Early Childhood Today: Wish and Reality

by

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"It seems essential to get a generalized picture of 'children'. . . but at the same time every generalization is far removed from that which children really 'are.' All generalizations about childhood manipulate education, but without them one cannot educate." This quote is from education scientist Jürgen Oelkers.

In contrast, Rudolf Steiner said, "There is only one educator and that is the child-man and child-woman facing their own selves. Education is the art of creating an opportunity for child-beings to educate themselves." With the first quote one experiences that the image adults make of the child is the basis, the foundation, of education. The arbitrariness of the quality of that image is noticeable. The main point is that one has an image; however, in contrast, Steiner's comment is based on the idea that no image at all should be made of a child, rather the concept of what childhood actually is lives within this conflict.

Perception of Childhood in Research

The modern outlook towards the child has been essentially defined by the principle research done by Philipp Aries and Lloyd de Mause. In his fundamental work, Aries pointed out already in 1960 that the concept of "childhood" is a fabrication of the modern era. As a result, education as we know it has been working its mischief more or less by robbing children of their freedom. It used to be that in traditional society a child was happy "because he or she had the freedom to interact with many grades and age groups." Therefore, "at the beginning of our modern era a special condition was *discovered;* namely that of childhood. That led to a tyrannical concept of family that resulted in the destruction of friendship and sociability." [1] Lloyd de Mause describes the history of childhood as "a nightmare from which we are just now awaking. The further back we go in history, the more inadequate is the care of and provision for children and therefore the larger was the probability that they would be killed, abandoned, beaten, tormented, and sexually abused."[2]

Today, it seems, instead of waking up, society has sworn an oath of apocalypse against childhood. A sociological purvue of the situation of children today (in Germany) with such known factors as the one-child family, one-parent family, and so forth, determines to a large degree the thinking about children. Some of the clichés used to describe and evaluate the current situation include destabilization (basic environment becomes fragile), equalization (social etiquette between adults and children is equalized), isolation (only-children), cloistered, institutional-ization, products of education, and media-influenced. The view that childhood is disappearing is further supported by additional descriptive phrases such as medicated, politicization, commercialization, and mechanization.

Isolated voices have been raised in opposition including German educator Klaus Mollenhauer who noted,

> My anthropological imagination is not sufficient for me to envision a "disappearance of childhood"; that is, in the sense that there would be no marked differences in the educational process between children and adults and also no tasks specific to each to be mastered. I can only understand diffusions in this regard as social pathology.

However, today one is again, or perhaps newly, eagerly prepared to conceive of childhood as a fabrication with the consequence that now children are to be treated as little adults, "Since our children have been compelled by conditions to become 'little adults,' we must now also treat them as adults" with the consequence that "education…is not to promote childhood, but to destroy it." [3] One can get away from the endless circle of scientific theories if one leaves behind the abstract idea of childhood and concentrates on images of childhood or if one does empirical research.

Images of the Child – the Example of Pippi Longstocking

Since the time of Rousseau, age-appropriate education has become a leading concept in pedagogy. This requires a detailed, conclusively provable concept of development as a foundation. The necessary research for such a concept was done, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, through exact and detailed observation and analysis by such people as Sigmund Freud, W. Stern and Jean Piaget. Developmental psychology researched the thinking, feeling, and willing of children and produced a vast amount of material on individual findings in which the individual child was lost. A way out remains—in the dire need for an explanation.

One could cling to Rousseau's image of the original-natural state of the child possessing moral integrity. In our day, one likes to overlook the fact that, for instance, the "Wild Child" from Aveyron in his "found state" had none of the moral qualities, which he really should have possessed, according to this theory. Nowadays, people enthusiastically console

themselves with a romanticized image of the child such as was portrayed by Astrid Lindgren in her story *Pippi Longstocking*. In *Pippi Longstocking*, the reflex against social conventions is clear. Customs are thrown overboard, paradoxes become real (a horse standing on the veranda), most secret dreams, such as throwing raw eggs, come true, and education is not left out—self-education, admittedly, within a reward-punishment scheme. Send her to bed? "I'll do that myself," says Pippi. "First I'll say it very friendly, and when I don't mind, I'll say it again more sternly and when I still don't mind then I get a spanking."

It seems to me that this situation was not created from an intimate knowledge of the child's wish to fashion his or her pretend world after reality. Rather, it seems that this situation is presented as a dreamed-up, radical answer to failed strategies of upbringing and education. Daily reality and the child's experience of the world are here lost. This does not help clarify what a child really thinks, feels, and wills.

Motifs of "Happiness Education"

Moving closer to what a child thinks, feels, and wills, which guides the motifs of some educational methods, is easily stymied by what parents wish for their children. A traditional attitude involves many parents' dream that their offspring will have a more fulfilling life than their own. One can observe how, with such an attitude, educational agendas fail and the best of intentions does not lead to the desired outcome. Coerced happiness is a dysfunctional agenda!

All the same, one can be stimulated into thinking that happiness education works when good "feelings" arise as a result of Johann Pestalozzi and his relatively unsuccessful forays into "happiness education." It soon becomes clear that one is dealing here with a transitory feeling and not a permanent state of being. No one can be constantly and limitlessly happy.

Likewise, what actually constitutes "happiness" must be determined by every person according to his or her own position and situation.

This can easily be concluded from a survey of a large group of school children.[4] A boy, ten years old, commented, "I've been happy my whole life (to this point). Above all because I have good parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers, and sisters, neighbors, friends, and a pet." Other children of the same age see their happiness in nice friends, good grades, successful skating, or a new computer.

One can get a more penetrating viewpoint with the question about the biggest possible experience of happiness. A schoolgirl answered, "When I was little I wanted to learn to ride a bicycle. My father put me on the bike and I rode off. He held onto the back of the bike. At a street that went a little downhill, he let go and I rode along without knowing that he did. Suddenly my father yelled: 'You can do it!' Then I realized that I was riding by myself. That was the happiest experience of my life."

This answer begs our inquiry into the common characteristics of those things that can bring on moments of happiness. Aristotle differentiated between luck, which came about by accident (*eutycheia*), and the feeling of happiness that appears by virtue of an activity, voluntarily done, that makes one happy (*eudaimonia*). When we achieve capabilities through learning, then feelings of happiness are especially present.

Current research has empirically corroborated this so-called activity-theoretical approach and has been able to elaborately specify that feelings of happiness come about when "for the mastery of a situation or the carrying out of an action, maximum capabilities are demanded."[5] This means when one can make maximum use of one's possibilities and capabilities in situations that justify the exertion. Substandard efforts such as when a chess player loses interest because he or she always wins easily, lead to loss of motivation just as demands for extraordinary effort, if over-challenging, can lead to frustration.[6]

This kind of happiness allows the forgetting of "time and space, delight and pain" and leads to personality growth. Here one does not experience oneself as a passive observer but as an active co-creator of the world. For children this comes especially into play when they can optimally balance their will and their ability. They experience themselves as creatively active and so change the world and themselves.

The task of education, then, is obvious—creating opportunities for children to design and form their world and providing stimulus for these activities. To be avoided is passive entertainment that omits challenging activity.

From the Child's Point of View: a Paradigm of Early Childhood Research

These considerations live within the central idea that guides modern methods of research on childhood and especially early childhood. Researchers abandon every limitation of perspective regarding a certain research goal. In the style of selfless observers, they unreservedly try to put themselves into the child's world and experience. In this manner, empathizing, from quantifiable, measurable gauging of averages, which can then be translated into patterns, can finally be revived. The phrase "from a child's point of view" acquires meaning when one allows every person to have her or his own blueprint for life by virtue of his or her own strengths and his or her own, personal characteristics—"when one wants to seek out the child, even the very young child, as an actor in its own development."[7] In this way, one may learn to understand developmental phases as an open process leading to new and even surprising individual patterns as children wrestle with outer conditions and propelling inner forces. Also, set aside is the fallacy that the developmental process may be summed up as an exact, naturally pre-programmed succession of phases. Those working in Waldorf education like to habitually, and therefore more or less unconsciously, refer to the seven-year rhythm. In other words,

> One must believe that something is possible which goes beyond what can be directly and immediately noticed or perceived. However, it seldom shows itself on its own. Usually one must be pushed to it. It is the other, unexpected, unknown and also impenetrable part of the subject that "comes into the picture" here, metaphorically speaking, his shady side.[8]

What we are dealing with here is the requirement that the "permanent, individual blueprint of the child" is perceived. Here the child becomes foreign to us, becomes a puzzle. At this point we remember Steiner and his counsel that we should not create an image of the child because a view of the individuality is lost if images become concrete.

Today "from the child's point of view" means learn to understand the child from the beginning as a matchless individual. Learn to understand a child's behavior as questioning the world and the educator. In short, learn to let children express themselves.

Approaches: Biographical Testimonials

To get closer to the areas of perception and reality, children should finally have a word. It may be astonishing to some to try this at the preschool age and even with infants. The American early childhood researcher Daniel N. Stern subtly, sensitively, and poetically ventured to feel himself into the state of soul of infants of various ages during his exemplary research about ten years ago.[9]

Using Stern's work let us turn, first of all, to the time of infancy. Joey, six weeks old, has awakened. He looks randomly at a sunray dancing on the wall next to his crib.

> *A space glows over there,*
> *A gentle magnet pulls to capture.*
> *The space is growing warmer and coming to life.*

Inside it, forces start to turn around one another in a slow dance.
The dance comes closer and closer.
Everything rises to meet it.
It keeps coming. But it never arrives.
The thrill ebbs away.[10]

An image of moving forces, not coagulating into form or becoming solidified, an up and down, back and forth, no fixed point of reference, rising tension, falling tension—the infant is enmeshed in a cohesion of pure force-activities.

A few weeks later this force-activity takes shape. Joey, at age 4.5 months, feels himself to be the cause of these processes but he cannot find the right measure. For that he needs the loving tuning and rhythmic composition of this symphony of forces by his mother. Otherwise there is the danger of becoming overwhelmed.

I immerse myself into the world of her face.
Its lines are like heaven, clouds and water.
Its liveliness and verve are the air and light.
Usually it's a turmoil of light and air.
Today, everything here is still and dim.
Neither the lines in her face nor its round bulges are stirring.
Is she gone? Where did she go? I'm scared.
Her complacency also slowly creeps into me.
I look for something alive in her face in which I can take refuge.
Now I've found it. It's her eyes. Her liveliness is concentrated there.
It is the softest and, at the same time, the hardest place in this world.[11]

The little boy is drawn into the "world of the eyes" where he experiences powerful currents that surge and tear and pull. He is able once again to delve into the world of the face, which is now variably shaped and touches him like a living, fresh breeze. Inside him the living dance begins anew. With mutual delight, a "game of tag" now begins which surrounds him

and flows over him and in his alternating strains is like an experience of wind; if it becomes too pressing, the little boy turns away:

> *I hesitate. Then I veer off. I turn my back to her wind. And I coast into quiet water, all alone.*
> *This quiet place quells the turmoil inside me. It dies down and comes to a rest. I am comforted.*
> *After a while in the stillness, a faint zephyr brushes the side of my head. It refreshes me. I turn and see it gently ripple the water under a softer sky.*[12]

A new quality appears when the infant masters speech more and more. In doing so, the point at which what is spoken is no longer merely "formulated" but also targeted in reference to the self is of fundamental importance. [13]

> *My room is so still I am all alone here. I want to go where Mommy and Daddy are. If I don't go, I will stay alone and still. So I go to their room, and get in between them, into that valley. There, I wrap myself in the heat that rises and falls. I immerse myself in the pools of warm smells, in the sounds of air flowing in and out of them as the valley fills and empties. I bathe in the rich tides of our morning world.*
>
> *Then Daddy sends into my world a familiar sound—just for me. Its music unlocks the warm Daddy-feeling. For the first time, I notice that the sound has a special shape, one that stands apart from its music. This shape is bright and soft and lingers after the music is gone. It has a force and life of its own. It was hiding in the flow of the music but has come out. I can play with this brand-new shape. It has curves with little explosions. I try it and send it to Daddy. He sends it back to me, clean and sharp. I am getting it now. I send it back. He laughs and sends it to me again, this time flowing free and full.*
>
> *This new shape takes me into myself. There the shape unfolds by itself but also emerges from inside me. It grows and spreads. I let it fall over and around me. I press it close against my feelings. Now I'm ready. I rise up wrapped in my new shape.*

That bright, soft cloak changes me. I fling myself out of the valley and declare myself: "Me pumpkin!"

From this simple example out of everyday life, one experiences exactly how the process of giving oneself up to something, in this case to language, with its entire musical-rhythmic melody, calls forth comforting feelings of life energy. In this realm, one can completely lose oneself, and through the lightning-like beaming in of forces related to coming to consciousness, one experiences formation, limitation, and shape. This comes completely from inside the small child. It is certainly stimulated by the father in this case, but should be understood as a genuine achievement of the child. One senses that the child "knows" the word and is able to mold these overwhelming forces.

It is clear from these examples that the world experience of the small child is flexible. The child does not perceive the same reality as adults. The child is interwoven in a process in which the outer appearance of the world is not taken in. Instead, shaping forces enter into conversation with the life energies of the child. This "conversation" proceeds in an unstable manner and is highly sensitive. It can get out of hand and become threatening. But, insofar as it is shaped and formed, it can become uplifting, strengthening, refreshing, and growth-stimulating. The child now requires attentive perception of its sensations and orientations. The child needs support and encouragement from adults. At the same time, the child also requires a caring, protective, and anchoring envelopment that conveys security, safety, and composure. Further, the child needs stimulation to continually encourage a sailing forth to ever new shores.

It is clear from the early childhood memories of Elias Canetti how profoundly early childhood experiences can affect the motifs of later life. The following episode must have happened when Canetti was two years old:

My earliest memory is drenched in red. In the arms of a girl I come out of a door. The floor ahead of me is red and to the left there is a stairway going down which is also red. Opposite us at the same level of height, a door opens and a smiling man steps out and comes up to me in a friendly manner. He comes up very close to me, stands still and says to me: "Show me your tongue." I stick out my tongue; he puts his hand in his pocket and pulls out a pocket knife, opens it and puts the blade very close to my tongue. He says: "Now we're going to cut out his tongue." I can't bring myself to pull in my tongue. He comes ever closer. Soon he will touch my tongue with the blade. At the last moment he pulls the knife away and says: "Not today, tomorrow." He folds up the knife again and puts it in his pocket.

Every morning we go out the door to the red floor, the door opens and the smiling man appears. I know what he is going to say and wait for his order to show my tongue. I know he wants to cut out my tongue and every time I am more fearful. That is how the day begins and it happens many times.[14]

Later, in many conversations with his mother, the association is clarified, and the incident is clearly conceivable, but Canetti cannot let it go. It accompanies him during his entire life as a determining motive. Canetti saves his tongue: In spite of everything, he becomes an author. It is also clear that for a child, reality is not the world of facts but rather what is hidden behind the facts and revealed in the soul. This reality is, first of all, bound up in the forces that form the feeling of mental/physical well-being. Then, they gradually work themselves up to the sphere of soul activity, thereby forming a basis of soul, a co-author of biographical motifs. The responsibility that educators have is paramount. It is especially evident that actions, facts, and writings about these matters are deeply and morally perceived.

From others' memories about childhood episodes it becomes more clear what the reality of the world is for the small child. It is molded out of

moral substance. Truth is the educational resource. That is exactly the opposite of what Alice Miller decried: "Education is, above all, the exercise of power of the stronger adults over the weaker children. It is a compilation of deceitful maneuvers." However, this can only be an attitude of education that mistakes outer appearance for reality; that believes the wrapping to be the actual core-being of the child—in inheritance and environment, in genes and the ability to manipulate them. The essential being of the child is not to be found there. It hides itself from a constant, measuring gaze. This gaze is fixed and certain and does not have the openness to avoid preconceived notions, even of the unexpected. With that kind of an attitude, how can an atmosphere be created where the small child has room to develop its individuality? The attitude of the older generation regarding the younger generation should be one of acceptance and pleasant surprise, as formulated by Erik Erikson, and not one of critical observation.

Therefore, for the task of education, qualities are needed in which the individuality does not see itself as being hindered by its so-called wrappings. Steiner impressively summed up these considerations: "The essence of the child . . . we cannot even get to know with our normal understanding. We can't even comprehend it. But, we can support it through attention, discretion, and devotion."

Footnotes:

[1] "The society of the Middle Ages, which we have chosen here as a starting point, had no relationship to childhood.… An understanding of childhood is not to be confused with a fondness for the child; it corresponds much more to a conscious perception of distinctions between children and adults, even categorically differentiating youth from adults. Such a conscious relationship to childhood did not previously exist." Philipp Aries, 1975.

[2] de Mause, Lloyd. *Hoert ihr die Kinder weinen. Psychogenetische Geschichte der Kindheit*, (*Listen to the Children Crying: The Psychogenetic History of Childhood*), 1977.

[3] Already in 1985 the educator, H. Giesecke, in an essay titled "Vom Ende der Erziehung" ("The End of Education") wrote about taking leave of the "Idea of Childhood": "One would do well to treat children as small but steadily growing adults."

[4] Bucher, A. A. *Kindheitsglueck: Romantischer Anachronismus oder uebersehene Realitaet? (Childhood Happiness: Romantic Anachronism or Overlooked Reality?*). A study of 1,300 school children about the psychology of happiness and education, 1999. On pp 399–418 Bucher tells how Pestalozzi failed with his upbringing and education desires for his own son.

[5]Ibid., p 403.

[6]Bucher describes results of research done by Csikszentmihaly who empirically specifies and enriches the basic concept of Aristotle in that he names conditions under which feelings of happiness appear or not.

[7] Cf. C.E. Schaefer. *Aus der Perspektive des Kindes? Von der Kindheits-forschung zur ethnographischen Kindheitsforschung* (*From the Perspective of the Child? From Childhood Research to Ethnographic Childhood Research*), 1997.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Stern, Daniel. *Diary of a Baby*, Basic Books (Harper-Collins), p 17, 1990.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid., p 58.

[12] Ibid., p 59.

[13] Canetti, Elias. *Die Gerettete Zunge. Geschichte einer Jugend* (*The Saved Tongue: Story of an Adolescent*), 1979.

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