Being and Becoming: The Implications of Different Conceptualizations of Children and Childhood in Education

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Abstract: How to conceptualize children and childhood are intrinsic to the ways of understanding education. The 'becoming' child is seen as an opposite or negative form of adults while the 'being' child is recognized as a social actor with the ability as well as rights to actively participate in its own life and in those of others. However, in addition to the problems of each discourse, such a dyad also leads to a separation of fundamental education factors. With reference to the Interpretative Reproduction Model and the concept of time, this paper discusses an alternative perspective on children and childhood that views the child as the 'human becoming and being' concurrently, coupled with its associated implication on education. By doing so, the author hopes to provide a platform facilitating adult professionals, pre-service or in-service teachers, to reflect upon their attitudes towards students and the ways of understanding education.

Keywords: Children, Childhood, Being and Becoming, Educational Philosophy, Pedagogical Implications

Introduction

Over the past decades, there has been much discussion about the different conceptualizations of children and childhood as beings and becomings, both of which involve conflicting approaches to what it means to be a child (James, Jenks, &Prout, 1998; Mayall, 2002; Qvortrup,1994). These approaches shape not only people's attitudes and beliefs towards the role of children in society, but also the educational activities that are closely linked with children's daily lives. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) defines a child as a person below the age of 18, which is applicable in this article.

In brief, the becoming child is seen as an "adult in the making" who is waiting to become rational and competent just as the adult is. In this context, education is teacher-centred, with students functioning as the object of knowledge and expected to learn truth and facts residing in adults' society through a professionally-designed curriculum. Conversely, the being child is seen as a social actor in his or her own right, with an ability to construct childhood actively by him-or herself. Education is therefore directed by students, requiring teachers to create an environment that allows students to grow up in their own ways. It seems that a strong tendency exists to see the being child and the becoming child as separate, with advocates of the concept of becoming denigrating that of being (Uprichard, 2008).

However, the manifestations of time itself embody being and becoming simultaneously, drawing on the interplay between the present and the future. When focusing only on the being child, the temporality of the becoming child, who affects experiences of the being child, will be lost. Indeed, the experiences of being a child shape what a child will be in the future. As a result of the separation of being and becoming, two fundamental features of education—the individual being and the subject-matter of the curriculum—are oppositely situated in the process of educational practice. Here, the source of knowledge falls on either side of this process and the classroom relationship is either focused on the teacher or the student.

Recognizing that neither approach, with its associated implication on education, is in itself satisfactory, this paper moves beyond binaries by integrating the idea of becoming into the being child—that is, the becoming and being child—for understanding the interplay between adults' world and children's agency. This proposal to see the child as human becoming and human being concurrently, which has been suggested and discussed by other scholars recently, is inspired by Corsaro's interpretative reproduction model and the concept of time. Under this approach, two educational factors work together through an equal dialogue between students and adult teachers from which knowledge has emerged. Education is, therefore, not relying mainly on the teacher's instruction and effort, but also on students' participation in making decisions about their own learning.

The Conceptualizations of Children and Childhood

Childhood acts like a secret box. It attracts a great number of scholars from various disciplines, seeking to uncover its essence by enquiring into the meaning of being a child. Historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, and political commentators are involved in this process. A variety of perspectives are created through their scholarship, with an interwoven effect on the image of the child (Verhellen, 2015). Accordingly, different

conceptualizations of children and childhood arise, flowing from a fundamental question—whether the child is the human becoming or the human being. The meaning of becoming and being is, therefore, at the forefront of the analysis.

Hegel firstly notes that becoming consists of the contradictory notions of being and the negation of being simultaneously (as discussed byArneil, 2002). This implies the existence of a conflicting state between the perceptions of seeing children as becomings and as beings. Furthermore, according to Arneil (2002), becoming, almost by definition, is decided "by the end product and by the particular 'being' that one is to become" (p.3). This future-oriented aspect of becoming indicates that the becoming child is subject to the perspective not of what being a child currently is, but what the child will be in the future. The idea of being and becoming will be described in detail as follows.

The Becoming Child

The philosophy of the becoming child can be traced back to the enlightenment view of the child. Seen as less than fully human, unfinished or incomplete, a child, according to enlightenment thinkers, functions simply like a "blank slate on which the ideas of its parents and the society are inscribed" (Baader, Esser, Betz, &Hungerland, 2016, p.140). As such, childhood is a transitional stage in which children are preparing to become adults (Baader et al., 2016). Similarly, the role of children in early liberal theory is one of the future citizens who are waiting to become good rational citizens in society (Arneil, 2002). Given the absence of the "necessary attributes of citizenship— namely, reason, autonomy, and the capacity for having authority over oneself" (Arneil, 2002, p.2), children, in this sense, can only be considered as human becomings with the potential rights of citizenship, gaining these potentials in the process of development that is shaped by the assumed goals of adulthood and its associated citizenship. Furthermore, contemporary theories, such as Parson's socialization theory and Piaget's theory of child development strengthen the difference between children and adults (Tisdall& Punch, 2012). In these theories, adults or adulthood are regarded as the goal and endpoint of children's development and socialization (Qvortrup, 1994; Tisdall& Punch, 2012). Thus, a clear adult-child dyad exists where adults are viewed as mature, rational and competent whereas children are viewed as immature, dependent and vulnerable, and such developmental differences manifest themselves as the essential feature of childhood for children to be in. In sum, constructed as the opposite or negative form of adults, children can only serve as a reflection of the future adult and are, therefore, unable to enjoy the same status of citizenship as adults, namely human becomings.

The Being Child

In contrast to the becoming view of childhood, which emphasizes adults and adulthood as the "golden standard" (Tisdall & Punch, 2012, p. 249) for children to become, the notion of the being child argues for the recognition of the present contribution of the child as an integral member of society. To a large extent, this is consistent with the 'new' sociology of childhood, a paradigm that challenges the ways of seeing the child as a human becoming and instead views a child as a being with an ability to construct childhood actively by him-or herself (James et al., 1998).

Influenced by sociology and social anthropology, the 'new' sociology of childhood examines the social construction of childhood, which indicates that the meaning of children and childhood is socially constructed, varying considerably both across and between cultures and generations (James &James, 2004). According to these scholars, "knowledge of the child and its life worlds comes from the predisposition of a consciousness represented in a certain context" (James et al., 1998, p.27); in this context, components such as social structure, policies, cultural mores and the daily life of both adults and children have an interwoven effect (James &James, 2004). As such, children and childhood are rooted in a certain social and cultural life that emerges from the interaction of children with other structural forms or components in that context. In this sense, it seems reasonable to claim that the experiences of being a child itself or the individual's life in childhood actually contribute to how children and childhood are conceptualized in society.

Furthermore, as mentioned above, the 'new' sociology of childhood assumes that children are active participants in constructing their own lives and that of others (James & James, 2004). In particular, instead of simply internalizing and revealing the early development of adult culture or the future of the social world children, in fact, play a role in their own world, "in the lives of those around them and the societies in which they live" (James & Prout, 1990, p.8), where their course of actions could form new social relationships and cultures that might affect

themselves as well as other groups within the society (Mayall, 2002).This more developed concept is consistent with acts provided via the idea of agency, which in this context is defined as children's capacity to make decisions and choices to have an impact on one's world and thereby may contribute to a wider process of social and cultural reproduction (James, 2011; Katsiada, Roufidou, Wainwright, &Angeli, 2018).Therefore, children, as much as adults, can be envisaged as social actors with an ability to exercise their agency in both their own development and society (James, 2011), namely human beings.

However, both the discourses of the becoming and the being child are in themselves problematic. In relation to the becoming child, the main issue is that children's lives and activities in the present are envisaged as a preparation for the future, undervaluing how the collective actions of children can contribute to society. According to Corsaro (2015), in the process of interacting with adults, children attempt to interpret the norms embedded in their surroundings and then behave in accordance with them in later life. It appears that children not only play a critical role in the enforcement of social norms and values but also make a great contribution to societal maintenance (Corsaro, 2015). Secondly, the notion of the becoming child presumes incompetency as one of the constitutive features of childhood. However, James et al. (1998) argue that an individual's competencies vary depending on the social context in which they are situated, implying that both children and adults have possibilities to be competent and incompetent.

In terms of the being child, it is worth noting that what a child will be—an idea always and necessarily residing in adult's world—indeed has a significant impact on the construction of what a child is. Furthermore, as one of the most intimate relationships emerging from constant interactions between adults and children, the parent-child relationship grants the legal rights, duties, powers, responsibilities and authority to parents in making decisions about their care and upbringing of a child. However, the importance of such a relationship fails to be underlined in the being child discourse. The issues from both discourses of the becoming and being child call for a different way to understand children and childhood.

The Being and Becoming Child

Although there is a conflict between the meaning of being and becoming, an alternative conceptualization of children and childhood is possible, by way of combining these two concepts and regarding them as ones that complement one another, that is, the being and becoming child. This viewpoint is epitomised in the model of interpretative reproduction—children actively contribute to their peer cultures and to wider society through the process of appropriation, reinvention, and reproduction. In this model, Corsaro (2015) claims that children create and participate in their own unique peer culture by creatively taking or appropriating information from the adult world to address their own peer concerns…they are not simply internalizing society and culture, but are actively contributing to cultural production and change" (p.18). Here, it seems that the concepts of becoming and being work together as children grow up. Children are, by interpreting the adults' society, constructing and producing their own peer culture and world in which they are actively participating in exploring the way to become adults rather than passively waiting. In other words, with respect to adults' society, children set up their own social structure and the rules of interaction based on a consensus within group members. Therefore, children function as beings in their community, which is in line with the idea of the being child. Furthermore, given that children create their own culture and worlds based on the interpretation of adults' society, the experiences of being children are, in fact, influenced by the future constructions of becoming adults (Uprichard, 2008). As Uprichard (2008) states, "looking forward to what a child 'becomes' is arguably an important part of 'being' a child" (p.306). In this respect, children are both human becomings and human beings on their way to enter the society created by adults.

As the essence of both being and becoming, the concept of time provides an additional way to understand children and childhood. Hart, Dixon, Drummond, and Mclntyre(2010) posit that the future is being actively created in the present, implying the essential of idea of being embedded in the idea of becoming. As discussed above, children actively interpret information from adults' world to produce or extend their peer cultures which, to some extent, will ultimately be transformed as a part of adults' world. That is to say, the kind of adult that a child is expected to be in the future might arise from the experiences of being a child in the present. Thus, in recognition of the co-existence of these two concepts, children and childhood are necessarily being and becoming.

Although the notion of the being and becoming child includes the meaning of becoming, it does not indicate that children are subordinate to or different from the group of adults. Lee (2012) argues that people, including both

children and adults, are "interdependent beings who are always in the process of being and becoming with each other" (as cited in Uprichard, 2008, p.307). With regard to children, they are human beings in their own society but human becomings in adults' society. Similarly, adults are human beings in their own world but not full members in the children's community. As a result, both children and adults can be viewed as beings and becomings, which bridges the gap that makes children different from adults. Childhood, therefore, encompasses not only the same wellbeing interests of human beings as adulthood but also the constitutive features of human becomings. In light of the above, the being and becoming discourse acknowledges the life and experience of both children and adults. Children, in this sense, are entitled to be treated as equal to adults.

The Impact of Being and Becoming on Education

In fact, the conceptualization of children and childhood affects the understanding of education by offering different assumptions about learning and knowledge, which determines how education should be conceived in relation to the curriculum, pedagogy and teacher-student relationship. According to Dewey (1920), the education process includes two fundamental factors: "an immature, undeveloped being; and certain social aims, meanings, values incarnated in the matured experience of the adult" (p.8).

Seeing children as human becomings who are unfinished, incomplete and citizens in waiting, the idea of the becoming child suggests that the aim of education is to develop such irrational creatures into rational human beings by substituting "the child's individual peculiarities, wishes and experience" with facts and truth derived from the mature and rational experience of the adult (Dewey, 1920, p.8). To a large extent, this aligns with so-called old education, which emphasizes the "importance of the subject-matter of the curriculum as compared with the contents of the child's own experience" (Dewey, 1920, p.11). As such, knowledge is objective; it exists purely in the curriculum of each subject produced by adult professionals and can only be transferred unilaterally from rational adults/teachers to irrational children/students. In this respect, education seeks to create one uniform end product functioning as a member of a specific society or culture, indicating that students are all expected to master the same body of curricular content so that they can fit the existing knowledge in the world.

To achieve it, the role of adult teachers is one of adopting lecture and demonstration as a means of feeding students with an authoritative list of knowledge bits and skills that largely resides in subject-mattered curriculum, and of employing standardized tests for final evaluation (Morrison, 2007). Accordingly, the student's job is to learn these objective and pre-organized facts and truths, bit by fragmented bit, and then to provide evidence of showing the knowledge has been successfully transmitted through these standardized evaluations (Morrison, 2007). Similarly, the current educational system in England can be held up as an example where a national curriculum, coupled with a system of national goals and nationally standardized tests, were implemented by the Thatcher government (Apple, 1993). In recognition of children as human becomings, an authoritarian model of the teacher as all-knowing and learner as an object of knowledge and history is more likely to exist in the education process, rendering most students powerless and voiceless in the classroom.

Conversely, the idea of the being child tends to situate children at the center of education, given that they are human beings with an ability to construct their own development and life. In implementing this idea into education, the child's growth itself functions as the ideal and all subject-matter of studies are subservient to such needs of growth (Dewey, 1920). Accordingly, as opposed to old education, the facts and truths as to children's development would emerge from an individual being—including internal forces such as state of mind, prior knowledge, skills, understandings and experiences—rather than the subject-matter of the curriculum, leading to a differentiated and individualized learning process.

In Rousseau's naturalist approach to education, the role of adult educators was one of providing for children's interest and facilitating their learning. In his book, Emile, Rousseau (1966) suggests to educators "to be well aware that it is rarely up to you to suggest to [Emile] what he ought to learn. It is up to him to desire it, to seek it, to find it" (p. 179). As such, the objectives and knowledge coming from the adults' world should not be imposed on children for learning. Similarly, the gardening metaphor proposed by Gopnik (2016) endorses the view that the responsibility of teachers is not to direct the child's development but to construct the optimal surroundings in which the inner nature of the mind could grow and flourish spontaneously. Since knowledge is individually constructed in accordance with internal forces, educators should provide an environment where students are allowed to find and pursue ideas that interest them, thereby making contributions to their individual facts and to growing in different

ways as human beings (Morrison, 2007). In sum, seen as human beings, children, through non-interventionist interaction of teachers, are allowed to proceed at their own pace and at their own discretion in their learning (Neumann, 2013). That is to say, it is not outside educational structures or the subject-matter of the curriculum, but rather what children have created for themselves, that is needed in education, indicating that students ought to live with the consequences of their actions instead of those of teachers.

Although this 'new' perspective of education that sees children as human beings has seen an increase in support, it has also been challenged. According to Mintz (2018), one of the problems in the gardening metaphor is that child-centered gardener-educators are too optimistic about children's innate nature and potential. The seed contains within it a particular future from which one cannot depart, and such future concept serves similarly as those assumptions about hierarchies of races, ethnicities, religions, genders, and social classes in a society. With emphasis on children's innate nature by ignoring its inherent assumption, the gardening metaphor may thus reinforce existing prejudice and marginalize children based on their backgrounds. In other words, the child is a subject in constructing its own development while being an object in the place where she/he lives. They actively develop themselves as the person who they are expected to become by society. Moreover, from Dewey's (1920) point of view, regarding the child's present powers and interests as something significant in and of itself is, in fact, as dangerous as the perspective of old education that tends to compel the child to follow a given path while ignoring his or her dynamic quality due to the impossibility of expecting the child to develop the fact or truth out of his or her own mind. Likewise, as a key educational application arising from Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the concept of scaffolding contends that the child's learning capacity can be enhanced by providing her/him with challenging tasks that can let learning occur within the bounds of the Zone of Proximal Development—the distance between the level of achievement a learner can reach independently and the level they can achieve with the guidance of adults or more capable peers (Vygosky, 1978; Schunk, 2012).

Based on the analysis above, it seems that the notion of the becoming child and the being child place two fundamental education factors opposite to each other, with different emphases on the facts and truths as well as the role of students and teachers. Dewey (1920) criticizes this opposition, claiming that "to oppose one to the other is to oppose the infant and maturity of the same growing life; is to set the moving tendency and the final result of the same process over against each other; is to hold that the nature and the destiny of the child war with each other" (p.17). Therefore, an alternative assumption to the relation between these two fundamental factors is needed to bridge the gap between the child's internal status and the various forms of subject-matter that make up the course of study.

The discourse on the being and becoming presents children as both human becomings and human beings in their growth, equal in status to adults. With reference to the model of interpretative reproduction, children develop themselves in a way that they actively construct their peer culture by taking or appropriating information from the adult world and then commit themselves to cultural and social reproduction by embedding peer culture into an adult's one (Corsaro, 2015). As such, it is not easy to set a clear boundary between the idea of future becoming and present being in terms of their relations to children's growth, necessitating the co-existence of two fundamental features of education mentioned above. In recognizing what both teachers and students contribute to the learning process, such a conceptualization of children and childhood moves away from the restrictions of separation, working to make teachers and students more engaged in dialogue in which honest exchange, negotiation, and interaction create the necessary conditions through which all members participate in producing and redefining the knowledge as learners and educators. Knowledge is, therefore, constructed from the communication between professionals and students, between adults' life and children's innate nature and potentials, between the subject-matter of the curriculum and students' present experience.

Rather than weighted either to the teacher or to the student, the discourse of the being and becoming child differs from that of the becoming and being in terms of the interaction between teachers and students—here is, teacher-student with student-teacher, a new relationship proposed by Paulo Freire (1970). As he claims, "the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach" (Freire, 1970, p.80). In this case, the role of the teacher is not limited to the delivery of knowledge from the curriculum of each subject or to the construction of natural environment in which children grow up by themselves at their own pace, but is also to gain a deep insight into how students' experiences already "contain within itself elements—facts and truth—of just the same sort as those entering into the formulated study" (Dewey, 1920, p.16). Through listening, observing and waiting, the teacher is accountable for figuring out

connections between students' interest areas and curricular content, and then assists the student in "developing the necessary tools and skills to move forward with their pursuit of some interest areas" by providing certain topics and ideas that come from academic subjects (Morrison, 2007, p.47). More importantly, in this process, students should be encouraged to actively reproduce individual knowledge by making what they have learned meaningful in their own terms.

Apparently, it is highly possible for children to misunderstand the concepts or theories perceived as truth and facts in certain fields, but the importance is how educators respond to such misunderstanding, which varies in different notions of children and childhood. Seeing children as human becomings, teachers will not consider what children understand as knowledge since it is only situated in textbooks and they are more likely to correct students as soon as possible. On the contrary, the discourse of the becoming and being child is subject to view children's misunderstanding as their own knowledge constructed through their social interactions as human beings, and that knowledge is of equal weight to the field in general in regard to students' development. The teacher, instead of making a quick rectification, will attempt to figure out the reasons behind such interpretations, for example, in what ways the relevant concepts exist in students' prior knowledge and how they influence the students in meaning creation.

Furthermore, as social actors equal in status to adult teachers, the role of students is to take the lead in shaping the direction of learning, making choices and taking ownership rather than relying mainly on the teacher's direction and input. For example, in cooperation with teachers, students make decisions on what they want to know, what skills they would like to acquire and in what ways. They even can participate in self-assessment based on those criteria created by themselves so as to take shared responsibility in constructing their own development. In real practice such as teaching democracy in the high school history class, one could invite the students to come up with democracy-related questions, topics, and themes they wanted to tackle in the class after letting them know the mandated foundations content required by the curriculum, including being aware of the definition of democracy, the election process, Canadian government functions and so on. By doing so, students come into contact with the academic subjects through their self-designed curricula containing individuals' interests and life experiences.

To sum up, under the discourse of the becoming and being child, learning occurs depending on what both teachers and students do, thus requiring an equal dialogue between the group of the teacher who while teaching also is taught and the student who while being taught also teaches. Moreover, with teachers' well-designed supports, students gain access to the traditional curriculum, subjects, disciplines, or skills but on their own understandings and for their own purposes, which creates a learning process necessary for them to make the most significant kind of knowledge transformation.

Conclusion

The conceptualization of children and childhood manifests itself through ways of how education is perceived in society, within schools and among educators. Specifically, the educational practice with emphasis on the subject-mattered curriculum, external knowledge and the authority of adults/teachers, which still plays a dominant role in the most of contemporary education systems, is the victim of seeing children as human becomings, whereas the idea of the being child leads to an ignorance of the importance of social environment in education. Instead, recognizing children as beings and becomings not only addresses the significance of adults' world and children's agency to students' lives, but presents a conceptual framework to understand education, where students are empowered to take ownership of their learning and their voices significantly affect adult professionals and teachers in designing the curriculum, textbooks and lesson plans.

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