try to answer that question. In doing so, we hope to be able to qualify stereotypes of “discoveries”, “turns”, and so on, as, all in all, history seems to be much more complex than what theories “exported” from the social sciences would suggest.