Snow Queen Elsa Goes Won't Go to Kindergarten. Children's Negotiations of Belonging in Formal Educational Contexts

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Abstract:

Against the background of long-term child-centered ethnographic research, this article looks at children's negotiations of belonging in a Swiss kindergarten. Borrowing from (childhood) theoretical figures of agency and belonging, it reveals the interdependence of children's perspectives and pedagogical order, and how cartoon characters like Spiderman or Snow Queen Elsa help us to explore children's perspectives in formal educational contexts.

Keywords:

Ethnography
Kindergarten
Agency
Belonging
Social differentiation

1. Introduction

'Woah, show!' Victor 1 (5 years old) doesn't just want to be shown the Spiderman figure that Harun (4 years old) has brought with him doesn't just want to be shown to him. Rather, he wants to touch it, examine it and see how flexible it is and how it fits in his hand. Harun is visibly proud. Patronizingly, I notice hands Victor his figurine - a gesture of friendship. That very same day, the caterpillar boy Harun is allowed to play Lego with the big butterfly boys. Victor brings him into the established group. However, the joy and pride are temporarily curbed in the meantime. After Dragan (6 years old) asks the kindergarten teacher Mrs. Gasser about the figure he had brought with him, she scolds Harun: he is not allowed to bring toys from home into the kindergarten, he has to take his he had to put his Spiderman in his rucksack straight away.

Elena (6 years old), Peter (5 years old), and Mariana (5 years old) have darkened the room and created a fire zone. Touching the floor means dying. The wide window sill, chairs, and tables help the fighters to move safely around the room. They dodge the fireballs that keep appearing spontaneously fireballs that appear spontaneously or catapult them back into the back into the universe with wild gestures. They have a magical scepter in their hands. The most difficult thing is to cross each other on narrow passages, scurrying past each other sibilants, without physical tension. The movements become more relaxed again when the scepter-wielding

firefighters successfully. Images from the animated series 'Star Against the Forces of Evil' are called up and integrated into the play integrated into the play environment of the after-school club.

Spiderman, Elsa the Ice Queen, and various characters from the Disney Channel and other (children's) TV programmes were very popular with the children from Mühlekon, a diverse Swiss metropolitan neighbourhood. They adorned the shoes, T-shirts, rucksacks and snack boxes of Harun, Elena and their companions from the municipal kindergarten (henceforth: KiGa) Wiesengrund. They snuck into their games and were painted, imitated and positioned against each other. The figures moved with ease from the television to children's fashion and into the play scenes of the children. They accompanied the children from home to the day-care centre, to Grandma's in Kosovo and back to the Mühlekon nursery. However, the figures were not accorded the same importance everywhere, not everyone around the children reacted to their appearance with equal appreciation, and the teachers at the day nursery repeatedly tried to limit their presence, banishing Spiderman to his rucksack and replacing Elsa the Ice Queen with wooden figures, Lego and educational fairy tale and animal figures.

Drawing on the empirical material of child-centered ethnography, this article explores children's affiliations in formal educational contexts [1,2]. In doing so, he reconstructs children's perspectives in pedagogies orders of difference [3]. Borrowing from theories of actor-centered childhood research [4], he is interested in how children negotiate belongings against the background of changing frames of reference. The article offers a social science interpretation of the possibilities of empirical research into children's perspectives. Firstly, the research on which the article is based is presented and the terms central to the argument are defined. Interwoven into this is a discussion of methodological and research ethics, which seeks to take account of the surprises of the ethnographic research process and to reflect on them concerning the situational responsibilities and social positioning of those involved. This is followed by a focus on negotiations of children's belonging in formal educational contexts through the analytical inclusion of their TV heroes. Some key findings are summarized and prepared for the discourse on early childhood in the conclusion.

2. Child-centred ethnographic research on belonging

The basis of the article is a child-centered ethnography on configurations of belonging, for which children in a KiGa class were accompanied through their everyday lives, in some cases over several years, but at least one school year: from KiGa to home, to after-school clubs and shopping centers, to fantasy worlds, through YouTube channels or across playgrounds in their neighbourhood and beyond. The study thus grew along the children's horizons into a multi-local ethnography in Switzerland, Kosovo and Ghana, and was reflected in hundreds of pages of field notes, photos, transcripts from conversations and other recordings, the documentation of school and family artifacts, countless hours of (often non-written) participant observation and much more [2]. The analytical reading of children's belonging developed here and put up for discussion consists of ethnography in the sense of analytical writing and theoretical abstraction of topics recognized as relevant and aimed at understanding. This remained in constant reflection and discussion with what was experienced and noted during the research but also came to its current contour through the feedback and suggestions on written texts and thoughts, the joint thinking in interpretation groups, and the social-theoretical examination of figures of thought from similar research [5]. The empirical insights serve as plausibilising illustrations and are aimed at a reading of a defined intellectual problem that is as systematized and reflective as possible. This methodology anticipates that this transnational and social anthropologically orientated research differs from the German-language educational ethnography described by Breidenstein and its 'disciplinary specificity' of a 'data-interpreting style' [6], whose analytical readings are often fed by a clearly defined and concise procedure of interpretation (e.g. according to the rules of objective hermeneutics, the documentary method or a decided declination of the grounded theory method).

In the article, only a few (intellectual and geographically situated) settings of the broader ethnographic research are thematized superficially, above all the negotiation of children's belonging in the pedagogical order of the kindergarten. In this context, the children's TV heroines function as an analytical probe that

is used to reflect on the questions that introduce the article.

3. Belongings as relevant involvements

Child-centered research such as the present one enters the field with an ex-ante-formulated generational category of distinction: it distinguishes children from other people with a view to its research interest [7–10], without essentializing the respective affiliation and thus attributing to it an omnipresent power of action. Rather, it is always important to examine the implications of the category 'child / -er' for the people it refers to, for the research interest, and for the various social relationships in the field, and how it relates to other categories of belonging. Understanding complex configurations of belonging thus becomes the analytical core business. What does this mean in concrete terms? 'An analysis of belonging enables us to recognize how the self emerges as a by-product of people's efforts to respond to others', writes Gammeltoft in her attempt to qualify processes of subjectivization [11]. She identifies three elements of reference that are central to negotiations of belonging: possession, membership, and moral obligation. Following on from this operationalization, it is also understood that belonging here as relevant involvements that people relate to subjective. The memberships (to the big butterfly boys), the possession (of a Spiderman figure), and also the moral obligation (loyalty to one's cohort) determining categories of belonging are not simply there. Rather, the respective elements of reference can be invoked, denied, performed, felt, assigned, or, for example, claimed depending on the situation [12,13].

4. Children's perspectives and agency

Qualitative social research has dealt intensively with the question of effectiveness and the agency of children in shaping generational relations of order. It has shown how children, as social actors, shape the conditions of their everyday lives and criticized earlier childhood research that took too little account of children's ability to interpret the world independently and meaningfully. As a result, numerous studies emerged that sought to close this knowledge gap and carried out analytical work on the theorization of children's agency [14,15]. However,

Spyrou's question can be critically asked: "Does the overwhelming preoccupation with children's agency guide researchers to focus on the creative, innovative and productive capacities of children at the expense of investigating social and cultural reproduction?" [16]. So is this new child-centered research squandering its analytical effectiveness? There would certainly be a danger if childhood researchers were content to simply point out children's agency without analyzing it [17]. Simplifying practices of showing children's agency therefore require a "relational revision" [4], which according to the axiom of this article, simultaneously takes into account the agency of the children and that of the researchers (and all other relevant actors identified for the object of research), and does not play off one in favour of the other. This summarization must succeed in making plausible not only the perspective and agency of the children but also that of the research or the researchers. This is done in this article by exploring how "the optionality of being a child" [10] becomes analytically tangible in entangled relationship dynamics in formal educational contexts. If checked on the ethnographer's agency in this way, it can be stated that in a place like the day-care center with such clearly defined positions, it may nevertheless be easier for the adults present, despite the "impossibility of not participating" [18], to adopt positions detached from other adults. The ethnographer certainly has room for maneuvering and can be more influenced and guided by children, for example, than would be possible for other adults in the daycare center or ethnographers in other contexts [19]. The empirical data show that the trust placed in the ethnographer by the teachers was often used by the children to escape the pedagogical gaze to a certain extent. The ethnographer wanted to show her loyalty to them and was therefore not allowed to report minor rule violations directly to the teachers depending on the complicity of the children. It was also possible to exploit the fact that the ethnographer was unwilling and unable to say no, and thus complied with various children's wishes. "They're in the goal!" "Will you play with me?" "Take a picture of Ladybug." This analysis of the conditions under which the relationship between the ethnographer and the children in the kindergarten can be shaped provides important insights into the negotiation of children's belonging in formal educational contexts. At the same

time, the analytical capturing of children's perspectives with the inclusion of ethnographic agency, it becomes clear that children's perspectives reflect generational relationships in which the ethnographer as an adult differs from the children, but also from other adults such as the teachers in the field, and children also know this [10].

5. Ethnographic relationship and positioning

If social science wants to include children's perspectives in the processing of a research interest such as the one presented here and conceptualizes children as competent social actors for their interests [20]. The question of the relationship between researchers and the children of interest to the researchers arises more urgently than usual. What power asymmetries permeate research situations despite the invocation of children's competence? What relationship between vulnerability and equality can underlie these situations? Who has the authority to interpret how children's consent to research projects formulated by the social sciences is processed? A cursory overview of similar projects shows that these questions have been dealt with in different ways. Childhood researchers have tried, among other things, to appear as similar as possible to children and thus to be the "least adult" [21,22], to position themselves clearly as a friend [23,24] or to establish a relationship as a friend of a person close to the child [25] and thus to address and involve children in research to divergent degrees [26]. In the present ethnographic study, an attempt was made to initially keep the respective relationship with the children open in terms of definition and thus give the children, as central dialogue partners, the opportunity to actively participate in the relationship quality. However, it was precisely by navigating through the children's everyday lives together that the researcher-children relationships became not only repeatedly precarious but also concerning the "defense and appropriation strategies" introduced by the children [27].

6. Ethically justifiable

The research logic of ethnography, associated with openness, flexibility and a strong concept of empiricism [5,27], makes it impossible in the strict sense to fully comply with the current requirements of ethics committees, which are primarily based on quantitative research logic. These are aimed, among other things, at explaining all research intentions to potential study participants in advance and exclusively obtaining consent for what is presented [28]. Ethnographers have therefore pointed to divergent logics of consent and the procedural development of research ethics [29], to the compelling conditions of the possibility of situational handling of ethical guidelines [30] and to pitfalls especially in obtaining children's consent to research [31,32]. In the present case, it was decided to obtain consent not from children but from their legal guardians and at the same time to use a "methodology of slowness" conceived by Kromidas (2012) in working with children, which emphasizes "patience, mutual respect, and the humanity of ethnographic research," which means, among other things, "surrendering to the child's agenda" [33]. From this discussion about child-centered qualitative social research, it is possible to outline a field of tension between the analytical added value of research with children on the one hand, and research-ethically justified restraint on the other, the situational handling of which cannot be resolved theoretically, but only pragmatically, and with a view to the social consequences.

These remarks on the effectiveness of children's perspectives and the logical and ethical fields of tension in research reflect the conditions under which ethnographic childhood research is possible. As has been shown, they are deeply interwoven with the intellectual problems to which childhood research is committed and play a decisive role in the presentation of the following reading of children's belonging in formal educational contexts.

7. Readings of children's belonging

Children encounter various new categorizations of who they are in the KiGa, this colourfully furnished room full of small chairs and toys. They are confronted with categories of belonging that sometimes have no relevance whatsoever in their everyday lives outside the KiGa: the younger caterpillars or the older butterflies, those who have a birthday in November, for example, wear green T-shirts or speak in Turkish in ten languages. The respective configuration of affiliations goes hand in hand with an invocation of the "good kindergarten child" in

paedagogical addressing practices [34,35], which the school novices constantly encounter during their attendance at KiGa. Practicing KiGa rules and making behavioral requirements of living together, especially in the first few weeks after the summer holidays, when a new cohort is incorporated into the structure, takes up a large part of the pedagogical attention. However, the children do not remain passive recipients of assignments in this formation of order: They accept, reinterpret, reject, pass on, and contribute their categories of differentiation. This interweaving of children's agency in the formation of the order in formal educational contexts will now be analyzed further using the TV heroes Spiderman and Elsa, who often accompany the clear majority of the class to nursery school every morning in various accessories. This is particularly interesting because references to these figures are usually ignored in educational appeals. It is the pedagogical practices of muting that must first be discussed before the children's interaction with the figures can be explained, and a condensed and ethnographically tailored field note from everyday life in the daycare centre will serve as an illustration. It comes from Arian's birthday, which the class celebrated in early autumn together with the teacher, Mrs. Gasser, and Arian's mother, in the presence of the ethnographer.

8. Pedagogisation of a birthday child's life

Birthday children at KiGa Wiesengrund usually received increased attention for about an hour, which was accompanied by both the opportunity to invite parents and the responsibility of bringing a cake. This must be seen as a special marker in that the teachers refrained from enforcing the otherwise applicable no-sugar rule and parental absence. Mrs. Gasser had given individual children the task of darkening the room while the birthday boy, Arian, was to wait in the cloakroom until everything was ready. On re-entering the KiGa, the class stood in a singing line and five lit candles were waiting. Arian was to blow out each one individually. Each one was to symbolize a year of life: 'First, Arian turned one year old,' said Mrs. Gasser. 'What do you think, children, what did Arian learn?' Elena spoke up: 'Trotting.' Mrs. Gasser and Arian's mother smiled at each other and Mrs.

Gasser objected that he might have said the first word, and Arian's mother added that he knew Albanian first and not yet German. The ritual was repeated, and on his third birthday, Victor said in response to the same question: "Fernseh luege," whereupon his mate Lewis spontaneously jumped to his side and shouted 'ou jo,' imitating one of their TV heroes. Mrs. Gasser did not accept this, saying that it had nothing to do with age, and put the question back to the group. When Victor asked again on his fourth birthday, he said: 'Büechli aluege.' Mrs. Gasser repeated his answer in standard Helvetian language and added that Arian would certainly have been able to look at books by then.

9. The muting and insertion of Elsa and Spiderman and Co.

The analytical focus should be on the non-silencing of Victor's television hint. If we consider the visual dominance of the film and series characters, it is initially surprising why they are so clearly ignored by professionals in the daycare center, as the undisputed guideline is to orientate educational practice towards the children's everyday lives and topics. During all the months of participant observation in the daycare center, there was no reference whatsoever to the characters in the teachers' topics. When TV characters were introduced by children in pedagogically guided sequences, this led to a muting on the pedagogical front stage or an active de-thematization. Pedagogically de-thematized was thus gender order outside of school, which was fueled by the merchandising of parts of the international children's (fashion) industry, offering a pink-blue / boy-girl difference with respective identification figures, was also pedagogically de-thematized (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Girls and their Elsa souvenirs.

It is not only the categorical exclusion of figures, who are then stuck to T-shirts and rucksacks in educational sequences as silent witnesses of other orders that is interesting. It is also interesting to see how quickly children themselves become aware of this order in their urge for pedagogical recognition and join the pedagogical canon in the relevant sequences. The fact that Victor brings in the book that points to educational affinity immediately after the TV has been banned points to the successful establishment of a pedagogical order and to the ability to navigate divergent repertoires of recognition. It is because as it immediately becomes clear, his TV heroes are not abandoned.

The muting of Elsa, Spiderman, and the like, as well as the activity of television in general as a "pedagogical of the 'good life' [36] is capable of releasing much more than the insight into hierarchizations of knowledge in formal educational contexts, especially about children's perspectives." The fact that children are constantly moving between peer culture and teaching requirements on the classroom stage [37] is also relevant for the observation here, as is the realization that recognition from peers can be at least as important for children as praise from teachers. If one turns the ethnographic gaze away from the teacher and their differentiation practices and towards the children's organization of this birthday morning, it becomes clear that the pedagogical mute can certainly release energy. Lewis' gesture in response

to Victor's idea that Arian might have learned to watch TV throughout the morning and led to situational acts of affiliation, similar to the scenes involving Harun's Spiderman figure or the scepter-wielding firefighter mentioned at the beginning. The performance of this seemingly rehearsed and recognizable pose strengthened Lewis and Victor's relationship, they owned the relevant moves and temporarily attracted a lot of childlike attention.

Zaylie, on the other hand, who also wanted to join in, was unable to join the posing children Elena (the two girls sat together at the table eating cake in their Elsa T-shirts) said that Zaylie couldn't do it, that it was also "not for Räupli, and the younger cohort of Räupchen." The children established modes of negotiating to belong outside the pedagogically intended order but often used the pedagogical category of difference of cohorts to exclude even less established children. This points to the intertwining of pedagogical order and children's perspective. So, if Spiderman, Elsa, and their companions rarely come into the limelight on the pedagogical front stage, they can act as a change of register for the children and as boundary objects that situationally suspend the pedagogical in the day care center. They then weave themselves into multi-referential orders of belonging within the kindergarten. If it has been conceptually established here that belonging as relevant involvement places people in subjective relationships, it can be explored how children participate in shaping the pedagogical order, for example by being aware of its nature (Dragan telling Harun off to the teacher about the Spiderman figure, Victor reciting the book), or by drawing on it with a new charge for children's negotiations (by using the established differentiation and older butterfly children and younger caterpillar children for the social exclusion of Zaylie). In addition, the mute on the pedagogical front stage reveals a social space within the group of children that eludes the pedagogical attention of the teachers.

10. Conclusion

This article explored the conditions of children's negotiations of belonging against the background of pedagogical orders of difference in a Swiss kindergarten.

To this end, it first discussed the methodological and research ethical tensions that can be inherent in such research and these are always already part of the research interest. These considerations, which have gained relevance as tools for reflection on the question of ethnographic childhood research, complicate the analysis profitably. It was possible to explain how the symmetrization of child and ethnographic agency can be used situationally and pragmatically to deal with the tension between ethical sensitivity and analytical added value in research with children. According to the further argument, ethnographers can sometimes be in a position to temporarily destabilize generational orders and their positioning within them in favor of children's and intellectual agendas, which allows for new perspectives on children's negotiations of belonging.

The reading of children's perspectives in formal educational contexts developed with the help of an analytical focus on Elsa, Spiderman, and co. showed how strongly the TV characters are woven into generational and neighbourhood relationships, and how their presence and absence can bring about changes of register within the existing social orders in the classroom. She explains how this analytical probe offers us conclusions about 'the practices of producing childhood as a social fact in its logic of realization' [10]. Concerning the anticipated extracurricular, which is imagined in the catchment area of the Mühlekons kindergarten as tending to be problematic and contrary to the pedagogical program, the pedagogical order responds with a certain rigidity to the extracurricular affiliation categories marked as relevant for the negotiation of the "good kindergarten child." The pedagogical muting is thus preceded by an involvement in the child's extracurricular life, In other words, a practice-orientated inclusion is identified as problematic in the extracurricular world, the analysis of which would be just as worthwhile as the involvement in divergent gender orders in the children's everyday lives. The pedagogical ignorance of Elsa and Spiderman remains ambivalent. She opposes a certain segment of the children's (fashion) industry, which is oriented towards TV programs and has found its way into Mühlekon's children's room. It superficially silences a visually clearly visible marker of the (counter-gendered) childish world outside of school and disqualifies it as pedagogically valuable. At the same time, a children's world can be configured within it, which in some cases actively undermines the hierarchies of the pedagogical order and to a certain extent finds its way into the children's negotiations of belonging as a counter-school culture [38].

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