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## **Review of M. Kontopodis, C. Wulf & B. Fichtner (Eds.) (2011): *Children, Development and Education. Cultural, Historical, Anthropological Perspectives***

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During a summer University on cultural and activity research in Moscow, I met Michalis Kontopodis who kindly asked me if I would like to review a book edited by him together with Christoph Wulf and Bernd Fichtner, *Children, development and Education. Cultural, Historical, Anthropological perspectives* (2011). I accepted the project with enthusiasm and gratitude for giving me this chance and was looking forward to discovering the book that I review here with a great pleasure.

As it may be deduced from the title, the aim of the book is, amongst others, mainly an epistemological one: putting into dialogue two (distinct but complementary) approaches, namely cultural-historical psychology and historical anthropology, to study children, development and education. This book is a critique of mainstream western developmental theories concerned with a “general child” developing into an adult and of educational practices that often rely “on the normative conception of a universal, a-historical, rational human being” (p. 9). It brings together different theories and approaches and offers some powerful insights for future research on childhood and development. As a young researcher myself, I found in this volume many great ideas and shared interests. Unfortunately, I will not comment here on all the chapters, despite the fact they are all bringing a new and interesting view on children’s development. Rather, after some general considerations about the whole edition, I would like to highlight in this review some interesting points and observations and discuss them critically in the hope of bringing new perspectives on the topic.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first one, “Culture, history and child development”, contains five chapters. As written in the introduction, “human development is thus explored and conceptualized in regard to its interrelated semiotic,

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material/embodied, mimetic and performative aspects” (p. 12) and “focuses more on infancy and early childhood development” (p. 13). The second part, “Gender, performativity and educational practice”, contains seven chapters and is focused “on qualitative studies of school-aged children and young people” (p. 13). These brief factual considerations about the book bring me to some more critical observations. I would like to underline and comment four dimensions that I find interesting and relevant across the whole edition.

*On the social character of developmental processes.* In the introductory chapter, the editors write that “Wulf’s analysis leads to similar conclusions as those of Stetsenko and Hildebrand and Seeger: it foregrounds the social character of developmental processes” (p. 13). It is well established from previous research that developmental processes, especially cognitive development, do not happen in a social vacuum: they are influenced by social interactions, (see for example Doise, Mugny & Perret-Clermont, 1975, 1976; Iannaccone, 2010; Light & Littleton, 1999; Perret-Clermont, 1980). The role of social interactions on human development is recurrent all along the book and it is certainly acknowledged by each contributor. However, some authors in this volume focus specifically on the topic, albeit in different manners.

Klasen (chapter 5) and Wulf (chapter 6) both evoke the role of mimetic processes in learning and development. Wulf’s main thesis is of a particular interest: “mimetic processes do not only refer to other people in face-to-face situations, but also to places, spaces, things, imaginary actions, scenes, and themes. Institutions such as the family, the school, the role play that is implicit in the media, but also values, attitudes and norms, are learned and embodied by children through mimetic processes” (p. 96). The quotation not only underlines the role of mimetic process but also refers to the role of institutions, as Hedegaard also highlights in her paper: “Children develop through participation in institutionalised forms of practice that are characterised by specialised and shared communication and activities” (p. 122).

Seeger & Hildebrand-Nilshon stress the importance of these interactions and their social use for meaning-making: “Language and meaning can only make sense psychologically in social use, in the communicative process” (p. 54). To go further, Moro, in her contribution, claims that “it is less the language which transforms the action into a cultural-historical one than the process of meaning-making related to non-verbal signs produced by other people in order to transmit the use of the objects to the child” (p. 68).

These considerations go beyond the role of social interactions in cognitive development. They bring something new to the relationship between social interactions and human development: the importance of not only taking into account face-to-face interactions, but also how institutions, values, norms, rules and objects are part of the child’s development and education.

*On the intertwining of the child’s multiple worlds.* In a chapter entitled “Cultural elements as means of constructing the continuity of the self across various spheres of experience”, Zittoun and Grossen (2013) discuss the interplay between change and continuity of the self across different spheres of experience such as school, family, leisure, work, and social activities. They rely on a case study taken from a research on the use of cultural elements (philosophy and literary texts) among young people in school to conclude that some elements were taken by the adolescent to play the role of boundary objects between school and family, and to give a sense of continuity across her various spheres of experience. In

the book “Crossing boundaries. Intercontextual dynamics between family and school” (Marsico, Komatsu & Iannaccone, 2013), the authors reflect on the complexity of family-school relationships. In particular, some chapters rely on how school enters home and, in return, school enters home, crossing boundaries of these two educational contexts. I wanted to mention these works because this is a dimension that is often found in Kontopodis, Wulf and Fichtner’s edited volume.

Three chapters are of a particular interest concerning this point. In her paper, Chronaki looks at how Gypsy-Tsiggano children are bringing their “home” to school, especially in mathematics lessons. One of the interesting results is that when familiar practices were brought into the classroom (for Gypsy-Tsiggano children, a situation of selling and buying, like at the market for example), children were able to contribute to the situation and enjoy it. Moreover, they started to talk in Romani (the language they use in their everyday “sphere of experience” at work, in the market, outside the school) in the classroom during the market activity and taught it to other students. This emphasizes, in a socio-cultural perspective, the role of “multilingualism and ‘funds of knowledge’ as resources for mathematical learning development” (p. 218).

Through the analysis of interviews with young Turkish people going to school in Denmark, Hedegaard highlights, between other conclusions, the fact that there is sometimes a lack of contact between home and school and that this lack “can lead to value positions between teachers and parents that end up in conflicting demands, where the students have to administrate demands in the concrete school practice that are in conflict with their own motives” (p. 130).

In her paper, Audehm raises the question of how symbolic practice, pedagogical interactions and the authoritative structure of ritual performance are interrelated at the family table during mealtime. In three families examined in the paper, Audehm has noticed that “whereas the mealtime rituals thus stage a partial separation between the spheres of work and family, no such separation is enacted between the spheres of school and family. The parent’s pedagogical action is oriented to producing behaviour that complies with the norms dominant at school” (p. 149).

Whether it is home at school or school at home, spheres are intertwined and students can bring to school elements (symbolic resources, see Zittoun, 2006) from different spheres of experience and this can, if properly introduced, enrich school situations and create learning possibilities and resources.

*On gender issues.* An entire part of the book is dedicated, amongst others, to gender – as noted above, the second part is entitled “Gender, performativity and educational practice” – which stresses the importance the editors wished to give to this topic. Despite the fact that gender is one of my personal research interests, I thought it was an important point to comment on in regard to this volume in relation to development and education, as the school curriculum nowadays remains “gendered” (Basow, 2010). Apart from Ivinson’s chapter that focuses specifically on gender issues and is entitled “School curriculum as developmental resource: Gender and knowledge”, other authors sometimes evoke gender but do not focus on it specifically.

In her paper, Ivinson claims that the material culture of the classroom is carried by artefacts, furniture, texts, equipment, and that all of these are fully gendered. She then concludes that “young people experience tensions due to the gendered identities carried by various curricular subjects and their own developing gender identities” (p. 153). One of

the interesting results that Ivinson points us to is that teachers use instructional discourse to mark objects and practices differently in boys' and girls' classes (she studied non-mixed classes). She finally stressed that "much of the emergence of gender in classroom practice happens beyond or below the level of discourse. Objects of the material culture of the classroom, along with patterns of practice and discourse combine to form hybrid semiotic assemblages that come into view in activity" (p. 162). This last point seems very important to me as it underlines that gender can be found everywhere in an educational context, not only in an explicit way, i.e., in the discourse and behaviours of teachers and students; it is also implicitly present, through objects in the classroom, school books and furniture, in texts and other materials. Gender is therefore omnipresent, perhaps to a greater degree than we would think. As Ivinson stresses in the beginning of her chapter, "school reflects social order which traditionally provided upper- and middle-class boys with routes to the public domain via male fraternity" (p. 152).

Kontopodis, in his paper, concentrates only on female students at the school where he conducted his ethnographic study. He focuses on how gender, social class and ethnicity are interrelated. His aim is to "search for alternatives to the modern developmental approaches in psychology" (p. 188) and "to provide possible answers to the political question of how time and human development can be conceptualized so that freedom, imagination and movement are reflected and generated a school" (p. 188).

Gender is certainly an important part of identity, as some authors in this book report (see for example Chronaki quoting Butler, Audehm, Kontopodis, Hedegaard). The editors claim in the introductory chapter that they used the word "gender" in the second part title "to make clear the connection to feminist scholarship and especially the so-called 'third wave' of feminism" (p. 13). That is a noble intention. Nevertheless, it seems to me that an important concept is missing in the book in regard to gender studies: the concept of *intersectionality* (Bilge, 2010; Hill Collins, 2007), i.e., "intersectionality reflects a transdisciplinary theory aimed at apprehending the complexity of social identities and inequalities through an integrated approach. It refutes the compartmentalization and hierarchization of the great axes of social differentiation through categories of gender/sex, class, race, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation" (Bilge, 2010, p. 58). Actually, many authors in the volume are accounting for intersectionality, by taking into account not only gender but the intertwining of gender, social class, ethnicity, age, and so on, but without evoking the concept, what I think could have been very useful.

*As a conclusion: on cultural and learning identities.* To conclude, and as I already mentioned identity, I would like to make a brief comment on this aspect. It appears explicitly in Hedegaard's chapter and in Chronaki's one; however this dimension is underlying the whole book, as most authors mainly rely on a cultural-historical perspective on development and education, a perspective in which identity and personal history are crucial. The main idea of Hedegaard's paper is that multiple identities are created by the person through the participation in activities or cultural practices within specific institutional contexts. Drawing from cultural-historical activity theory and adopting a developmental perspective, she stresses that a person, through her activity, creates her own multiple and diverse cultural identities.

Chronaki, in her paper, claims that "the process of participating in school arithmetic practice involves constructing a certain 'learning identity' that reflects the 'norms' of

mathematical culture” (p. 208). She considers the process of learning as reshaping body and mind and transforming learning identities.

These considerations about the development of cultural and learning identities bring us back to what Wulf claims: “By way of such role-model-related mimetic processes children create themselves and develop their individuality and uniqueness” (p. 96). Identity has then something to do with creativity: the person (more specifically the child) creates herself and her own personality. As Hedegaard says: “it [the personality] is something one creates by participating together with other persons in activities in different institutional practices” (p. 121). The idea of a child as the (co)creator of her own person, personality, identity, point of view, individuality and uniqueness seems very important and, in my opinion, deserves to be underlined as a one of the main, important contributions Kontopodis, Wulf and Fichtner’s edited book brings to the study of children’s development.

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