Empowering little children - parents' strategies and children's lifeworlds in Kyrgyzstan

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I - Three Basic Assumptions:

1- Good Childhoods
Good childhoods – in the approach of this study – are childhoods
(a) in which children's competences and their potential for further self-development are optimally fostered by good parenting and good childcare institutions,
(b) in which children are also enabled to (co-)construct their own learning environments by the selection and interpretation of available stimuli and learning influences,
(c) in which children "feel good" and their individual needs are taken seriously.
This is a definition insisting on social and cognitive development and on children’s agency, as it is favored by the new sociology of childhood.

BUT:

2 - Childhood and the Constant Balancing of Exigencies
Childhoods are taking place in a constant balancing of everyday-life exigencies (as given by household composition, economic conditions, work etc.), adults' conceptions of childhood and children's needs, availability and characteristics of preschool institutions etc. Therefore real childhoods necessarily are compromises and their quality has to be assessed as being better or poorer in relation to the given context.

3 - Variation of Childhoods-Risks and Resiliency
As childhoods are realized in a variety of conditions and always as a balancing process a variety of childhoods exists. This variation has to be studied and the qualities of childhoods have to be assessed while taking their contextual conditions into account. Different childhoods may be than of a (still relatively) good quality while some conditions may be as well identified as being generally aversive. Qualities and conditions of resiliency have to be taken into account while studying childhoods in a poorer country.

II - Early Childhood and Parenting in Kyrgyzstan - what is the problem

From the 2004 Report "Practices of Fostering Children of Early Age" we know that parents are interested in their children. They are taking care of their babies, mothers "always talk to a baby" (95%) while feeding him/her and mothers and fathers also spend time playing with the baby. Meanwhile the educational practices seem to be more problematic for children of 2-7 years. Parents spend less time with their children while they are growing, especially fathers (23%/44% of fathers "have not played for a
long time" with their 3/7 year old children or even "don't remember" when they did so for the last time). Correspondingly board games (which can also be played by the whole family) are very rarely played. All in all parents seem to know or apply few practices that foster children's intellectual or personality development. Especially "cultural" practices (reading books with the child, drawing, playing music instruments) and learning games (making puzzles, playing with meccano) are applied very rarely. And also the teaching of rules to little children validates the impression of a weak fostering of their personality development: to teach them rules of good behavior (to obey, saying hello and goodbye, take away toys etc.) has priority over the teaching of safety rules, which might allow the child some independent but at the same time prudent behavior. An education without corporal punishment is of paramount importance to foster children's intellectual and self-development. But, more than half of the parents in the "2004 Report" admit to slap their children "sometimes" (40.7%) or even "often" (13.5%). Also the availability of important objects/space for little children is relatively lower that the one for babies.

→ All in all the existing research gives the impression that little children's intellectual- and self-development (self-confidence, knowledge of one's own needs and interests, positioning oneself towards one's social world etc.) are insufficiently fostered, due to a lack of parents’ possibilities and to a lack of consideration of the exigencies of little children's development. While parents seem to be loving and caring parents of babies their interest in the child seems to lessen gradually during early childhood. Is this a lack of interest in little children due to a low value which might be attributed to this age group or a rather instrumental value which is attributed to children? Or is this age phase not interesting for parents as they have low ambitions concerning future educational outcome - as they may e.g. not perceive any future chances for their children or at least no chances which are based on individual competencies and efforts. Or is it simply a lack of knowledge about children's development and the possibilities to foster it? Or are they limiting (encouraging) interactions with children of this age group for the potential of rebelliousness, wildness and disturbance, for the unlimited curiosity which children of this age – especially if their competences are well fostered – may show, so that they nip this potential in the bud? What are the societal experiences of parents influencing such attitudes and practices? And are there maybe just everyday routines or patterns of (verbal) communication including or excluding intense interaction with little children which might be fostered or altered? And as to the children: how do little children arrange themselves if they find themselves in a relatively low and marginal position? How do they get along with the work burden and how are they able to find niches and loopholes and possibilities to build up self-confidence? What are qualities and conditions of resiliency enabling children to cope with relatively poor childhood conditions? How is all this correlated to measurable competencies of children? Such are the questions our study wants to tackle and the result shall be a typology of childhoods, differentiating various "typical" childhoods according to their potentials and qualities and according to the societal circumstances in which they happen.

III - Research Questions and Study Design

Based on the above mentioned results we intend to study parents’ knowledge and conceptions of early childhood, parents’ practices fostering children's development including intrafamilial communication, and the intrafamilial distribution of goods (which mirrors as well the value of children). It is a matter of
course that the material conditions and the social situation and experiences of the family have to be taken into account (recent changes due to social transformation, migration and experiences in foreign countries etc.) – and this makes an important part of the project: to analyze how social experiences of parents are translated into childhood qualities. To determine the qualities of childhoods in a more comprehensive way we also have to consider additional influences fostering children’s development like the availability and attendance of early childcare institutions or care and attention given by grandparents, relatives, older children etc. We take the influence of early childcare institutions to be important, also in influencing parenting attitudes and practices (Study 1 – parents’ interviews).

To study the qualities of childhood it is important to gain insight into children’s lifeworlds: their everyday life consisting of work and play with peers, including niches and scopes of action, which children may create and protect, their views on themselves and their conditions of living, their hopes and fears. Therefore, ethnographic observations and the participatory research methods will be used in case studies of target children. Target children will be selected according to previous information (e.g. from the actual UNICEF study on early learning and development). Everyday life in families of these target children (practices, communication patterns) and the visions of infancy and childhood of the parents of these children will be studied with in-depth interviews and observational methods to obtain comprehensive information for a selected sample of children (Study 2 - ethnographic and in-depth case studies of children’s lifeworlds and family environment).

As a third angle on the interaction of parents’ educational practices and the lifeworlds and outcomes of childhood the review of young adults on their own childhood is crucial. What do young adults who are not yet parents themselves perceive as important competencies, knowledge and values they received from their parents. How do they relate to the future perspectives of the young person? In what way are educational practices criticized and what do the yet-to-be-parents anticipate as important goals for their own future children? The jingling of different ideas about society deriving from tradition, religion as well as western capitalist lifestyle by this in-between-generation is another focus of this study. Qualitative interviews including the questions from the survey of study 1 (in form of a backview on the own remembered childhood) as well as additional questions concerning future perspectives and views on Kyrgyz and western societies will be conducted with young people between 19 and 29. (Study 3 – Biographical constructions and Perspectives of the ‘In-between-generation’ – Fractions and Fusions between Tradition and Modernity)
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A - parental knowledge and conception of early childhood
- value of children
- goals of education
- parental ambition
- family goals
- valuation of family life
- perception of a particular child

B - educational practices
- disciplining practices
- cultural practices
- intrahousehold communication
- leisure time and shared activities

C - intrahousehold distribution of goods and work/resources
- time use
- income use
- distribution of food
- distribution of space
- savings for children's education
- family goals

Household composition
Possibilities and availabilities

Children's life worlds
- children's play and places
- peer culture
- children's duties and obligations
- children's views on family, parenting, educational institutions
- hopes and fears
- satisfaction and unhappiness

Additional resources
- early childhood institutions
- experience of parents with ECD

Picture 1 - Study Design
Study 1 - Parenting - attitudes, practices and intrafamilial distributions

Based on questionnaire data and in-depth-interview-data (in combination with various other methods like worksheets for interviewers concerning blueprints of apartments/houses, inventories of children's books, family games and toys\(^1\) of parents of children from 2 to 7 years collecting the following data, simulation of mother-child-conflict situations):

a. parents' knowledge and conceptions of early childhood and young children's educational needs
   - between "natural growth" and "concerted cultivation"
   - educational goals and status ambitions (for school career, adult profession etc.)
   - gender as eventually important variable
   - individualization of conceptions
   - value of children
b. educational practices
   - educational practices as implicated in routine action
   - disciplining practices
   - cultural practices
   - leisure time and shared activities, family games
c. intrafamilial distribution of resources
   - time use and time spent with children (methods: time schedule sheets)
   - income use and distribution
   - intrafamilial division of goods and work
   - negotiating household vs. command household
   - distribution of food etc.
   - space for children in apartment to play/children's room (blueprint of apartment for sub-sample by interviewer)
   - savings for children's education
d. family conditions: household economy (income, income sources, weighted income according to number and age of persons in household), household composition, exigencies of work etc.
e. attitudes and decisions of relatives / neighbors / other members of community, emergence of new educational cultures

In what way do attitudes and decisions of relatives / neighbors / other community-members influence the parents' views and decisions?

\(^1\) Toys may be categorized in the following way: construction/simulation, body and sport, creativity, role/simulation, media/simulation, family games. Other categorizations may be applied.
Study 2 – Lifeworld study of little children (3-7 years old; including target children)

Ethnographic methods, "participatory research"-methods, interview techniques, analyzing children's actions and perspectives. The following variables/phenomena are important:

a. children's play in kindergartens, streets and at home (peer cultures, adult interventions and restrictions, reproduction of cultural and structural properties in play and peer culture; children’s spaces)
b. children's duties and obligations, daily routines
c. affiliation and bonding; intra-familial and extra-familial,
d. social network and support
e. children's position in social hierarchies and social structures
f. children's view on families/parenting/educational institutions
g. hopes and fears, satisfaction and unhappiness
h. aspirations for the future (also professional aspirations)
i. skills and cognitive competences
j. opportunities for self socialization and socialization of self
k. qualities and conditions of resiliency

Family environment/experiences:
Intrafamilial communication (selected video recorded sequences)
- showing amount and type of talk, gender differences: amount and
- type of talk of fathers vs. mothers, to girls vs. boys

Study 3 – Biographical constructions and perspectives of the ‘In-between-generation’ – fractions and fusions between tradition and modernity

Interview guideline based on questionnaire from study 1, in regard to own childhood
Additional questions about:

a. what they perceive as important / crucial differences between Kyrgyzstan and Germany (in case of exchange students)
b. what they like or dislike about their education,
c. about their future lives and perspectives and wishes
d. how are relationships defined (relatives, friends, partner)
e. how are personal decisions made, what are priorities
f. what they value about traditions, what they consider modern, how do they combine it

Concluding remarks: Our aim is to measure childhoods on a multitude of dimensions and to take the different situations which families are facing into account. The results shall be assembled to a comprehensive typology of childhoods and their respective qualities. In such approach we use a variety of methods in order to validate mutually the results of the different study elements. The approach pays attention to the concept of human capital accumulation while enriching the human capital concept by the notions of the new sociology of childhood: focusing on childhood as a distinct life phase with a proper value. It views children as competent members of society and by listening to their voices empowers them to actively engage in the society they live in.
### IV Completed data sets and next steps:

Up to now two fieldwork phases have been completed in Kyrgyzstan (Biskek, Alai, Naryn and Batken in 2010 and 2011) and two in Germany (March 2010 and December 2010). Data collection in Kyrgyzstan is completed, while further data collection in Germany is ongoing.

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<td>Childhood experiences and their evaluation, future plans and strategies</td>
<td>20 Interviews (mainly young Kyrgyz in Germany (Au-Pair, Daad-Stipends)</td>
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V Instruments and techniques:

**Study 1 (parents interviews and survey)**

- Questionnaire
- Simulation of educational problems: asking for parents’ advises and reactions
- Status measurement
- video recording (every day family interaction)

Cameras are set up for a certain amount of time in the shared room of the family to register and analyze communication patterns, daily routines and generational arrangements

**Study 2 (children’s lifeworlds):**

The following collection of instruments have been tested carefully and have proven high practicability with little Kyrgyz and German children:

- Family Portraits (drawing / painting)
  Child is asked to draw or paint her family and give explanations of who is shown.
- Favourite Places Exercise (drawings)
  Child is asked to draw a map of his town / street / village and emphasize his favourite places, child may optionally be asked to give a
  - Child Guided Tour (video recording / protocol) showing those places
- Smilies-exercise: Wooden smilie-figures showing various emotional expressions are presented to the child, child is asked what he/she can see in this face, if he/she know this feeling and what events lead to this feeling. How does child react in this situation?
- “Helpful Bug – Social Network Sorting Activity” (diagram)
- Child is asked to draw a big spider, she herself being its body, the legs being her personal problems, and the feet being people who may help with those problems.
- Talisman Exercise: Me and my future (open question and group discussion) Child is given a good-luck-charm and asked to make a wish for the future, additional questions concerning future profession, living conditions in the future
- Dollhouse Exercise: Daily routines and structures
  Group of children is given a toy dollhouse, after some given time to play and become familiar with the material, ask child to tell about everyday routines: Where are you when you get up in the morning, what do you do then, who is with you etc. Schedule of typical day, what, where and who has a meaning in child’s subjective perception of everyday routines?

**Study 3 (in-between-generation)**

- Questionnaire (cf. study 1, but in regard to own childhood)
- Interview guideline with additional questions (rather open structure of interview, leaving lots of space for personal comments and biographical focus of interviewee)
Sample / Setting:
The sample will be enlarged by another fieldwork phase in Germany and a satellite project for Iran is planned. Observation of free play shall be included as addition to study 2 (children’s lifeworlds).

Further References:


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