

REZENSIONEN / BOOK REVIEWS

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Review of Kennedy, D. (2006). *The well of being. Childhood, subjectivity, and education*. New York: SUNY Press.

This book is part of a small field of research recently emerging as a cross-section of childhood studies, cultural study and philosophy. The author David Kennedy is associate professor of Educational Foundations at the Montclair State University, USA. He has published several interesting books and papers around the same themes (Kennedy, 2000; 2002; 2006; and Kennedy & Kohan, 2008). In spite of the field's high relevance for education it seems that it is seldom if ever taken up in teacher training courses.

Perhaps the interest in this field of research arose with Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of childhood* from 1962. Ariès' thesis that children in the Middle Ages were seen as "small adults", and that our present understanding of child psychology as in many ways different from that of adults has gradually developed since the 18th century, became rather well known in the 1970's. Ariès' study was subsequently complemented with DeMause's (1976) "psychohistory" of childhood, focusing on the historical development of parent-child relations from a psychoanalytical point of view. DeMause described this development in several stages, starting with the "Infanticide mode" – in which newborn children could be killed without further ado if the child was unwanted for one reason or another – and ending with the "Empathic mode", in which parents and adults in general really try to see things from the child's point of view, to empathize with their children. One expression of this mode would be the Convention of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1989. Among other things, the Convention explicitly states that

children's wishes and opinions should be actively asked for and listened to.

Ariès and more especially DeMause are just a few of the many sources that Kennedy draws upon in his book. Even though DeMause can be criticized for his rather static scheme of historical development – such models always have their weak points – Kennedy emphasize DeMause's last mode of empathy as of particular interest for present educational thinking and practice. First of all, the development of psychoanalytic theory, for instance by Donald Winnicott, have established that childhood is not a phase of life that is simply left behind when we grow up. There is in all of us an "inner child", a state of mind to which we can "regress", but also *consciously return to*, in certain situations and experiences. Kennedy relates this to the so-called postmodern – rather post-structural – critique of the "monolithic subject": the idea that there is a "one and only" homogeneous ego or self, constituting the essence or kernel of each of our individualities or personalities. The post-structural view is rather that the self is not a single essence but varies between time and place; it is constituted by the context and does not exist as an independent reality. This opens up a fissure in our modern adult self-understanding. We are not individual but pluralities, and one of "us" is a child, an inner child or a "becoming-child" to use a term from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze.

For Kennedy, all this gives a potential for "the deconstruction of the ideology of adulthood and the decolonization of education" (p. 22-23). The ideology of adulthood refers to the belief that as adults we are mature and fully developed human beings, whereas children lack many of qualities and abilities. Childhood is seen as a state of *lack*. This then becomes the justification for our intervention in the lives of children, an intervention that we call "education" but that can also be called a "colonization" of childhood. The term colonization is not arbitrary. In 19th century colonialism, colonisation was often justified in educational terms: it was the "duty" of the civilized European race to "educate" the primitive state of mind of

aboriginal peoples, lacking rationality and culture. The aboriginal mind was equated with the mind of the child, and both needed education.

The conclusion is not that children should be left alone (“we don’t need no education”); because children obviously need relations and interactions with adults in order to grow and develop. But the quality and character of these relations/interactions may change radically if teachers and parents take the ideas above –and many others also discussed by Kennedy – to heart. As Kennedy says at one point: “[T]he character of my relations with the child before me is linked with the character of my relations with the child I still am, with whom other dimensions of my selfhood are in a continual process of dialectical reconstruction” (p. 24). That is, if I truly recognize the child in myself, my relation to the child in front of me changes. From being *only* a teacher I become a fellow human being and I, or the child in me, learn as much from the child in front of me as s/he possibly learns from me.

The overriding purpose of Kennedy’s book is to provide a sketch for a possible cultural evolution, based on the historical change and development of adult-child relationships. This evolution also has a biological aspect, the so-called neoteny, which according to Kennedy “could be considered to be the key ingredient in that evolution, for it represents the plasticity of the species” (p. 24). Neoteny refers to the retention by adults of traits characteristic of juveniles. As students of Anthroposophy may know, Wolfgang Schad (2000) has suggested that neoteny is of particular significance in human evolution, and Kennedy seems to make a similar suggestion. The younger the organism, the more “plastic” it is; that is, the more capable of change, adaptation and development. Therefore, if adults become more aware, respectful and appreciative of their inner child, they may also become less rigid and more open to further development. A very similar notion seems to have been the basis for the “cult of childhood” common to many of the Romantic philosophers and poets, also dealt with by Kennedy. The Romantics had their own view of both human and child development, very much opposed to the conceptions spread by Enlightenment rationalists. The aims of universal, compulsory education that gradually grew out of Enlightenment rationalism did not include the marriage of mind and nature or similar Romantic objectives, but were formed “by the ambition of the increasingly hegemonic

and reactionary nation-state and its dominant elites to shape the world to their political, social and economic interests” (p. 56). And this ambition seems to be as strong today as ever before.

Whether one believes or not in the validity of Kennedy’s views on cultural evolution is, however, of less importance. This book and his other works open ones eyes to many qualities and aspects of childhood that normally remain unseen or unknown in educational thought and practice. I think it is of particular importance for Waldorf teachers to read this book. The reason is that there is a risk that Rudolf Steiner’s view of “the child” and child development becomes a mental grid through which the actual children we meet are filtered. We then see our own model of “the child” and not the individual child itself. Kennedy’s book is also very stimulating in other respects and should be of deep interest to Waldorf teachers.

References

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