

The disappearing child or the disappearing adult?

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During the eighties of the 20th century a new paradigm within childhood research will develop, a paradigm that built its theoretical grounds on the difference between children and adults. With its explicit social constructivist view on childhood, the Sociology of Childhood claims that children are not only formed by natural forces but rather that they inhabit a world of meaning created by themselves and through their interaction with adults (James, Jenks and Prout 1998). Therefore they situate their starting point in the daily social and cultural activities of children. According to James, Jenks and Prout (1998) the key feature of the paradigm consists of understanding childhood as a social construction, in which children are seen as active in the construction and determination of their own social lives. By its strong emphasis on the child as actor, the Sociology of Childhood highlights a concept of the child as the acting subject. They see the child as the one who acts autonomously as well on the epistemological (the child perspective), moral (the child as competent actor) as on the political (the child as citizen) level (Honig 2000).

An important research concept in this context is “generationing”. Alanen (2003) states that “generationing” refers to the process through which one individual is construed as being a “child” and the other individual as an “adult”, which has major consequences for the activities and identities of the members of each of those categories, but also their mutual relationships. In this way, “generationing” is turned into a key concept for studying children and childhood. In this relational approach, the relationships between people (between children and adults) are the major point of focus and not the human being as an individual (either children or adults). As a result, the labels “child” and “adult” do not denote a group, but the social organisation of a particular group.

This universal child has certain rights and is a vulnerable, but competent individual. However, every definition of a child also implies a certain definition of a parent, as a necessary partner for the child. The universal child, which is entitled to certain rights, is an individualized child, considered to be an outstanding human being, not only an appendage to the parents or the family. Yet the importance of the family is stressed, and the child’s right to be part of the family. Thus the necessary partner of the child is introduced, namely the parent. A parent who is complementary to this “universal child entitled to certain rights” is a parent who needs educating, which places a repeated and stronger stress on educational support. So from a historical point of view, the move towards “children’s rights” is very closely linked to the idea of child protection, to which it wanted to offer an alternative. Currently, the “children’s rights” are also epitomized as the “educational duties in their capacities as children” including even the “right of children to have good parents” (Willems, 2000). From this perspective, educational support means activating the educational responsibility of the parents as an instrument, instead of creating the necessary conditions to enable parents to take up their responsibility. In the latter approach, responsibility is not explicitly based on a *principle*, but on *learning* to deal with social situations that involve choices, which, in turn, lead to questions about the relationship between individual and societal responsibility.