

Subjectivizing in a marginalized school: An ethnography with children viewed from Winnicott's psychoanalysis

Subjetivarse en una escuela marginalizada: Una etnografía con niños leída desde el psicoanálisis de Winnicott

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Background

Children have recently started being considered as active agents and subjects of study in education research, challenging adultcentrism and institutional violence against children. In Chile, both social and educational exclusion cause multiple types of symbolic violence against children. The inclusion of these children's voices in research is intended to displace the hegemonic discourses about them in order to reveal their own experiences. By analyzing ethnographic data produced with children in a marginalized school in Santiago (Chile), we observe the evolution of an object of study, or "serendipity", that is, the serendipitous discovery of a phenomenon. By paying attention to children's expressions and experiences, the researcher discovers that the theory of transitional phenomena can be used as a tool for interpretation within the educational context. This research shows how transitional theory is deployed in an educational, marginalized, and Latin American context.

Aims

The aim of the original research was to understand how children subjectify themselves in marginalized surroundings, using a poststructuralist theoretical framework of subjectification. During the fieldwork process, surprising data were produced that required a more specific conceptual framework to interpret and analyze them, revealing the casual and unpredictable nature of the research processes. The focus of the research thus shifted towards a new central theme: What are the factors that motivate children from a marginalized school to take an interest in school knowledge? Subjectivation is thus viewed from Winnicott's psychoanalysis, which incorporates the unconscious dimension of human experience and allows us to understand how children are motivated towards school knowledge.

Method & procedures

A qualitative approach to the field of study was preferred, in order to conduct in-depth research of the dynamics proposed. The methodology is considered a visual school post-ethnography, as it questions the subject-object duality and incorporates visual productions. This post-ethnography was implemented during a period of seven months. The research was carried out in a subsidized elementary school, located in the outskirts of Santiago, and created in the 1980s in a rural area in the process of urbanization. Since it was opened, it has specialized in accepting students who have been excluded from other schools for behavioral, academic, economic, social, or racial reasons. The techniques used were: documentation of the object of study, participant observation in the school, ethnographic interviews with adults and children, and visual productions of the students, associated with group interviews with the children. The research focused on a fourth-grade class of 42 children of between 8 and 13 years of age. Thirty-five of them delivered informed consent forms signed by their parents or guardians and were able to participate in the nine group interviews, which were formed by three or four children. The visual production devices were: (1) photography, with the preparation of a collective "photo-kit" which was later utilized in the interviews for conversation, using the trigger "your best moments at school"; (2) drawing, with the preparation of an individual "anti-portrait" during the interviews, to address and talk about "what or who I am not or do not want to be".

Results & discussion

The main finding of this research is to confirm the applicability of Winnicott's transitional theory—which emerged in Great Britain in the mid-20th century through his clinical work on parent-child relationships—in educational, marginalized, and Latin American contexts. Five key moments in the processes of child subjectivation are presented, which enable us to understand the data produced in the fieldwork and outline methods of approaching school knowledge, where the importance of emotionality can be highlighted. These five key moments are: (1) holding, both physical and psychic; (2) transitional objects as tangible supports of this immateriality; (3) playing, which allows the creation of a link with spontaneity, images, and metaphors; (4) creativity, which emerges as a driver and a focus of satisfaction; and finally (5) destructiveness and utilization of the object, which allow the reliability of the environment to be ensured. This work shows that the ways in which children are motivated towards learning contrast with the technocratic devices implemented in Chilean schools, which favor memorization and repetition, control, and discipline of bodies, standardizing behaviors and learning in order to respond to external demands for accountability. On the other hand, children's subjectivations demonstrate the need to build emotional relationships with school knowledge through free and creative activities. In addition, the findings in the field show the importance of adults in the deployment of these relationships with school knowledge, which they must mediate and validate.

Conclusion

These results seem essential to rethink teacher training. From this perspective, knowledge is located in a transitional space, an intermediate area between subjects, which is invisible and fluid. School knowledge is content without substance, without materiality, an abstract construct that is located in the world of ideas and rationality, but which also involves an emotional dimension. It is this dimension that children express most strongly, through which they communicate and connect with their surroundings. During teacher training, it is therefore essential to emphasize the importance of the emotional dimension in the way we relate to knowledge and how children can relate to school knowledge. On the one hand, this should be done to produce a demarcation from the standardizing logic that currently prevails, which lessens learning processes by turning them into predictable and controllable procedures, and, on the other hand, to provide greater complexity to the discourses that call for the deployment of emotion, empathy, and affection in school spaces, without explaining how these aspects are linked to school knowledge.

Keywords: ethnography, poverty, psychoanalysis, school knowledge, subjectivation

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